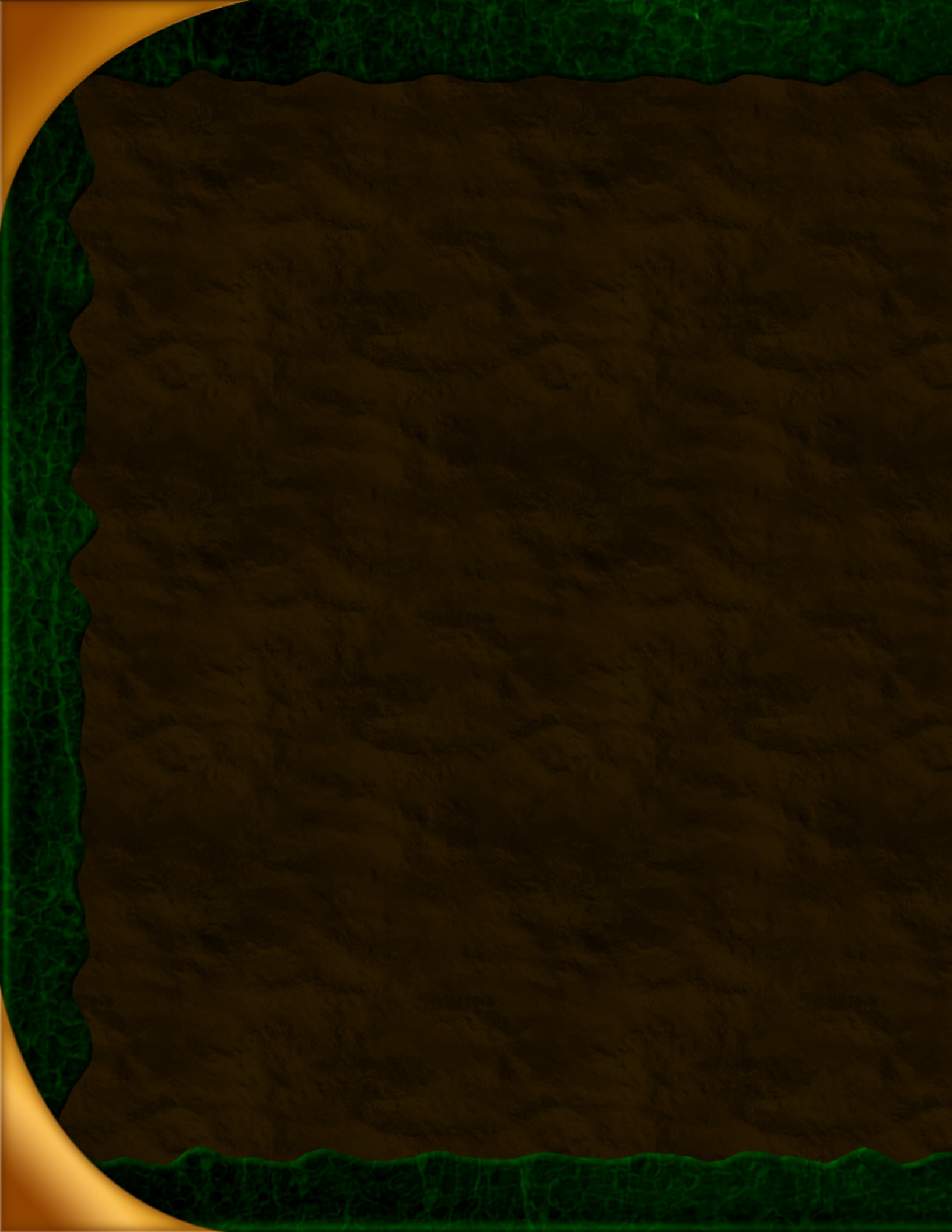


# THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT







# THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

*by*

*Lady Gwendolyn*



The Catholic Kingdom Press



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# CHAPTER I

**I**n the kingdom of Amadeum (ah-mah-DAY-um), there are many rivers which carefully wind their way throughout the kingdom; between the hills, around the valleys and through the forests, emptying at last into the neighboring ocean's water. Opposite the western shoreline lay the other border of Amadeum: a long row of mountains whose tall and majestic peaks often hide above the clouds.

This small kingdom's past history showed that the only interruption to the peace they enjoyed was the pestilent pirates who scaled their coasts and plundered their ships. But while these thieving brigands made the kingdom weary (and on their guard), a new threat was beginning to emerge from the south. The king's keen eyes had not foreseen this threat and was greatly alarmed when one of his trading vessels was wiped out by a barbarous attack. But it was not the pirates this time!

It was the Exthereons (ex-THĒ-rē-unz), a strong people, whose greedy leader, known as Lord Missetheon, had taken a keen interest in this little kingdom's domain. It was not long before war was declared.



Dark storm clouds gathered over the castle, as the king prepared to set out with his men. After leaving instructions for the welfare of the kingdom, Philip III (for that was the king's name), bid farewell to his young wife Margaret and their four children: Philip, Meg, Julia and Robert.

It was a cold morning when the kingdom's small army left, headed by their brave king, to fight against their enemies. Although the war lay to the south, King Philip did not have an adequate fleet in order to carry all of his men across the wide gulf. He planned, then, to send some of them over the water, while he led the rest on foot or horseback through the mountains and across the rugged eastern plains. Going around the water's shore, they would meet their ships beneath the gulf and continue their march to the south... and to war.

As Queen Margaret and her children watched the men go, the young queen's eyes grew moist. A mild wind swept through her long, blue veil which had covered the baby in her arms. Shielding little Robert from the chilling air, she turned towards her three other children, who stood staring after their father. Pressing her two-year old's head to her heart, Margaret offered a prayer to God for her husband's safe return.

"Please God, bring him back to me soon," she whispered.

Autumn was just beginning and although it had only been a month since the king's departure, his

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castle was already suffering from his absence. Each person busied himself according to his position and duty, but a certain spirit, a darkness, seemed to follow everyone like an ominous shadow. This was King Philip's first war. Although the kingdom had endured wars before, it had enjoyed peace for the past few generations. Now, their young king, aged thirty-three, must fight enemies far more powerful and experienced than he. It was a great cross for his wife, only four years younger, to bear. While her patience was sorely tested, the queen longed for the least bit of news; even now, when only a month had passed.

But the queen's worries seemed as nothing in comparison with the unhappiness of her eldest son. Aged twelve, the young prince could barely keep his mind on his studies. It would often trail off into deep thought, as he pictured himself by his father's side, sword in hand, in the heat of battle. Oh, why didn't his father let him go? He was too young, they all said. While his father was away, they said, he must: help his mother; tend to his studies; and pray for his father's success and safe return. But who would help the king as much as his own son? Who else could serve the king as his true and faithful knight? Philip jabbed his pen through a sheet of parchment in disgust.

"Your majesty, please," Master Thomas, his tutor exclaimed. "Would you stop putting holes in your desk!"

"I would rather place some in my father's enemies," the boy admitted.

"Well, studying your arithmetic will have to do for now," said the old man. "I am really very tired of asking you to pay attention."

"And I'm tired of listening to your old, croaking voice," the prince retorted.

"If -," the old tutor spoke slowly and with great restraint, "If I must send for Sir Henry de Authsville, you shall regret it."

"Threatening the king's son?" the lad dared.

"- Warning!," was the stern correction.

"And what crime have I committed?" The royal hands went up in the air with annoyance. "All I want is to be with my father. He's left the safety of his castle behind, to sacrifice all and fight against those who would threaten the happiness and peace of his people. And what am I forced to do? Not only am I kept from being at his side, but I must sit here and listen to an old man explain how to add numbers!"

"Your duty as prince is to tend to your studies. And with full attention!" Master Thomas added.

"What do you know about being a prince?" the boy scoffed.

"I have instructed your father, and his father before him - "



*The old tutor spoke slowly*

## CHAPTER 1

“To do what?” the prince interrupted. “You don’t fight swords with Latin! How shall I ever become a knight, much less the king, if, whenever there’s danger, I’m thrust aside like a rusty sword and others are called to my defense?”

“By learning to control your imagination and your temper and by obeying your elders,” the tutor answered calmly. “Now if you’re ready, we will continue.” The man bent over his books.

“Now ‘tis my ‘imagination’ that I love my father,” the prince remarked out loud. “And they ask me to control it.”

The old teacher cleared his throat and raised his eyes. A sharp look, beneath those thick eyebrows, sparked a memory in the prince’s mind. The threat to summon Sir Authsville- the strict knight who served the queen - made Philip decide that, under the circumstances, it would be best to act like he was studying.

By lunch, the prince was glad to leave his books behind and join his family to eat. When he arrived at the table, though, he found his sister Julia in a most dejected state. The five-year-old princess informed him that their mother, the queen, would not be able to join them for the meal. The role their father had left for her to fill was occupying much of her time.

After he’d eaten, Philip hurried to his room. The door closed behind him as he rushed to a tall, luxurious bed. From beneath it, the boy lifted a large, finely-crafted wooden box and gently set it down. He eagerly undid the latch and, reaching in, pulled out a small sword with an ornate handle. Hanging from its elaborate hilt, was a large pendant on a chain of gold. Briefly studying his family’s royal coat of arms, which was carefully embossed on the golden disk, the prince slipped it over his head. Then he lifted his sword.

Philip eyed the weapon with pride. It was passed down to him from his father, and had been in the family for three generations. Ever since he could remember, Philip had loved to practice with it; in expectation of putting this weapon, *his* weapon, to great use. He thrust it into the air and examined it at arm’s length. Slowly he turned it from side to side, watching it reflect the noon-day sun which poured in from his balcony. Then, quickly and with great skill, the prince swung the sword around, jabbing here and there, as if everything surrounding him was a deadly enemy.

“For the king!” he shouted and deftly thrust his sword at a sinister-looking vase, knocking it to the floor. Its dull thud echoed on the stone. Philip abruptly stopped but it was not the vase’s plight that concerned him. A different sound had caught his ear. The door to his room creaked slowly as a small hand pushed it open. When the prince found his nine-year-old sister staring at the fallen vase, he sheathed his sword.

“Tis only wood,” he assured her, referring to the vase.

“Aye,” the princess replied as she placed it back atop the table. “But you may not be so fortunate the next time.” Her brother laughed.

“I know how to handle a sword, Meg, and with Sir Reginald’s training I shall soon be as good as

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father!". the boy said proudly. "And then, they *won't* be able to keep me from his side," he added quietly. "You will see," he told his sister "One day, I will be father's true knight!"

"You always rush things," the princess sighed. "Why not wait until you're old enough, before you go flying off to some war?"

"Age should never be an obstacle to the brave of heart," Philip answered.

"The good God has things grow for a reason." His sister reminded him. They obviously had had similar arguments before. "You are not born strong nor wise. His plan is for that to take time, which comes with age. The vines in my garden are not as strong as mother's, much less the ones which cover our castle. Those vines reach up to the sky, they are so tall. And they have stood the test of time and neither rain, nor hail, nor wind have weakened their grasp. But it was not always that way. They were once young and weak like my vines. But one day mine shall be as tall and strong as them."

"The frost does not kill some plants the way it does others." The young lad stood tall and erect. "Some are born to stand where others fall."

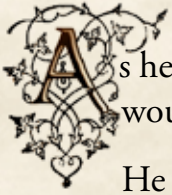
Meg's hands went to her hips. She knew her brother too well to think she could convince him. Often they had discussed such things and the little princess was in no mood for another argument. So, saying nothing, the girl went to leave. Turning around at the door, she said, "Your tutor wants to see you, I think, before your lessons with Sir Reginald."

"Did he say why?" Philip was suspicious of Master Thomas' intentions.

"No," the girl said slowly as if trying to remember. "He didn't send me. But I overheard him, and offered to get you. He's waiting in the studies."

Philip reluctantly followed his sister out of the room and then made his way to the study hall. As he wondered what new plans were being hatched to thwart his desire to fight and defend his father, his hand instinctively gripped the hilt of sword more tightly..

## CHAPTER 2



As he reluctantly made his way to the royal study, Prince Philip wondered what new injustice he would suffer at the hands of his tutor.

He found the venerable tutor, Master Thomas, seated behind a great wooden desk looking at some large books. As the tall boy approached, the old man removed his spectacles and set them aside.

“What do you want?” Philip asked quickly.

“I spoke to the queen -,” the teacher said, folding his hands.

“I thought she was busy!” The boy interrupted.

“It was brief,” the man explained. He paused slightly, before continuing. “I told her about your behavior this morning.” He watched the prince’s eyes fall. “Circumstances prevent her from dealing with you as she desires.” There was another pause. “But she left instructions for you to retake the subjects from earlier today.” At this the prince’s head shot back up.

“No!” The boy shouted suddenly, as if getting control of himself.

“The *queen* gave strict orders,” his tutor said sternly.

“It isn’t fair!” Philip cried. “I’m supposed to go sword fighting with Sir Reginald. He’s waiting for me now!” The prince turned sharply, slapping his heel on the cold stone floor, and went to leave.

“I’ve already informed Sir Reginald,” the old man called after him. “He is no longer waiting for you.”

Philip turned around, this time more slowly. His disappointment and defeat were expressed clearly in the blank stare he gave his teacher. Then, his royal eyes grew hard and his jaw, firm.

“I am *not* going to study,” the boy informed Master Thomas.

“You don’t have a choice,” the tutor’s voice was more weary than mad. In response, the prince folded his arms and thrust his shoulders back. The old man met the boy’s challenging gaze quite calmly. One by one, he began to gather the prince’s books until there was just a single stack. His wrinkled hand then reached out for a metal bell on the table’s edge.

“What are you doing?” the prince demanded sharply.

“Your mother said to lock you in your room with your books, if you presented any problem.” The boy’s only answer was a silent stare. The tutor’s suspended hand grabbed hold of, and shook, the little bell. “Young William will carry these for your majesty,” he explained to Philip. Almost immediately a small boy - a royal page - came scurrying into the large room.

“Yes, my lord?” William asked with a bow.

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"I need you to carry these books for Prince Philip here," the man said, slapping the top of the stack.



*The prince withdrew his sword*

"I am not going to read them!" the prince protested.

"Very well. But you shan't practice your swordplay either." The old man stretched out his hand to take Philip's sword, but the prince recoiled with an air of disgust.

"Ye dare to touch the royal sword of the king's son!?" He exclaimed. The tutor silently looked at the shocked youth.

"Lay it on the table, then," he nodded with his gray head. There was an awkward silence, where only the heavy breathing of poor William could be heard, as he struggled patiently to avoid dropping his heavy load. At last, the prince withdrew the sheathed sword from his belt and laid it solemnly on the wooden table.

"I shall return to retrieve it," Philip promised.

"It may be later than you think, sire," replied the grave teacher. "I fear for your sword, once your mother learns of what you've done."

"I suppose you think it's horrid that I do not worship my studies."

"On the contrary, your majesty, that's the least of my worries. Your attitude is perilous. Today, it's your studies; tomorrow..." With a heavy sigh, the old man leaned back and gestured for young William to carry out his task. The page gave a slight bow and then went ahead. Philip's eyes followed him out and then returned to his tutor. They were quiet for a while and looked at one another for what seemed like an eternity, as Philip searched for what to say. Finally, in a tone, he deemed befitting of his rank, the prince whispered: "It will do you no good." Then he turned quickly and stomped out of the room - leaving his teacher no opportunity to respond.

"This test is not meant for me, your majesty." The man called after the prince. Acting as if he had not heard, Philip only quickened his pace. The old man watched his young lord leave the room. His eyes followed the boy out and then closed gently. Slowly, his head fell, until it rested in his hands. He sat there for some time alone, quiet, sad and weary... very weary.

"The king," he whispered, raising his head, "will find a greater war to be fought, when he returns from the battlefield."



*He sat there for some time alone*

## CHAPTER 2

“Where shall I put these?” William asked. He had been standing for a few minutes, waiting for a signal from his prince.

“Throw them in the rubbish heap for all I care!” Philip said coldly.

William looked around. He wasn't sure how to take the prince's response. He found a small table by the balcony's entrance. Philip made no objection when he put them there, so the page respectfully took his leave from the young prince's royal presence.

Philip waited, but didn't hear the door close. He turned around to find that William had left it open for the tutor, who was now standing just outside the doorway. They exchanged looks, the prince and the old man, but not words. And none were needed. The prince felt his defeat keenly, but he summoned every ounce of his pride to repel his elder's admonishing glance.

Then, the tutor reached forward and began pulling the door closed. Before it shut, the old man's eyes were briefly raised. For that small moment, Philip saw a streak of pain run through his wrinkled face and dim his eyes. It effected the boy, but in a way he neither understood nor enjoyed.

Then, before the closing thud's echo had faded away, the prince heard a distinct click come from the outer keyhole. The clanking of keys could be heard accompanying the tutor's fading footsteps down the long corridor. The locked-up prince's indignation flamed inside of him again and with a sudden passion he ran to the table which held the study books and kicked its legs from beneath it. The tall stack came crashing to the floor and Philip, hoping his master had heard the loud noise, added to it by kicking the small table to the other side of the room.

Philip gave a satisfied look at the mess he had made. After a few moments, a thought entered the prince's head and he filled his arms with books. He went out onto the balcony and emptied his load near the railing. Then he hurried in to get the rest, which he dumped on the heap outside. Carefully, he selected his least favorite books, which he laid on the railing - preparing to hurl them out into the air and down to their fate.

A familiar noise got his attention and Philip gave a short glance below to his right. There he saw, some distance away, his two sisters playing in the orchards. Meg's cheerful laughter brought back to the prince her haunting words:

*“God has things grow for a reason. You are not born strong nor wise. That takes time, which comes with age. ... These tall strong vines which cover our castle have stood the test of time, though once they were young and weak like my vines. ... But one day mine shall be as tall and strong as they.”*

Philip sighed. The struggle within him was fierce, but he had a will of his own, and it was very strong. He began to doubt. Was he too young? Were his actions wrong? Who was right and what should he do? What would his father want



*His mind was filled with  
hundreds of thoughts*

him to do? His mind was filled with hundreds of thoughts. With his heart sinking lower and lower, one question seemed to rise above the rest. After all this, had Philip been beaten so easily? Should he admit defeat?

For one brief moment the struggle reached fever pitch. And then it was over.

“Never,” Philip said bitterly. He snatched up a book and raised his arm to throw it. He momentarily caught sight of a small vine which had been knocked off the railing and onto his books. So quickly does the mind work that, no sooner had he seen it, he forgot his intention of throwing the book. He looked up at the thick growth of vines which twirled around the turrets of the castle, reaching up to its very top. Slowly, he lowered his arm as his mind raced.

“Age-old vines,” he spoke to them softly, “which cover this castle. We shall test thy strength.” Philip tossed the book aside and went back inside his room.

“’Tis a pity that old ogre took my sword.” His eyes flashed at the memory. “But I’m sure that father can supply me with one when I get there. A better one!” He pulled an old chest from the wall and reached behind it. “I’ll have to be in disguise until I get there.” He held up a ragged tunic. He had found it once while hunting with his father, who had given him permission to keep it.

Philip changed his hunting coat for the muddy tunic and searched around for his knife. Diligently, but quickly and with some skill, the prince collected together the few provisions he would need.

“I can’t bring much,” he said stuffing a handkerchief in his belt. He looked around his room.

“I don’t have any food,” he said slowly. “I guess I’ll have to - ”

Suddenly, he stopped to listen. Was it just his imagination ...- wait! No... yes! Someone was coming down the hallway. The young boy froze. His hand went over his racing heart and he tried to stifle his breathing. The footsteps approached the bedroom door... but then passed on. Philip heaved a great sigh but quietly.

“I have to hurry,” he whispered to himself as he ran out onto the balcony and peered around. No one. In the distance he heard a horse and cart approaching from the south.

“Today will be perfect,” Philip told himself. “They won’t come for me ‘til tomorrow morning. The prince stepped backwards onto a book. He looked down.

“But I mustn’t leave this mess here for them to find.”

In hopes of distracting his future pursuers, the prince gathered all his books and set them up to look as if he’d been studying them. Then, he jumped into his bed, twisted around a bit and then got out, throwing the blankets aside. At the balcony’s door, he turned back to give the room one last check.



*The Royal Schoolbooks*



## CHAPTER 2

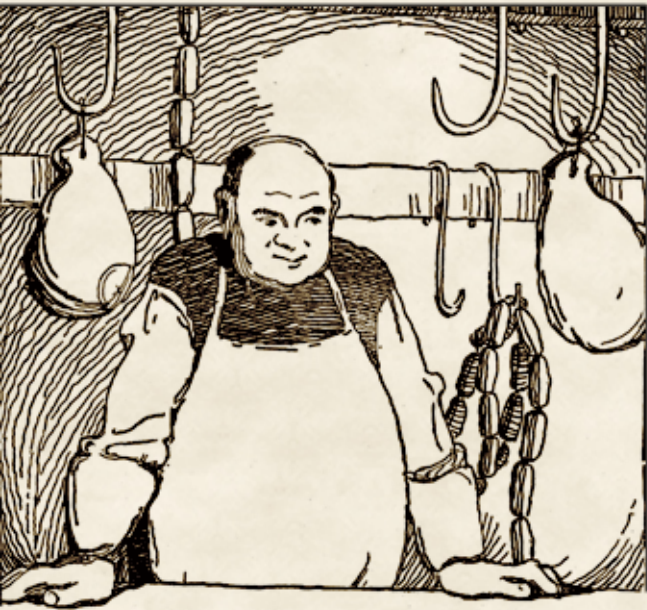
“Hopefully, when they think that I’ve studied and slept through the night, they won’t have any idea of the head start I actually have.”

The prince walked out onto the sunlit balcony and looked towards the gate. That cart was nearly empty now, having delivered its goods to the castle.

“It won’t be empty for the return journey,” Philip smiled, climbing onto the railing. “I’ll see to that.”

Taking hold of a few secure vines, the prince began to slowly descend to his freedom.

## CHAPTER 3



*“MEAT! Fresh meat!”*

“I understand.”

“Harder to sell, you mean,” a farmer chimed in. “I fear for the harvest this year. My problem is going to be finding the extra to sell. What with all the raids we suffered last year, my family almost starved.”

“I agree, Patrick,” George said. “It seems poor timing for the king to leave. May God and Our Lady bring him back safe!”

“And victorious,” Michael added softly, glancing briefly at his son. “Well,” he swung a flour sack off his shoulder and reached into his pocket. “George, how much for that bird there?”

“What?” the stout man squinted.

“The chicken,” Michael pointed, “how much do you want?”

“But, Michael, I know you don’t need this. You’re a hunter! Buy some fruit from James there. Don’t waste your money on meat.”

“I’ve already gotten my wife some flour. Please, the hunting hasn’t been so good and we can’t afford to kill our chickens.”

George smiled, but did not move. The tall man grabbed the bird in question and handed it to his son, Peter, tossing several coins on the table.

“Wait,” the butcher picked up the money. “It isn’t worth all that!”

“**M**EAT! Fresh meat! Quickly before the sun sets now!”

A short dark man bellowed from the top of his lungs. It was five o’clock in the evening at the busy market square of Maristella. The area was fairly full of last minute shoppers, but people were heading home for dinner and the window of opportunity for any more sales was closing. A tall man and his son approached the butcher’s stand.

“Have you sold anything all day, George?” the man asked.

“Well, Michael, it’s been worse. But I haven’t sold as much as I’d like. It’s getting harder to store this much meat.” The butcher wiped his forehead as he surveyed his booth.

## CHAPTER 3

“Maybe not,” the hunter said, picking up his sack. “But you have mouths to feed.”

“Not as many as you do,” George protested.

A loud crash saved Michael from responding. A fruit cart had been upset and a rainbow of colors went rolling out in all directions.

“Peter,” Michael gestured to his son. “Go help James gather his fruits.” The young boy immediately ran over and obediently knelt down to help retrieve the runaway food.

James, however, was yelling at a lad who seemed to be the cause of it.

“Why don’t you watch what you’re doing?” James shouted.

“It was an accident!” the boy protested, but with little contrition.

“James,” Michael stepped in calmly, intercepting the next reprimand. “What happened?” he asked casually.

“Is it not obvious?” the angry man slapped his hands to his hips. “This careless boy has ruined all my fruit with a single blow.”

“I did not mean to,” the young boy insisted.

“Of course not!” the fruit seller said sarcastically, “Maybe your foot got caught on one of its legs. Coincidental, I suppose. But it happened only after I refused to give you a small job in exchange for a meal. I’m surprised you didn’t ‘help pick the fruit you spilt!’ Why do I think there would be less in the cart when you were done helpin’!”

“James!” Michael interrupted. “Surely, it’s not as bad as all that.”

“Oh, isn’t it?” James asked. A small crowd had begun to gather around the scene. “Look at how much food he damaged!”

“How much was it, Peter?” the hunter asked his son.

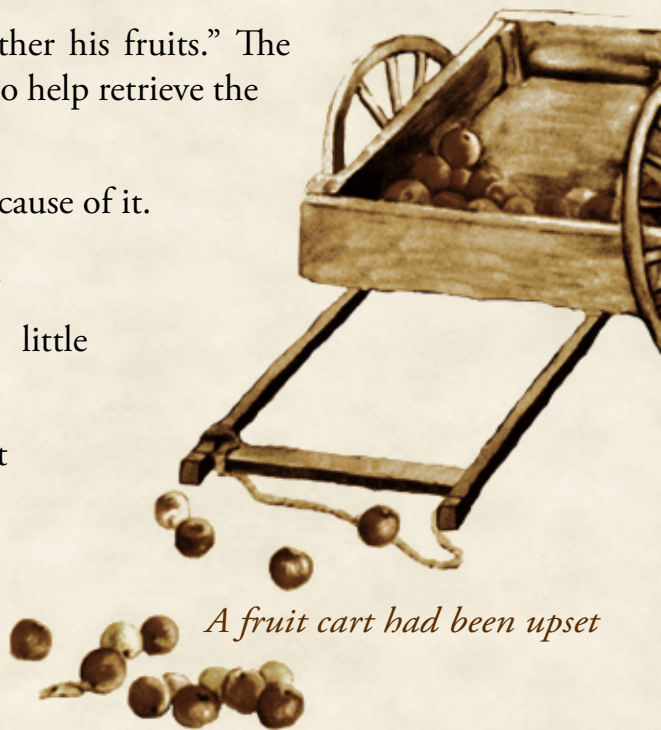
“Around twenty pieces, no more than thirty. The rest can be sold.”

“And the others, eaten, I’m sure,” Michael reassured his friend.

“But who will buy them, Michael?” James asked impatiently.

“The boy, of course!” Someone commented from the crowd.

“Have ye any money?” James turned towards the guilty one. Everyone was quiet, waiting for his answer, he took so long to say it.



*A fruit cart had been upset*

"No," the boy looked ashamed for the fact, and several voices were raised among the people at this awkward complication.

"He looks strong enough to work the debt," an old man said out loud.

"His father must have money," someone else assumed.

"Where is your father?" a woman asked him.

The young lad looked at her and mumbled. "We were separated. There's no one to look out for me now." He lowered his head.

"Why not?" someone asked. But the boy had little time to answer for almost immediately a voice called out: "The cart is broken!" The small crowd became more dense as everyone crowded around to see for themselves.

"Well, that's it then." James said. "Have ye, then, no way to pay for the wreckage?" The boy licked his lips, but said nothing. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Will a chicken pay for the spoiled fruit?" Everyone turned to the author of question. "I have it on good authority that this bird is of the highest quality!" the hunter added with a smile. He was working hard to turn the attention to himself and away from the boy.

"And what of the cart, Michael?" James asked, not quite ready to forgive and forget. He seemed frustrated with the huntsman's calm approach and gentle attitude toward the young hooligan.

"Come now, James." He leaned over to see the damage. "It isn't all that broken. The worst I see is a missing handle and a broken wheel." The fruitseller walked over and peered down at the cart. The tall hunter pointed at the wheel.

"I've a friend who'll fix that for nothing at all," he said. James didn't move. Michael gave him a good-natured slap on the back. "What do you say, James?"

Slowly, a smile softened the seller's hard face. It was hard to resist the warmth of his good friend's charity. "The handle was already missing," he admitted gently. Quickly raising his voice again he stuttered "And ... and - I'll accept your offer for the wheel." He straightened his back, adding, "and the bird!" He took the chicken from his friend's outstretched arm. "Thanks, Michael."

The hunter answered with a slight tip of his hat. "Gather up the damaged fruit, Peter, and we will bring it home to mother."

At this point, most everyone returned to their own business and James went behind his stand. The strange boy, however, merely wandered off, unbeknownst to anyone. Only one pair of eyes followed the stranger as he trudged off and away from the bustle of the marketplace.

The huntsman bent down towards his son, "... and tell mother we'll be having an extra plate at the table."

Peter looked at the boy in the distance.

### CHAPTER 3

“Yes, father,” he smiled. The son took the bag of fruit and headed off for home.

Quickly snatching up the sack of flour, Michael went off in pursuit of the young stranger. His long strides soon caught him up to the child.

“Hello,” the man called out. The boy’s head turned to look behind.

“Hello,” he answered, but refusing to stop. Suddenly the tall huntsman was in front of the boy, blocking his path.

“My name is Michael Hawkson,” the hunter held out his hand. “What’s yours?” The boy looked cautiously at the rugged brown hand before him. He thought a moment and then slowly took hold of it with his own. “Richard Barkwood,” the boy answered. Michael gave a small grin.

“Where are you going, Richard?” he asked cheerfully.

“Nowhere, I guess,” the boy said, shrugging his shoulders, “Just trying to find my family.” He looked around. “Where am I?”

“You mean the village? You’re in Maristella.” The name apparently was not familiar to the boy, who turned a thoughtful eye to the road.

“What happened to your father?” Michael asked. A confused look came over the lad’s face.

“I...I don’t know,” he stuttered thoughtfully. “I mean I wasn’t there long enough to see. We- ” there was a short pause as he looked at the tall man’s face. “We were traveling,” he went on to explain, “to our new home, when we were waylaid by some thieves. Father told me to escape, which I did, but...,” his face grew dark. “I don’t know what happened to the rest of my family.”

“Do you know where they would go if they survived?” asked Michael.

“Uh...” His small eyes were searching. “I don’t know.”

“Where were you moving to?” The hunter asked.

“Eastward. Father never told me where exactly.” The boy didn’t offer anymore of an explanation and Michael decided not to pry. Instead, the hunter just stood there, stroking his beard. There was deep thought going on behind his dark eyes.

“By the way,” the boy slowly broke the silence, “thank you... for your help.”

The tall stranger smiled broadly, “You’re welcome, my friend. Would you like to pay me back?”

“I suppose so ...,” the boy answered with obvious reluctance.

“How would it be if you carried this flour to my house?” The hunter swung the heavy bag from his shoulders into the young lad’s arms. “And then stayed for supper and bed?” This offer brought a surprised grin to the boy’s face.

“You *mean* it?” Richard dared not believe him.

## *THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT*

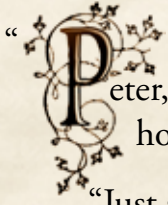
“Of course. Why wouldn't I?” The hunter laughed, shrugging his shoulders. “But you have to bring the bag home?” he said with a serious air which ended with a smile.

“Oh, thank you, my good man. I'm forever in your debt! We can start right away, if you like.”

There was an odd tone in the way the strange boy uttered his words. It was almost as if -. Michael stared deeply into the boy's eyes. He detected something in those eyes that was different, that seemed ... but he couldn't be sure. What he was sure of, though, was that whoever or whatever this boy was, he obviously needed a meal and a friend.

The young lad, with some effort, struggled with the dusty bag until it rested on his shoulder. The hunter pushed it to a more secure position on the boy's back, and then he led the youth away from the marketplace, down the dusty road that led out of town.

## CHAPTER 4



Peter, Peter,” a chipper girl of five pulled on her older brother’s arm. “Peter, who is Papa bringing home?”

“Just some boy from the market, Anna.” He freed his sleeve from her grasp.

“You didn’t recognize him?” His younger brother Matthew asked.

“I don’t think he’s from around here,” Peter said simply.



*The Hawkson’s kitchen*

“Do you know his name?” questioned a woman working diligently in the small corner of the room which constituted her kitchen.

“No, Mama.” Peter shook his head. A sudden cry came from his seven year old sister at the window.

“Mama, Mama! He’s coming! Look,” she pointed at two small objects, approaching quickly from a distance. “Papa’s coming!”

“Is the boy with him, Bridget?” asked Matthew, as he jumped out of his chair.

“I think so,” she squinted.

“What’s he look like?” asked Peter’s elder sister, Teresa.

“See for yourself!” Bridget answered. Teresa, following her sister’s advice, walked over to the crowded window and peered above the smaller heads.

“He’s so fair,” Teresa said. Peter mistook her comment and after making brief eye contact with her, slowly rolled his.

“No, Peter.” She defended herself. “I mean literally. He’s so...

“Pale?”

“I was trying to find a nicer way of putting it.” She said, almost reproachfully.

“What’s wrong with him?” little Anna asked.

“Nothing,” Teresa answered. “His skin’s just not as dark as ours.” The five year old began examining her hands.

“Maybe he’s a shoemaker’s son,” one of the girls guessed. “They don’t spend as much time in the sun as we do.”

"They're called 'cobblers', Catherine," Matthew corrected.

"Why don't you all back away from the window," mother suggested. "We don't want to scare him." The six children moved away and rushed over to the table. Almost immediately, footsteps could be heard approaching the door. Peter ran up and opened it for them.

"Papa!" cried several voices and their father was soon surrounded, but not overwhelmed.

"Hello, children," he said as he picked up his exuberant Anna. The little girl rubbed her cheek, but was beaming, after receiving a kiss from her father.

"Oh, Mother," The man pointed at the bag Peter had taken from the new boy's shoulder, "That's fresh flour from the Corthins. His wife is doing much better." The hunter set Anna on a chair.

"Good, I'm glad. Peter, put that over there," his mother said, gesturing to a dark corner.

"Supper's ready, dear," she called out to her husband.

"Good. We'll eat then, I guess. Here, everyone sit down." The children split up and then gathered around the table. An extra place had been set as requested, but a stool was all they could spare.

"Can you manage?" Michael asked the boy, looking at the short stool.

"I think so." He sat down on the stool, directly left of the head of the table, where Michael took his chair. When everyone was seated, all the heads bowed as the father led his family in a prayer. The Sign of the Cross ended the prayer for grace and began the meal. Having a stranger at the table did not seem to slow the younger girls down in their usual discourse on the various activities they busied themselves with, or the questions they hurled at their father. But pretty soon the conversation made its way around to the young lad unknown to them, sitting by their father.

"What's your name?" Peter asked him.

"Richard. Richard Barkwood," he said and scooped some more soup with his spoon. "What is yours?"

"Peter."

"And your age?"

"Eleven years."

"I'm twelve," Richard smiled, proud of the fact that he barely surpassed him.

"I'm three!" A small boy cried out.

"That's Dominic," Peter explained. Richard nodded.

"I suppose," Father said, "we should give everyone a proper introduction. Matthew, why don't you start and we'll go around from there."

"Well, I'm... Matthew," the boy smiled at the repetition.



## CHAPTER 4

“Tell him how old you are,” his father told him.

“Oh, I’m ten.” Matthew said quickly.

“You heard how old Dominic was,” The hunter smiled and Richard leaned forward to see the little boy further down his row.

“Hello, Dominic!” Richard waved gently. The three year old would have responded were his mouth not full of delicious bread. He smiled anyway with his hamster-stuffed cheeks. This simple grin brought an unexpected laugh from his sister Anna. Laughter, being very contagious, seemed to spread around the table. Richard, especially was effected, and could not help but giggle at the sight of this round, but rosy-faced, girl rocking with laughter. Michael watched Richard. A small smile, hidden behind his mustache and beard, spread across the father’s face. He was glad to see the boy’s raw and uncomfortable disposition wear away, and the true Richard come through.

Teresa gently asked Anna to continue eating. Obediently, the little girl made a valiant effort and was soon under control again. At least, as much as Anna ever could be under control.

Michael continued the introductions with his youngest child, Bernard. The father introduced him, because the child, himself, was only one year in age. Michael’s wife was at the other end of the table and she described herself as being twenty-eight years old. This led into a brief discussion as to when they were married; fourteen years ago, when Michael was twenty-four and his wife, Greta, was fourteen. Teresa, their oldest, sat next to her mother. She was thirteen years old.

“My name is Anna,” the girl said, when Teresa was done. “And I’m five,” she held up an open hand, displaying her age.

“I’m Bridget,” Anna’s older sister said. “And I’m seven years old.”

“I’m one year older than she is.” said the girl on Bridget’s left.

“Eight.” Bridget quickly interjected. Her older sister made a face at her rude interruption.

“And my name is Catherine,” she continued.

“So there’s ten of you?” Richard looked around, counting all the children plus their parents.

“We’re very blessed,” Greta nodded.

“How many are in your family?” Teresa asked

“There’s three other children and my father and mother,” said Richard.

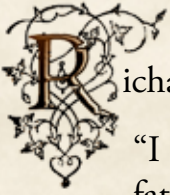
“Thank you for knocking down the fruit cart.” Bridget said brightly, changing the subject and holding up her half-eaten apple. A slight cry escaped her lips, as she received a harsh kick from Catherine’s foot beneath the table. Richard only smiled.

“Your father bought them,” he reminded her.

“Where is your family, Richard?” Catherine asked, putting the subject back on track.

An awkward silence followed, as the boy, suddenly nervous, hesitated to answer.

## CHAPTER 5



Richard's face abruptly changed and the tension in his eyes vanished.

"I don't know where my family is." Briefly, he retold for them the story he had told their father.

"What was your father's trade?" Matthew asked him. Richard didn't answer immediately.

"He was a blacksmith," he said at last.

"Daddy's a hunter!" Dominic said proudly.

"Really?" Richard turned towards their father.

"Yes, I am. But things are getting harder." Michael said shrugging his shoulders, then added sincerely: "But it is God's Providence. May His Holy Will be done."

It was quiet for awhile and the sound of wooden spoons on bowls filled in for the lack of speech.

Teresa finally thought of something to say. "Catherine's birthday is tomorrow."

"Is it?" Richard looked across at her.

"I'll be nine." She said shyly.

"It *is* tomorrow!" Anna cried out, more than compensating for her sister's shyness.

"That's right," her father said, "I was going to take you to see Mrs. Mill's rabbits after Mass tomorrow morning. Would you like that?"

"Yes, please!" Catherine quickly nodded her head.

"Can we come too!" Bridget and Anna cried out together.

"I think it'll just be Catherine, for her birthday," their father said. Then turning to Peter, he said, "Tomorrow, I'm going to need you to pick up that old bench from the Damino's."

"Tomorrow morning?" Peter asked. His father nodded.

"But, I was going to go fishing with Matthew," the young boy reminded him. "You said we could."

"I am sorry, Peter, but I've changed my mind," The hunter said simply. "I need you to pick up that bench tomorrow before it rains." Peter's eyes fell.

"Don't worry," the father said, "Teresa can go fishing with Matthew."

Peter bit his lip and slowly scraped the bowl with his spoon. The tall man cleared his throat and his son looked up into his eyes.

## CHAPTER 5

“Yes, sir.” Peter said quickly, but with little zeal. Richard watched him and then looked back at the father.

“You know, of course, to stay on this side of the forest and *no* side trips.” Michael added, raising his brows. “I want you back before noon.”

“Yes, sir.” Peter spoke a little more strongly, having recovered from his initial disappointment. Richard looked again at Peter, waiting. But the boy was finished; he had nothing more to say. The stranger’s eyebrows furrowed in thought.

The conversation changed from there and went on to other subjects. Bridget offered to show Richard their chickens, but it was pointed out to her that the sun had already set.

“Perhaps tomorrow,” suggested her mother.

“After I get back with Peter,” Richard added. Several of the older eyes gave him a quizzical look.

“What?” Peter asked.

“I thought I’d ride with you to the Damino’s tomorrow. That is,” he added, somewhat hastily but not sincerely. “If you don’t mind, Mister Hawkson,” he asked the father. Michael didn’t answer right away.

“Alright,” he said at last, “if you’d like to.”

“Thanks,” Peter said with a big smile.

“You’re welcome,” Michael and Richard spoke at once. Then Richard realized that he was not the one who had been spoken to. He lowered his head and bit a piece of bread.

The conversation changed again, but this time to finish up the meal and gather for their prayers. The girls helped clean up, while Peter and Matthew lit the candles beside Our Lady’s statue. Richard got up from the table, but kind of backed away, watching everybody work.



*On the mantle stood a statue of the Blessed Mother*

It was a small house. They were all in one room which seemed to serve as their kitchen, dining room, and living room. Towards the back, Richard could see a rugged door, which he assumed led to where they slept.

“There couldn’t be enough room for them all to sleep in here,” he thought, kicking his foot on the ground. Then he noticed that the floor consisted of dirt. What a tiny, dirty home! He looked around at all the people. They didn’t even notice what kind of house they lived in. And if you asked them, they probably wouldn’t care.

Suddenly a voice interrupted his thoughts.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

“Would you like to borrow my beads for tonight?” Catherine asked him.

“What?” Richard looked down at the coarse string of knots.

“For when we pray to Mary tonight,” the little girl explained. “Do you have yours with you?”

“No. I lost it,” he said slowly.

“Here,” she smiled. “Use mine. I can count on my fingers.”

“Alright. Thank you, miss.” He bowed slightly. Most everyone had already gathered together and Catherine and Richard joined them quickly. Then, everyone faced the fireplace where, up on the mantle, stood a little statue of the Blessed Mother, with her hand extended towards her children. Two candles flickered in the dark, lighting up the statue they framed and the flowers beside them.

Out of the silence came a deep masculine voice, leading his family in the Sign of the Cross. Then he began praying the Most Holy Rosary. Most of the children knelt, like him, before Our Lady's image. Little Dominic usually would fall back on his legs when his knees got tired and Bernard would lie on his mother's lap. Richard wasn't used to kneeling without support. Greta smiled when she saw him tip once, almost losing his balance. But he went on manfully and prayed along with the rest.

Every now and then, he'd just listen to the harmony of young voices finish their father's prayers. Richard watched them. Sometimes you could see them get distracted, but they always turned themselves back, as soon as they noticed what they were doing. A tranquillity came over Richard, seeing all those faces filled with such a love and peace. There was something real in them. Something different. Something he had never seen before. He was glad to see so many children, himself of course, coming from a smaller family. Then Richard would catch himself being distracted by all these thoughts and struggle to get back to his own Rosary.

When the family finished praying, it was time to go to bed.

“Where's Richard sleeping, Papa?” Anna asked.

“I thought we would put him with Matthew.” The young brother grinned.

“Where's Peter going to sleep?” asked Bridget.

“Out here,” her father said. “Teresa, would you please get an extra blanket for your brother.” The young girl nodded and got up off the floor.

“Come along, girls,” Greta patted her daughter on the back, “Say ‘goodnight’.”



*Bernard would lie in his mother's lap*

## CHAPTER 5

“Goodnight, Papa,” Anna stood on her toes to kiss her father, but had to be picked up before she could reach.

“Can I have a nighttime blessing,” Catherine asked, kneeling down.

“Me too!” Anna chimed in, dropping to her knees. Michael placed his large hand on each one. While her children received their blessing, Greta busied herself around their humble kitchen. Richard made his way to Catherine.

“Here,” he handed back her rosary, “Thank you again.”

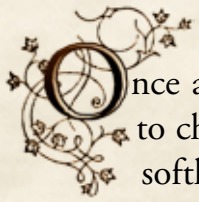
“Oh,” the girl took it with a smile. “You’re welcome.” The boy made a slight nod with his head and then turned to the mother.

“Goodnight, Ma’am,” Richard bowed. The peasant woman hesitated. Then returning his greeting with a smile, Greta patted the thin lad’s shoulder.

“And goodnight to you, young man. But you’d better be off to bed. Matthew!” the mother called out, “Don’t think you can delay your bedtime! Come now and show Richard his room. Make sure he is warm enough!”

The eyes of the young mother followed her new guest as he followed her sons to their bedroom. She seemed to be searching for something that the simple, dim candlelight could not reveal.

## CHAPTER 6



Once all of the children had gone to bed, their father went outdoors. He made his daily round to check their few animals. After securing the bolt on the horse's stall, Michael heard footsteps softly approaching from behind. The hunter turned around.

"Greta?" he squinted at the lamp shining his eyes.

"I didn't know if you needed some light," the small woman offered.

"Thank you, but I'm done," he said, slapping the dirt off his hands. "Did Richard get to bed alright?"

"Yes, but I hope Matthew doesn't keep him up all night," His wife forced a smile.

"I don't think he will." Michael looked up at the full moon. There were dark clouds approaching.

"Michael?" Greta's quiet voice broke the silence.

"Yes?" the hunter looked back down at his wife.

"How long is this boy staying?" Her voice attempted to seem calm.

"I don't know..." the tall man shrugged his shoulders. He started walking towards the house. He thought about it. "I really don't."

"You just found him at the marketplace?" She said, quickly catching up to walk beside him. Michael nodded.

"What was he doing there?" She inquired.

"Making trouble," the hunter smiled. His wife breathed a sigh.

"What?" He asked. Gently touching her arm, he had her stop walking and turn to him.

She lowered her eyes. "If he was separated from his family, will they not come looking for him?"

"If they survived and know where to look."

The woman lifted her head. "Surely," she hesitated a moment. "Surely, the boy must remember where the robbery occurred. Could you not start by looking there?" Her words came out ever more quickly. Her gaze began to pierce into Michael looking for answers to questions which her mouth did not yet dare to form. Michael nervously turned away, and looked up at the sky.



*She lowered her eyes*

## CHAPTER 6

“You seem anxious to get rid of the boy,” he said calmly. Greta dropped her eyes again.

“I don’t know,” she said. Michael still sensed an agitation in her voice. He waited for her to continue and for awhile no one spoke.

“Michael,” his wife said, holding the lantern close to his face, “Do you believe him?”

“Who?”

“Richard.”

“About what?”

“Everything!” She cried, placing the lantern down. She could bear it no longer and all of her fears came pouring out. “That he’s lost, missing his family, the son of blacksmith. Michael, you *know* he’s no blacksmith’s boy!” Michael sighed deeply but said nothing.

Greta respectfully but firmly continued to press her point. “You’re not going to get a child to look that neat with just a few baths. His hands look like they’ve lived in gloves. His manners are fit for a duke’s son. There’s just....” She tried to think. “There is just *something* about him. He sounds and acts—he just doesn’t look like he was raised in a blacksmith’s shop.”

She stopped for a moment to look at her husband. In the pale moonlight, she could tell his eyes were lowered. He quietly stood there, stroking his dark beard. One look at his somber face told Greta that he had already thought of all these things and more.

“I’m sorry,” Greta said quickly and lowered her head. Her husband gently laid a consoling hand on her shoulder.

“I know, Greta. I have already considered -” he shut his mouth and looked down. After a brief pause, he slowly raised his head again, breathing deeply.

“Regardless of his origins, this boy needs help and a place to stay. Until someone else is ready to give him that, I will.” His tone was firm and his points were clear. But her fears were far from calmed.

“What if some nobleman comes looking for him?” she asked anxiously. Michael grinned.

“We shall return Richard to his family when we find them.”

“And do you not suppose that they will wonder as to *why* he - ?” Her husband shook his head slowly and placed a gentle hand on her lips.

“Do not worry,” he said, as his hand traveled to her cheek. He raised her face. “Peace, Greta.”

His wife smiled and humbly lowered her head. He gently raised her face towards his and tenderly kissed her forehead. His clear eyes looked deeply into hers. Greta smiled, but Michael could see the anxiety still clinging to her heart. Gently gathering her into his strong arms, the hunter laid his cheek against her head. Wrapped in his protective embrace, Greta felt shielded from every danger in the world. Slowly, her husband drove away the fear that had tortured her soul and replaced it with a firm, but quiet peace.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

Suddenly, Michael looked up. His father's ears had detected a familiar sound.

"Was Bernard asleep?" he asked.

"Yes, finally" the woman sighed with relief. "It is so difficult to get him to sleep."

"Well, my dear," he patted her back, "I think he's awake."

"What?" her smile faded rapidly.

"Listen," he raised a hand to his ear. Slowly, she could distinguish in the night's air the faint cries of her son.

Greta enjoyed the warmth and protection of her husband and did not want the moment to end. "Oh well," she reluctantly sighed. "He's probably hungry."

"Probably," her husband agreed. He gave her a quick, firm hug before the two of them began walking back to the house.

Michael's keen ear was not the first to have heard poor Bernard's cries. In one of the pitch black bedrooms within the humble home, a young boy lay awake. He sat up at last, when the baby's cries continued to grow in volume and strength. Richard looked at the peasant boy sleeping beside him.

"How can he sleep through this?" the guest wondered. "Perhaps he's used to it," he responded to himself out loud. He tried to lay down again, but Bernard's cries kept him from falling asleep. His mind wandered, trying to distract himself until Bernard quieted down.

Then, something occurred to him. He turned over and reached his hand down beneath the bed. His hand fumbled around in the dark. There were his shoes, but also.... Ah, ha! Here. He pulled up a small sheath which held a little knife. Richard smiled. He wanted to make sure he still had it. It'd been a gift from his father, who had taught him also to never sleep with it on. His head turned sharply as he heard the outside door open and two voices enter the house. Quickly, he put the small dagger under the bed again and threw his head on the pillow. He listened to the hunter and his wife pass by. The baby's cries became momentarily louder as the couple entered their bedroom. Slowly, Richard turned. The crying stopped and all he could hear was Matthew's snoring. Richard grinned at the humble lad who shared his bed.

"Sleep well." His whisper was barely audible. "...and remember this night." He laid his head back down.

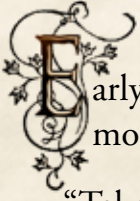
"Few peasants can claim to have slept so close to their prince!"



*"How can he sleep through this?"*



# CHAPTER 7



Early the next morning, after Mass, Mr. Hawkson sent six of his eight children home with their mother. Anna and Bridget waved back at Catherine, who stood beaming by their father.

“Take care, Peter,” Teresa called out cheerfully.

“Goodbye,” Peter waved at them all. Richard waved as well.

“Bye, Richard,” the little girls yelled, walking backwards. “See you later!”

Richard looked at Peter. “They are funny,” he smiled. Peter crossed over to his father waiting by the cart.

“They like you,” Peter answered with a slight turn of his head to the stranger.

“Are you ready?” Michael asked.

“Yes.” The hunter’s son pulled himself into the cart.

“Catherine and I may be done before you get back,” said Michael.

“Alright.” Peter held out his hand to Richard.

“Be back by noon,” his father reminded them as Richard scrambled in.

“We will, Papa,” the boy promised. He shook the reins.

“Come, Azarias,” Peter said to the horse, “let’s go!”

With a slight jerk, the animal started to trot.

“Bye, Peter,” his little sister waved.

“Goodbye, Catherine. Bye, Papa.” yelled Peter.

“Happy Birthday, Catherine!” Richard shouted.

“Bye, Richard,” she smiled.

“May God bless you and keep you safe!” Michael called after the two boys. He stood there with his daughter, waving them off. He followed them with his eyes as they trotted away. The father in Michael sighed. Doubts tried to fill his mind with worry. He shook them off firmly. They’ll be fine. He watched the specks fade off into the distance. That Richard boy was okay. He trusted him.



The two boys, companions at the start of the trip, had already become fast friends. Peter had taken them on a rougher, but more scenic route, to entertain Richard.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

“When we have the bench we’ll have to take a more stable road.” Peter explained.

“Whoa,” Richard cried softly as the cart wheel hit a small pothole. The peasant smiled at him and Richard laughed.

“I can see why,” he said.

“Oh, look!” Peter pointed at a large oak in the distance. “That’s the tree I told you Matthew couldn’t get out of. Father had to climb up and rescue him,” he recalled with a smile.

“What was it you were going to do with Matthew today?” Richard asked.

Peter looked briefly at him and then at the road ahead.

“We were just going to go fishing,” he said.

“Did you want to go?” The question quickly followed Peter’s answer.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. The honest answer was ‘yes’, but it was met with an awkward silence. Peter gave Richard a look out of the corner of his eye.

“But your company has made this task far more pleasurable than fishing,” Peter assured him.

“And if I hadn’t come?” The question received a puzzled stare from the hunter’s son. But the other lad said nothing. Peter laughed.

“Then it wouldn’t have been as enjoyable.” It sounded quite obvious, to him. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, nothing.” Richard looked out across the meadow. The peasant’s brows wrinkled as he studied his friend. He didn’t quite understand him and his questions. But as Richard didn’t volunteer to explain himself, Peter dropped the subject. And in return, Richard dropped whatever mood seemed to have caused those questions. For the rest of the trip, Peter and Richard carried on the most eager conversations. They were discussing old Azarias there and horses in general, when a sly looking creature darted across the road right in front of the cart.

“Oh, look,” Richard pointed excitedly, “It’s a fox!”

“Yes, a grey fox,” Peter peered past his friend’s head. “I wish I had my bow and arrow.” Peter told him wistfully.

“And I, my hunting dog,” was the enthusiastic response.

“I didn’t know you had a hunting dog.” Peter asked him.



*Peter pointed at a large oak  
in the distance*

## CHAPTER 7

Richard looked at him hastily. “Well, I don’t, really,” he said clumsily. “But I imagine one would be useful.”

For a while then, the two boys discussed the different aspects of hunting. Richard appeared to know very little and Peter enjoyed teaching him.

“You sound like you know what you’re talking about,” said Richard sincerely. Peter smiled.

“Father is an excellent teacher.”

“Is he a good huntsman, then?” asked Richard.

“Oh, yes!” Peter assured him. “Perhaps we can all go hunting later today.”

“If it doesn’t rain,” his friend added.

And so they talked, until they’d reached the woodcutter’s cottage, just outside the village.

“So what is this bench we’re picking up?” Richard asked Peter, as the horse slowly halted.

“Mr. Damino is a carpenter,” explained the young driver. “And my father hired him to build a bench for us.”

“Why?” asked the boy. “The ones I saw looked fine. Is it a work bench?”

“No.” Peter jumped down from the cart. “I don’t know what father plans to do with it.” Richard followed him down.

“Were I to guess, though,” Peter smiled, “I should think father ordered it because business has been ill for Mr. Damino of late. He is only just now recovering from a fall off his horse. He hasn’t been able to earn his living for some time now.” Peter commented as they walked towards the house, “Oh, and he may not be able to help us very much to carry the bench.”

“We can handle it.” Richard confidently assured his friend with a nudge. Peter grinned. In the short time they’d known each other, a bond had formed. Without realizing it, an affection had grown in the hunter’s young son for this boy; one that usually could only be explained by years of friendship.

Although Peter shared Richard’s enthusiasm, he was glad that one of Mr. Damino’s sons was there to help them carry and lift the heavy bench into the cart.

“Careful, Charles!” the carpenter called to his son, who was trying to secure its position.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Damino approached Peter. “It’s too large and won’t fit.”

“I think it will, father,” Charles said as he shoved the bench to the very back. “There!” He hopped onto the ground and leaned against the cart. The carpenter saw that a portion was still extending out over the back of the cart and there was not enough room to secure the bench with a restraining bar.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

"Just keep it steady, Peter," assured Charles, "and it should be fine."

"Thank you, sir," the young boy extended his grateful hand. Charles took it gladly. His father did likewise.

"Goodbye, Peter," he said warmly "And to you?" Mr. Damino held out his hand to Richard, who watched him with some surprise. He seemed caught off guard.

"This is Richard," Peter jumped in, saving a somewhat embarrassing moment. "He came along to help."

"Are you cousins?" the carpenter asked. Peter and Richard looked at one another.

"No," the younger one said, "just friends."

"Well any friend of Michael Hawkson is a friend of mine." He shook the boy's motionless hand.

"Thank you, sir," Richard bowed.

"Oh!" Peter threw his hand into his pocket. "Here," the small boy handed the carpenter something. "This is for you," he said and then turned quickly, motioning to Richard for them to leave.

"Oh no," the old man said slowly, counting the coins. He looked up from his hand, but the hunter's son was already up the cart.

"This is too much," Mr. Damino called after him. Peter shrugged his shoulders. "You'll have to discuss that with my father," the boy responded.

"But he's not here," the carpenter raised an ironic brow. The lad tried to hide his smile.

"All I know is that's what he gave me," he said innocently.

"Come now, Peter, take some of this back." But the young huntsman was busy pulling his friend up onto the seat.

"Please excuse us, Mr. Damino," said Peter respectfully. "But Papa wants us back by noon." Richard squinted up at the sun.

At this, the carpenter shook a mocking fist. "I'll make your father pay! Just wait 'til my back heals!"

"He is waiting," Peter waved, "And praying for it too!" Then, with a quick snap to the reins, Peter set the horse moving. The cart rocked a little and Richard glanced back anxiously at the bench.

"Careful!" Charles called out. Peter's silent nod acknowledged the warning. The old carpenter's face broke into a defeated smile.



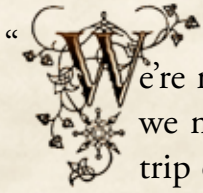
*"Just keep it steady, Peter."  
assured Charles*

## CHAPTER 7

“He’s as bad as his father,” Mr. Damino sighed.

His son nodded. “ Yes,” and placing his arm warmly around his father’s shoulders, he gratefully added, “...thank goodness!”

## CHAPTER 8



“We’re making excellent time, Richard.” Peter said happily. “We’ll be back in time for lunch and we may go hunting yet!” Richard found himself enjoying the ride home even more than the trip out. He was particularly fascinated with a large creek which ran alongside the road. As he watched the clear and bubbling ripples, Richard suddenly noticed another body of water a few miles off.

“I didn’t know there was such a large river nearby,” he said, almost asking. Peter turned to the right, following his gaze.

“There’s lots of rivers around here, we’re so near the sea,” he explained. Richard watched some floating branches ride the creek’s gentle current. He fancied one of those large twigs was racing them.

Richard sighed with impatience. He wished he too could race atop the waters. How easier traveling would be! It wouldn’t take nearly as long to get where he *wanted* to go. While Richard thought in silence, his younger companion was observing his pensive stare.

“You like the water?” Peter asked him. Richard just sat up.

“What’s over there?” he pointed to a little path in the distance, on the other side of the creek.

“A village, eventually. Uh, Fishersbrooke,” said Peter. “Home of the great fish! At least, around here,” he added “so they say.”

“Who say?”

“*They* say,” Peter shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“You’ve never been there before?” asked Richard.

“Once, with father. But not since.” Peter said, looking towards the distant river. “I don’t think he wants me to go back.”

“Why not?” Richard was intrigued.

“I don’t know.” Peter answered. “He never really explained why.”

Richard was about to ask another question, when the cart gave a sudden jolt in the back.

While staring across the creek, Peter had not been watching the road. As a result, they rounded the road’s bend too sharply and the rear wheel hit a fallen log.

“Whoa!” The boys cried out in almost unison and Peter’s young reflexes pulled quickly at Azarias’ reins. The anxious yank on the bridle scared the horse, who reared up on his hind legs. This last thrust was all the bench needed to topple out of the cart.

## CHAPTER 8

“Oh, no!” Richard cried as he heard it fall. He quickly scrambled down to the ground. Peter was already out and back, looking at the fallen furniture. He gave a sigh of relief.

“It’s not broken?” His shocked friend stood by his side.

“No, ” Peter shook his head.

“That was quite fortunate,” Richard laughed.

“Twas quite a blessing,” the peasant boy spoke softly. It truly *was* a blessing from God, for besides a little mud on the leg, the bench seemed to suffer no damage from the fall. Together the two children struggled to get the heavy load back into the cart. And were it not for their two Angels, they may have been at it for some time hence. But thanks to their unacknowledged Guardians, the boys managed at last to return the bench to its place.



*“Why not follow the road straight?”*

“What a treacherous bend in the road!” Richard panted.

“Nay, I was not watching where we were going.” Peter admitted. His companion was staring down the path ahead.

“Why were we turning?” Richard asked. “Why not follow the road straight?”

Peter followed his gaze. “That way,” the peasant pointed, “leads away from Maristella, though in a few miles it joins up with a larger road that could bring you back to the village.”

“ ‘Tis longer?” inquired Richard.

Peter shook his head. “No. The larger road is more of a highway really, so it actually would be faster.”

“Then why not take it?” Richard asked.

“Because,” Peter laid a hand on the bench., “Papa wants us to stay on this side of the forest. That path goes through it and out the other side to where it meets the highway.”

“The large road leads to Fishersbrooke?” Richard looked ahead.

“Yes,” Peter gently shoved the furniture. *Good.* It did not budge.

“You’re not afraid, are you?” Richard sent his friend a quizzical look.

“Of Fishersbrooke?” Peter was insulted. “No!”

“I should like to see it,” the other boy said slowly. Peter just stared, at him and then at the woods.

“Well, you can’t” he said at last. “Because we have to be back by noon.”

“But you said we were making excellent time!” answered Richard. “Can’t you take us on a short trip?”

“‘No side trips,’” Peter quoted, shaking his head.

“But it isn’t really,” the other boy protested. “It goes right to where we are going, just a different way.”

“No, I said it *could* bring you back to Maristella. Once you get to that larger road, you would have to travel in the opposite direction from Fishersbrooke. That path ahead will bring us *closer* to Fishersbrooke, but if we return to Maristella, it won’t bring us *to* it. And on top of all that, that path is on the wrong side of the woods.” Peter added simply. He looked as if the argument was settled. Richard was annoyed and getting impatient with his obstinate friend. Why not go that way? It’s faster! Richard asked him so, too.

“Because we’re not allowed to go that way.” Peter sounded somewhat impatient as well. Why does Richard keep arguing?

“You mean **you’re** not allowed.” Richard said hotly. Peter bit his tongue. He made it sound so inferior and degrading. Somehow Richard was the free one, not tied down to any rules, at least by Peter’s father, or so he acted.

“And what will happen anyway?” insisted Richard. “Even if we don’t take a side trip to Fishersbrooke? We’ll be back in plenty of time - just as your father asked.”

“*Said!*” his friend corrected him.

“What difference does it make?” Richard groaned.

“A great one!” young Peter retorted hotly. “Why should it make any difference to you whether we go my way or not!” Peter watched his face, waiting for an answer. The lad just stood silent, returning his gaze. Neither spoke.

*Why the change?* Peter thought. He wondered what Richard was thinking. Peter didn’t like arguing with him really. He wanted to have it both ways: Follow his father’s orders and keep the friendship of this new boy, whom he’d grown to like a lot. If they hurried and got home, perhaps they could go hunting or something, instead of waste time here. They were losing the “excellent time” they had made.

“Look, let’s get this bench home - ” he began cheerfully.

“I’m not going to your home,” interrupted Richard, a bitter tone in his voice. Peter was quite disappointed in his friend’s ill temper.

“Come on, Richard.” Peter ignored the rude remark. “Let’s get going.” He started walking to the front of the cart.

“Go, if you like,” Richard said, making no sign to move, “I’m not going back.”

Peter sighed wearily. “Why not?” he demanded.

“You return to your family, Peter” said Richard coldly, “And I to mine.”



## CHAPTER 8

“And where would that be,” the young lad spoke in sarcastic tones, “Fishersbrooke?”

“It’s a start,” responded the boy. Peter shook his head.

“Why not come back, Richard?” he asked desperately, “Father will be glad to help you find your family.”

Richard laughed. “He isn’t going to get very far if he’s afraid to leave the village.” The stinging insult pierced the hunter’s young son, which was Richard’s intention. But he was denied the satisfaction of a good reaction, for Peter held his tongue and said nothing.

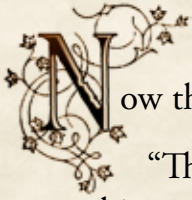
“If I need *anyone’s* help, it’s yours,” Richard said quietly.

The peasant’s head turned sharply at his ‘friend.’ “How?” he asked.

Richard smiled. There was an interest in his companion’s voice.



## CHAPTER 9



Now that Richard had Peter's attention, he attempted to arouse his curiosity.

"The road to find my family may be long and tiresome," Richard explained. "More than anything else I need a companion... a friend," he added with a hopeful look. This appeal strangely affected Peter, but he attempted to hide his feelings.

"Where is your family?" He tried to sound indifferent. But Richard could see the intrigue in his eyes, and played along to allure him.

"Far," Richard said simply. "But I have an idea where they were going and know that we will find them." He watched and waited as indecision reigned on Peter's face. At last the peasant boy spoke.

"I should love to go with you, Richard," his eyes looked up at the bench, "But I have to ask my father."

"Why?" Richard blurted out angrily. Then, catching himself, added quickly, "I'm sure he trusts your judgment." Peter made no answer. "What?" Richard continued "Do you think he doesn't trust you!"

"He can," Peter said softly. "That's why I'm going home."

"What!" Richard was irritably confused. He failed to see that by obeying, Peter was rewarding the trust his father had in him. But young Hawkson refused to argue any longer. He turned his back on his angry companion and climbed up into the cart.

"At least give me a ride there!" Richard demanded, still standing outside the cart.

"Where?" the boy asked. The other pointed towards the woods.

"To 'Fisherscook' or whatever that town is called." He sputtered angrily.

"No." Peter said calmly. Richard was enraged. How dare this...this... boy disobey his orders! Did he not know?

"Very well, then," Richard approached him with a strained calmness. "You have left me no other choice."

"Than to walk on foot?" the seated lad smiled. Richard ignored him. He walked up to the cart and planted his feet.

"I command you, in the name of the king! Take me to the village yonder!" His head nodded towards the wooded road. The peasant just stared at him. A boy, scarcely older than himself, with nothing special or characteristic about him, save his satin-like skin and lofty manners - dared to command him in the name of their high king! A humored smile spread across the rugged lad's face, until he at last burst into laughter.

"Oh, Richard," he cried. "Ye be a madman or a jester! But to me, you are quite funny." And Peter laughed, without sarcasm or ridicule, but with innocent sincerity. So engrossed was he in his merriment, that he paid no heed to the furious glares which his companion sent him.

"What impudence!" thought Richard. "You would not laugh thus, if you knew who you were mocking!" he threatened.

"And who, my friend," Peter tried to control himself, "has thus commanded me?"

"The king's son, Prince Philip!" the boy said with great and regal dignity. For poor Peter, however, this was too much and the young huntsman threw his head back with laughter so hard he almost fell off the cart!

"Oh, so you're Prince *Philip*, Richard?" he asked, hoping that the contradiction would be obvious to his new friend.

"I am Philip! I lied about the name Richard!" the lad insisted, stamping his foot in frustration.

"So, "Richard the liar" wants me to *believe him* when he *now* tells me he is a Philip - and Prince Philip to boot!"

"I *am* Prince Philip. I had to hide my true identity because ...", his mind searched quickly for a reason that might seem reasonable to this commoner. "- For safety! Even a peasant boy like yourself cannot be *that* stupid. Surely, you see the need to protect my identity as I travel! We are at war, remember? The crown has many enemies these days!"

Richard had thought he had sounded very convincing. Unfortunately, the hunter's son was not so gullible as to quickly believe someone who openly admits that he lied to him.

"And how is it," Peter laughed, "that my *prince* can travel alone, without company or soldiers?"

"It is to my soldiers that I go," said Richard.

"Why do they not travel with you?" insisted Peter. Richard breathed deeply.

"It is not for you, a common person, to question the king's -"

"I'm not questioning the king," Peter interrupted. "I want to know why his son travels alone. If," the lad added incredulously, "he truly be the king's son."

With a quick thrust in his pocket, Richard drew forth his hand and held it before the grinning boy.

"Here, peasant!" he shouted, "Behold the ring of your prince!" He dropped a cold object into the small dirty hands of the peasant boy.

Peter stared hard at the object he held. Words flooded his mind but froze in his throat. His face became grave. It was a ring with the royal emblem of King Philip III engraved upon it. The young boy's gaze went from the ring to its owner, who spoke up proudly.

## CHAPTER 13

“I *am* Prince Philip,” the strange boy announced. “If ye be wise, do as I bid thee!”

Sensing hesitation from the peasant, Philip stamped his foot and made a threatening gesture towards Peter with his arm. Azarias, startled, reared up and the cart lurched forward. Peter unconsciously put the ring into his pocket as he grabbed the horse’s reins.

In a moment, Peter had calmed the animal and then he could only stare at his friend in disbelief.

# CHAPTER 10



Different emotions struggled within the hunter's son at the shock of his new friend's announcement. All of this time, Richard was really Prince Philip.

"Why art thou here?" Peter asked him. Prince Philip threw back his shoulders with great defiance.

"I am here because I look for my father, who has left family and castle to fight the Exthereons. It is to his side on the battlefield that I go."

"Thy father clad thee strangely for a battle," said Peter, eyeing his tunic. Philip laughed. *How little this foolish boy knew!*

"It is to hide my identity, as I said, that I am forced to wear the garb of a peasant," explained the prince. "Not until I reach my father can I dress according to my rank."

Peter's mind quickly put the facts together. "He doesn't know you are coming?"

Philip looked annoyed. "Well, ... No!"

The hunter's young son leaned back in his seat. *The prince had ran away from home!* Peter looked away from him as he asked, "Why did you not stay at the castle?"

The royal eyes rolled with impatience. *This boy does not know anything!*

"Because my father needs me!" he said. "I need to be with him. None of them understand that as I do!"

"Including him?" Peter looked up and met his eyes. Philip hesitated.

"Yes, even him!" he said quickly and then his voice became quiet. "This is my duty. And... I love my father. I want... I need to be with him. I miss him so. No one understands this. And how can they?" he asked his attentive listener.

"They would have me sit, trapped in a castle; sick with fear for what may happen to my father and know that all I can do - all I am *allowed* to do - is nothing! Oh yes," he cried, "they shall let me see him again! When he returns from battle, I can stand alongside my mother and watch them carry his dead corpse to the grave!" His voice choked as he shouted and his sad eyes became downcast. He was envisioning his father's death, alone and abandoned in a bloody battlefield. How could their reasons for refusing him possibly be good?

"My one desire is to join him in his peril and face the danger with him. There, as his true knight, I will prove myself worthy of such a

*He was envisioning his father's death*

## CHAPTER 10

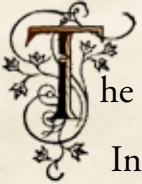
title, by battling the Exthereons and defending Amadeum! And if I cannot protect my father with my life, than I shall join him in death!” He raised his head in light of this triumph. “Tell me, Peter,” he said calmly. “Where is the evil in that?”

The peasant sat still and thoughtful. He was not dumfounded or shocked, as one naturally would be, if their prince was unfolding to them all the deep secrets of his soul. Nor was the lad overwhelmed with pride or great honor at the opportunity of advising the king’s son. He felt this boy’s convictions and desires, and he understood them as if they were his own. As he had listened, Peter’s thoughts fell often on *his* father and how he should feel if *his* life were in danger. Was the prince then right? *Could* the older folk simply not understand it? If they did understand, why wouldn’t they have let this devoted son follow his father’s footsteps and ride with him into battle? Why separate them and, in the process, crush this boy’s heart? Why? Why did they do that?

“I tried to speak with them,” said the prince. “I demanded, reasoned and implored them, and all to no avail. I do not know why they have refused me, but it is not my fault! I did all that I could be asked to do, and now I will not be denied. I must act as is necessary to act. I *will* find my father!” He looked up at the boy in the cart.

“Will you help me!?”

# CHAPTER I I



he prince's plea for help echoed in the peasant's ears.

In an instant, Peter remembered how all this had started. Would he help the prince? Now that Peter knew the real reasons for why he was asking, would he do it? The peasant looked down the road and a quiet thought grew louder in his mind.

"Were I to help you," Peter said slowly, "I would be disobeying my *own* father."

"Does your father want you to do what is right?" Philip presumed his answer. "Therefore, do what *you* know to be the right thing!" It sounded logical and conclusive. But to Peter, relying solely on that common sense left only to the uneducated, there was a contradiction.

"How am I to know what is right?" he asked the prince.

"Use your good judgment," Philip responded coolly. "God gave you a mind."

"And commandments to follow," added the peasant. "The fourth, I believe, being quite clear."

"Will this not be an honor to both your father and your mother?" asked Philip. "To assist your prince in so noble a task?"

"And is it?" This sudden question caught the prince off guard, whose answer was a silent look. The younger boy sat up straight.

"Is it so noble? You speak of truly serving your father as his own and faithful knight. Seems a strange way for you to show the king your love and fidelity," Peter continued, despite the indignant look on his friend's face. "Would a true knight act thus? Repaying your father's love and sacrifice with rebellion against his own wishes?"

"He didn't know what this means to me!" protested the prince.

"How do you know?" questioned Peter.

"Well," Philip said after a pause, "His decision would have been different if he had the faintest idea."

"How do you know?" repeated the peasant.

"How do *you* know otherwise?" the royal lad snapped back.

"Because, regardless of what we feel, we have to trust the rules and the people that God gives us to obey." The young huntsman explained.

"You and your catechism," the prince scoffed.

"God's laws rule both the mighty and the lowly, the rich and the poor, the old and the young."



## CHAPTER 11

“I know what the Commandments mean,” retorted Philip.

“Not very clearly, it seems.”

“Who are you to stand in judgment over the king’s son?” demanded the prince.

“Who are you to stand in judgment over the king’s decision?”

To this, Peter received no response. Philip’s temper was visibly at its limits, but the peasant nevertheless continued.

“Your father leaves for war and leaves you behind. Were it him thou truly loved and not thyself, my prince, thou would find thy joy in obeying his will and staying at home. ‘If you love Me, you will obey My Commandments’, so saith Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who too was once a boy, like you and me.” Peter stopped. He didn’t intend to do all this. “If I were going to ride you anywhere, it would be back to your castle to stop your poor mother from worry.”

“Keep your affections to your own family, Peter,” the prince whispered aloud. “My *father* will be proud of me when he hears of all I’ve gone through to reach him.”

“Your majesty,” Peter began sadly.

“Don’t!” Philip shouted, his voice shaking with rage. “Do not call me that if you have no intention of recognizing me as such!”

“I do,” Peter defended himself.

“Than treat me like I’m actually your prince!”

“How?” the boy said loudly.

“Take me to the other side of that village,” Philip said calmly pointing towards Fishersbrooke.

“No,” Peter said flatly. Philip was not about to give in either.

“Were your father in this position I think he’d do it.”

“If my father were in my position I think he wouldn’t.”

“If he knew what trouble he’d be saving, he would,” said Philip casually. He caught the quizzical look from Peter and continued. “Do you suppose that my soldiers have not already begun looking for me?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, the prince gave one, “Suppose, on discovering my whereabouts, they also discover the cause for my disappearance and delay.”

Peter smiled. “When they find you, I expect - ”

“Your father to be held responsible.”

Philip’s interruption finished off the peasant’s sentence. The hunter’s son sat motionless; his blood



*Philip’s temper was visibly at its limits*

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

froze in his veins. An icy chill ran through his whole body and grabbed hold of his heart. Peter's mind quickly grasped what the prince was doing.

"I should hate to see what your father would do when he realizes the 'misunderstanding' you've caused." He watched Peter's face turn from anger to fear.

"Not one of them will escape it, Peter," he told the peasant. "Do you have any idea what happens to those who kidnap the son of a king?" The boy sank in his seat, apparently having a vivid one.

"It's not worth the trouble, really," the prince reasoned, "for a small ride in a cart." It sounded like a question.



*Peter leaned his face against his folded hands*

For a long while, neither one spoke. The boy in the cart had lowered his head. Philip was confident, but he refrained from speaking, lest he over-influence the boy's decision. But he did not know that Someone else was already doing that, because He had been requested to by the peasant's silent prayers. Peter leaned his face against his folded hands.

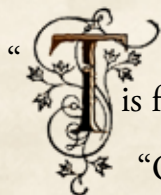
At last, the regal boy could wait no longer.

"Well?" he asked, without sounding too impatient.

Peter swallowed and sighed, but said nothing. Finally he raised his head and looked the prince in the eye.

"Forgive me, your highness," he said, "But my father wants me back by noon."

## CHAPTER 12



“Is fit for a queen!” a thin farmer proclaimed, handing a young girl a rose.

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Combridge” she smiled and carefully brought the flower to her nose. “It’s beautiful! And today is my birthday!”

“Is it?” the little man looked surprised. “And how old are you today, Catherine?”

“Nine,” was the happy reply.

“My,” Mr. Combridge stood up straight. “They’re all growing up on you, eh, Michael?” The girl’s father looked up from the farmer’s booth.

“Every year,” he smiled.

“I told Papa I’d never get too old,” the little girl smiled reassuringly.

“Ah, it is not possible to get too old. Every age is a gift from the good God.” The hunter laid his gentle hand on her curly head.

“And I think nine a splendid age,” said the farmer. His eye then caught a woman with one of his squashes, waiting for his attention. “Oh, excuse me, Catherine,” the man apologized. The little girl nodded with a smile.

“Happy Birthday!” he offered, as he quickly left to help his customer.

“God bless you, Patrick!” Her father waved goodbye to the busy farmer who returned his greeting with a similar prayer.

“That was very nice of him to give me the rose, wasn’t it Papa?” Catherine looked up at her father.

“Yes,” he nodded, “You should ask Our Lady to pray for him.”

“Oh I will,” she agreed, looking happily at her flower, “at our prayers tonight.” The two of them walked on for a time looking at all the different tables and stands. Michael felt a small hand slip into his and squeeze it hard. He returned it gently, while his daughter leaned against him as they walked. Catherine was quite enjoying this outing with her father. She rarely went to the marketplace and was therefore able to enjoy what most adults considered an ordinary chore.

As she waited for her father, who had stopped to talk with the butcher, Catherine noticed something peculiar about her ‘unexpected flower gift.’ The rose’s stem was wrapped with colored paper and string. Her cheeks colored slightly in embarrassment.

“Mr. Combridge and Papa had me thinking that he was surprised that it was my birthday.” She rolled her merry eyes at her *own* ‘surprise’ and began looking the flower over. When Michael was finished, he felt a slight tug on his sleeve.

“Papa,” Catherine asked him, “may I take the string off my flower?”

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

"If you want." As he watched her untwirl her present, he asked, "What will you do with it?"

"I'm going to make a string of beads." By this, she meant a Rosary.

"Why?"

"For Richard," the girl said. "He doesn't have one." Michael smiled. Generosity was good, especially in a child.

"May I see your beads, Papa?" Catherine asked unexpectedly. Somewhat confused, her father nevertheless obligingly took off his cap.

"I want to make sure Richard's is just as big as yours," she explained. Michael reached into his hat and pulled out his rosary. "I want him to have a man's string of beads," she added, eagerly taking the father's rosary. After looking it over, the girl gratefully handed it back.

"Thank you."

"Not at all," Michael smiled. He returned the rosary and put his cap back on. Catherine eyed him curiously.

"Papa, why do you keep your rosary beads in your hat?"

Michael laughed. "I guess I've always done that," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "My father used to do the same thing and I must have gotten it from him. I find I'm less likely to lose it that way."

Michael walked over to the bread-stand. He nearly dropped a loaf when his daughter pulled sharply on his arm.



"Papa, look!" Catherine called out in excitement. "It's Peter!" They saw their cart come around the corner. The young driver quickly scanned the area, like he was searching for someone. The hunter raised his long arm, but the eleven-year-old had already spotted them and was on his way over. One look at his son's face, and Michael knew there was trouble.

"Where's Richard, Peter?" his younger sister asked him when he had stopped the cart. Instead of answering, the boy just looked at their father.

"What happened?" The man asked. Peter drew a deep breath.

"Richard left." He answered. His father asked why. "He wanted to go to Fishersbrooke and I wouldn't take him. So he's gone off on his own."

Michael's eyes searched his son's. There was fear. A fear that the boy may try to hide from the world, but could not escape the penetrating look of a father.

"How long ago was this?"

"Um," the boy tried to think back quickly. "Three hours at least. I hurried back as fast as the bench would let me." The hunter looked back at the cart.

## CHAPTER 12

“Help me unhook the horse, Peter.”

Immediately, the boy jumped down and rushed to his side. Catherine stepped out of his way. She silently watched her father and brother work. She knew better than to ask any questions. Without knowing why, she was afraid. Before long, the animal was unfastened and the cart was removed.

“He was walking on foot,” said Peter hastily, “so he can’t have gotten too far.” Michael looked down at him. The boy was shaking. There was more. More than Peter was telling him. The hunter laid a consoling hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Take your sister,” he said, “and stay here until I get back” The two children watched their father mount the horse. As the hunter took the reins, the boy ran up to him.

“Father!” He put his hand on his knee. The man stopped. Peter licked his lips. Why wouldn’t the words come? His father waited, but time would not.

“There’s something...” Peter hesitated. Why was he afraid to say it? Perhaps something within him was scared... that he had done the wrong thing... or of what might happen.

“I’m sorry,” the boy said at last. He meant it, although he wasn’t being clear. Fathers, however, speak a different language.

“You would have my pardon, son,” the tall man said gently, “if there was something to forgive.” His eyes turned to his daughter, who had come besides her brother.

“Stay together,” Michael repeated, “And watch the bench ‘til I return.” With that, the hunter turned the horse away and rode off through the marketplace.

Suddenly, Peter’s face changed. In an instant, the fear that had silenced him gave way to a new terror.

“Father!” Peter yelled. “Father, there is something you must know about Richard!”

But the swift horse had carried its master too far away. The poor boy’s cries were hopelessly lost amidst the loud and busy market’s din.

“What about Richard?” Catherine asked. Her brother’s tone worried her; to such an extent, that her new rose and even her very birthday vanished from her mind. She tugged on his sleeve, straining to grab hold of his attention.

“What is it, Peter?” she demanded.

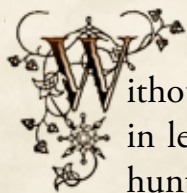
The boy looked anxiously at the rapidly diminishing image of their father. What trouble had Peter sent him hurrying into?

“Never you mind, Catherine!” He insisted, finally taking his sister by the hand. “Just pray!”

“For Richard?” she asked.

“For all of us!” Peter stammered, as he lost sight of his father who had disappeared into the woods.

## CHAPTER 13



Without the burden of the cart, the horse carried its rider at a full gallop, reaching Fishersbrooke in less than half an hour. As they entered the village, their pace deadened to a trot, while the hunter scanned the roads.

“Please, Blessed Mother,” the man prayed beseechingly, “Where is he?” The road ahead split into several paths, the straightest one leading to what seemed to be the heart of the village. “He probably would go that way,” Michael thought and he spurred his horse forward. An invisible hand touched his shoulder and, from the corner of his eye, he spotted an old shepherd coming towards him. The man was leading his flocks out of the village, heading for a lonely trail that went off into the meadows.

“They’re going out to pasture,” he thought. Something else insisted more. Almost in spite of himself, the hunter rode over to the stranger.

“Have you seen a boy pass by?” Michael asked. The old man raised a serene face.

“No,” he smiled. Michael nodded. *I thought so.*

He thanked the man and turned for the village.

“Wait!”

The hunter stopped.

“Was the boy alone?” the shepherd blinked.

“Yes.” Michael turned back around. The stranger paused and stroked his beard.

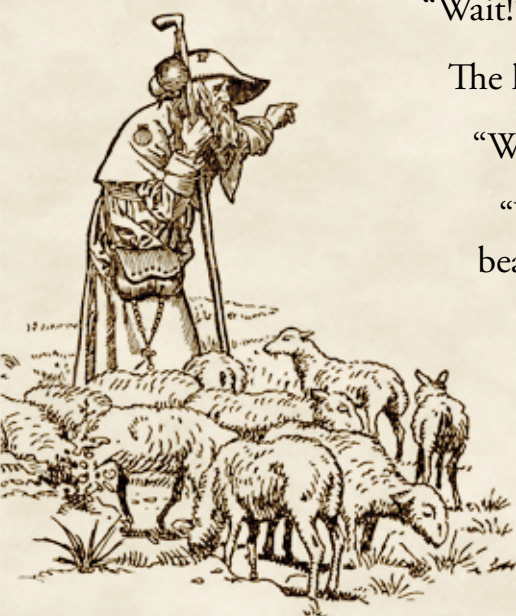
“I ...saw a child...” The shepherd spoke slowly, like he was listening to his own words. “Back there,” the old man pointed towards the forlorn path he was still on. It was a dusty road, which ran alongside a little stream, both seemingly led to the village outskirts.

“When?” said Michael quickly. The shepherd wasn’t sure. But wait! Maybe it wasn’t too long ago. Twenty minutes, maybe? The hunter thanked the good man and took the allotted road.

He traveled slowly, looking around for the slightest clue. What if the boy had not kept to the road? How should he find him? Michael looked up at the sky. The sun’s position indicated that it was early afternoon. The poor rider let out a sigh, and with it a prayer.

“Has he gone this way, dear Mother?” he asked wearily.

Several minutes later, he heard sounds coming from an ale house of sorts.



*“Back there,” the old man pointed*

## CHAPTER 13

“Fishersbrooke!” the hunter said with some disdain. Most folks around there said the wine flowed through that town like the river. But more than the quantity of wine was the iniquity it produced. Many an honest tradesman stayed clear of Fishersbrooke when he could.

As he approached, Michael glanced around the tavern. Several men were standing outside, laughing and carrying on a conversation. He rode on, passing the small crowd, and continuing on his way. Then something caught the hunter’s sharp ear and eye. Standing some distance away, apart from the others, was a man...talking with a young boy.

Arguing would be a better word. For it appeared that the child was trying to persuade the stranger to give him a ride.

“Have ye no respect!” the boy cried “For thy lord?” He clamored impatiently, “I tell thee, wait ‘till the king hears of this!”

“I shall box thine ears if thou mention the king again!” said the man, nearly drunk. The argument had sobered him much quicker than he would have liked and it put him in an ill humor. He had not the humor to laugh this little joke away, as did his companions.

“You would dare touch the king’s son!” the lad threatened. At this the poor man’s face grew dark, but he made no attempt to strike him.

“Who?” he said. The boy held up his head.

“I am Prince Philip! Thou must do as I command!” The stranger’s response was cut off by a loud interruption.

“There!” A rider shouted, as if he’d just arrived. “There you are, my lad.” The tall man dismounted his horse and strode to the boy’s side. The youth, however, stepped away.

“You know this child?” asked the drunkard, pointing at the boy with his long pole.

“Yea,” Michael smiled. “I do.”

“Is he yours, then?” the man inquired. The hunter looked across at the boy.

“No, but he is in my keeping,” he said.

“I am not!” the youth protested.

“Do you know his father?” asked the stranger. Michael hesitated.

“Not nearly as well as I know his wishes. And I intend to fulfill them.” He stepped towards the boy.

“You know nothing of my father’s will!” the lad shouted.

“Nor you of obeying them,” responded the huntsman. The attentive drunk looked from one to the other. The other men had heard the commotion and came stumbling over, eager to have a good laugh at the boy’s performance.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

“What?” one of them said, “Have ye still no horse with which to ride to battle?” This received a boisterous laugh from his fellow drunkards.

“Perhaps the king will send him a chariot,” a short man cried out “to take him to the madhouse.” And he burst into laughter.

As the mockeries continued, Michael listened and watched the boy's set face.

“You better keep a close watch on your boy,” one of the men said, addressing Michael. “He is not completely there.” And he pointed towards his own unkempt head.

The boy placed his hands on his hips.

“I can take no more of this!” He shouted loudly, stomping his feet, much to the crowd's amusement. “I will bear no longer this idiotic rabble!” Some of the laughs died off at these hot words. The hunter's keen eyes read their thoughts.

“Come now, Richard,” Michael spoke firmly, “It is time to go back.”

“‘Richard’?” one of the men laughed. “Fine name for a fool!”

“I'm not going back with you, you peasant” the boy recoiled from Michael's hand.

“You are not from here?” that first drunk asked, who all this while had been watching him in silence. The hunter shook his head in response.

“I thought not,” the fellow muttered, leaning on his pole. Michael's attention, however, was drawn immediately to a gruff looking drunk who had approached the headstrong youth.

“You fancy yourself a prince?” He demanded indignantly.

“The lad's no control o'er his imagination,” the hunter defended, stepping between the two.

“Nor his tongue,” said the drunk angrily.

“Be glad I do not have yours removed, fool!” the prince retorted, “Now, keep your distance!” At this, the tall hunter grabbed the boy's collar and pulled him towards himself, just preventing a collision.

“Let go!” the prince tore himself away and faced them all. “I see the sort of subjects my father has!” he yelled. “Ye be vagabonds and traitors to the king! I need none of your help. But woe to the man who dared refuse me, for justice shall be done upon him.”

Some of the real drunks just laughed at his threats, but most had grown angry with the boy's rash words. Michael's hand reached him first and despite the prince's cries, dragged him from the crowd.



*This received a boisterous laugh from his fellow drunkards.*



## CHAPTER 13

“Unhand me, wretch!” The youth pulled at his grasp. “My father shall hear of this!” Michael threw the boy around and looked him straight in the face.

“Hold thy tongue, Richard!” he said in a low voice. “Or for justice’s sake, I shall avenge thy father.” The small gathering was steadily approaching.

“Ye dare abuse the king’s son,” Philip’s eyes flared. “And he’ll have thy treacherous head on a platter.”

“Were the king involved,” reputed one of the men, “You would loose your own, for your arrogant impersonation of the prince!”

They wanted evidence, did they? The young boy threw his hand into his pocket, with great defiance. This would show them! As he drew it out, though, his confident face was filled with confusion when he looked into his empty hand. His eyes searched the expectant faces before him and his thoughts raced back. The prince twirled around, confronting the hunter.

“Where is he?” the boy demanded.

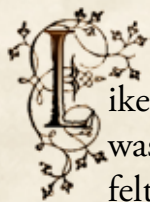
“Richard - ” the man’s tone cautioned.

“Silence, fool!” the youth interrupted. “Where is thy son Pe- ”

Without warning, Philip felt a sharp blow across his pale face. Stunned, the prince’s hand slowly felt where the hunter had struck him.

The next thing Philip heard was some meek and quick apologies given to the bystanders. Then, this same voice called for his horse, who obediently trotted to his master. The prince felt himself lifted by two strong hands onto the animal’s back. Grabbing the reins, Michael mounted the steed himself and hurriedly rode them away.

## CHAPTER 14



Like the journey back, the village was silent upon their return. The rider looked about. Everything was so still. Unnaturally though, he thought. Perhaps it was his imagination, but the huntsman felt as if everyone he passed was watching.... him. At first, Michael paid it no heed. Then he noticed that his greetings were not returned and his presence was ignored. He had never been treated this way before by his fellow villagers and a strange apprehension began to take hold of him. *Surely*, he argued within himself fighting to remain calm, *I should not be alarmed by this*. It had only happened with a few individuals he'd seen. Yes, but... but he *knew* these people... Before he'd finished this debate, the hunter heard a familiar voice.

"Michael!" A short man came hurrying over to the rider. The horse halted.

"George?" he asked, loosening the reins. "What's happened here? Has there been a death?" The butcher looked anxiously around. There were only a few people about.

"Michael," whispered his friend nervously, "Where have you *been*?"

"I was out of town," responded the huntsman. "Why?" He noticed the butcher sending Richard a sharp glance.

"There's trouble - " George said.

"Where?" the rider asked. The short man fumbled with his long sleeves, but said nothing.

"Speak, man!" said Michael quickly. "For the Love of God," he begged earnestly, "What trouble?"

"The king," was the hushed response.

The boy on the horse sat up. Again, the short man looked behind them nervously. "They say his son is missing." At this, the hunter's eyes turned sharply towards the boy in front of him. The lad, however, remained fixed on the butcher, listening intently. Without realizing it, a numbness began to spread throughout Michael's body.

"They think they have traced him to our village," George hesitated and his voice dropped. "They believe they have traced him *to your house*."

Michael's face was white, but unmoved. Before George had even finished his sentence, the reins had stiffened again as the huntsman's hands skillfully urged the horse homeward.

"No!" The butcher snatched the steed's bridle. "They're looking for you," he warned his friend. Michael tried to pull the horse away.

"There are *soldiers*, so many soldiers!" George whispered anxiously. "And they're sure the prince was at your house."

"Why?" asked Michael, avoiding the boy's look.

## CHAPTER 14



*A knife belonging  
to the prince was found*

“I heard something about a knife. A knife belonging to the prince was found beneath a bed,” the man explained. The hunter’s mind instantly raced to his family.

“Get back, George,” he ordered firmly and made ready to leave.

“Don’t!” the fearful man pleaded. He grabbed one of the reins. “It’s too late.”

“What about my family?” Michael insisted. The butcher’s eyes fell.

“They’ve already been arrested.” George muttered.

“How can this be?” The hunter stared at the anxious round face, which fumbled for words.

“They’ve taken your family, with orders to set out and find you.” he said quickly. “That is why you have found all quiet on your return. Everyone knows.”

Michael glanced around. So far, it had remained quiet. Slowly stroking his dark beard, the huntsman strove hard to think, but in vain. The man was trapped and he knew it. His mind strained all the harder, but to no avail. Then, like a flash, the hunter closed his eyes in shame.

“Forgive me, my God,” his heart prayed. “That I should forget Thee so easily. And when I need Thee the most.”

“All this absurd talk of a prince!” George cried indignantly, ignorant of his friend’s conversing with another Being.

“It isn’t absurd!” contradicted the hunter’s young companion. The butcher glared at the child, seated with Michael, who up until this point had remained silent.

“What is that?” the short man blinked. A few people drew closer, listening intently. The hunter’s eyes opened.

“I *am* the Prince!” declared the youth at the top of his lungs. Everyone in the vicinity turned and approached them, aroused by what they heard. “And this man,” the prince cried, pointing to Michael, “should indeed be arrested!”

Who knows what may next have followed, had not a piercing cry in the near distance cut off the prince’s startling decree.

A suspended silence fell upon the crowd.

There was another scream. And again.

Then, from behind a pair of houses down the village road came a small group of women running, like they were fleeing from the plague. For a moment, the bystanders did nothing. One look at these girls, though, and the keener minds quickly deduced the cause.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

"A raid!" breathed Michael.

"Pirates?" The butcher watched his friend's shrewd face. Another cry prevented his response, but confirmed his conclusion.

A wave of terror swept through the crowd and in an instant, confusion reigned. Amidst the loud clamor surrounding him, the hunter felt a sharp and sudden pain in his stomach. Instinctively, Michael clutched at his shirt, momentarily dropping the reins. This was all the time his attacker needed. In that brief moment, the prince broke free from his captor's arms and was off the horse.

"No!" Michael shouted, reaching out for Philip's tunic and grasping at thin air. "George, stop him!"

The butcher heard his cries, but too late. The boy was already slipping his way through the panicked throng. The hunter leapt off his steed and grasped his friend's arm.

"George," he told him, raising his voice above the screams that now filled the air. "Take my horse and find the king's men." The stout man listened attentively. "Make sure they know of the raiders. Hurry now, man! Go!"

"What about you?" George asked, after mounting the animal. "...Your family?" A smile lit the hunter's weary face.

"I should fancy they are quite safe -," he said quickly and with a touch of irony. "- with the king's soldiers." A sound caught his ear, and Michael turned. There was smoke coming from the village.

"Go!" he shouted, slapping the horse's back. "And God be with you!"



*There was another scream. And again.*

## CHAPTER 15



The hunter watched George ride off and then hurried in pursuit of the boy. Whether he was really the prince or not, was a conclusion that Michael's mind was not yet certain of. At the moment, the hunter's only concern was the boy's safety which, presently, was at great risk. Knowing which way he had gone was impossible. So, with a quick prayer, the hunter followed his best judgment and scurried in and out of back roads. At length, he found himself in the empty marketplace. Not completely empty though, for something caught the tall man's eye and he bent to pick it up. A rose. Catherine's flower.

"Peter!"

There was no response.

"Catherine!"



*A rose. Catherine's flower.*

It took all Michael's strength to battle the despair welling within him. His children were beyond his protection and sight. There he stood, alone and alive, without the slightest clue as to the safety of his own family. The sorrowful man dropped to his knees, then and there, still holding the wilted rose.

"Please God, my Father" he begged aloud. "Help me, Thy poor son, who has lost his children. You know that they are truly Yours first. Watch them and protect them, since their anxious father is helpless to defend them. Dear Mary, show me thy Son's will and give me His strength. I know not where to turn."

There was a heavy commotion to the right of the kneeling man. Several masculine voices were heard around the corner of the bakery. As Michael rose immediately to face the pillaging pirates, his Angel Guardian told him to hide instead. Hearing this as only a thought in his head, he obediently entered another building. Just inside the door, Michael watched an assembly of ten soldiers march past his position. He breathed a thankful prayer to his heavenly protector. Once he was certain that they were a safe distance away, the tall man cautiously left the house, and hurried in the other direction.

Following what he hoped were God's inspirations, Michael headed for the edge of the village. He didn't see many people, and he assumed that most had fled or were hiding. Several times, he found a child wandering aimlessly in the streets. Gathering up each little child, he would quickly find a safe place or person to leave them with.

Once, following a nearby scream, he found a young girl carrying an infant out of a burning house. As he watched, a raider followed them out and was rapidly approaching the children. Michael immediately sprinted across the road and, having no weapons, tackled the man to the ground. He heard a knife unsheathe and quickly pinned the attacking arm behind the brigand's back. The pirate's free arm then swung back with a large stick, striking the hunter's leg. Keeping his hold, the peasant snatched the wood and gave a hard blow to the buccaneer's head. His struggling captive immediately

collapsed. Michael slowly released his grasp and then pried the knife from the pirate's clenched fingers. He slipped it into his belt and quickly hurried down the road.

Just as he wondered where he should go, he was stopped dead in his tracks. Retracing a few of his steps, the hunter peered intently down a street he'd just passed. There was apparently only one occupant, but it aroused his interest. It was a horse, fastened to a carriage, but rearing up in nervous excitement. It seemed strange to the hunter, since the animal was apparently alone. Then Michael saw the explanation for its queer behavior. A small boy came out from behind, trying to calm the defensive creature.

"It is his instinct that responds thus to thieves, Richard." explained the hunter, as he drew near. Instantly, the boy spun around, his back to the horse. He was holding a knife. Michael smiled.

"You found your knife." he said calmly. "Or did you steal that too?"

"Stay away," the boy threatened.

"You really want to kill me?" Michael slowly approached him.

"No, but this should prevent you -" A clap of thunder shook the air and the youth's nerves. The man stopped and glanced at the sky.

"Prevent me from what?" he asked.

"Stopping me," responded the boy.

"From stealing?"

"From leaving," he snapped, "to find my father."

"Is that what this is all about?" the hunter said gently.

"It is what it has *always* been about!" the prince retorted.

"Is that why you ran away from home?" he asked.

The father's words stung the boy like the point of a sword. "Ran away from home?" the accusation made Philip's actions seem so selfish, so childish. Running away from home was something that rebellious brats did when they didn't get their way. Philip was certain he was none of those things and he shouted back in anger.

"This is all Peter's fault! He wouldn't obey me! He was too stupid and trapped in his foolish ideals."

"He believed you were the prince?" Michael asked.

"I **am** the prince!" The boy's voice shook, but he dared not raise it. He stopped and looked at the carriage he had tried, but failed, to detach from the horse's harness. His eyes turned and faced the tall, strong man before him, the one last and enduring threat to his liberty. And yet...



*"Stay away," the boy threatened*

## CHAPTER 15

“There’s still a chance,” offered the prince. “Your family’s being held by my father’s soldiers, but you need only take me to *him* and I promise they will be released.” There was no deceit in his voice. His eager eyes were filled with hope that the hunter would help him.

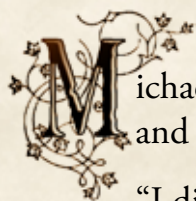
“Why not take you to your soldiers and they will fulfill both our wishes?” the man reasoned. Philip frowned impatiently.

“They will take me back to the castle!” he yelled. Realizing this would only harm his cause, the prince quickly added, “Do it! For your own sake.”

“Even if you are who you claim to be, you cannot bribe me to help you. My family is already held captive,” Michael explained.

“But what good will it do your loved ones when you are hanged for kidnapping the king’s son!”

## CHAPTER 16



Michael's mind swirled with thoughts and emotions as he tried to understand what danger he and his family really could be in.

"I did not kidnap you." he stated quietly to the prince.

"Tell *them* that. Once they find *my* ring in *your* son's pocket, they will -"

"You have a ring?" the man interrupted. "Where is it?"

"Peter has it," Philip said coldly. "I showed it to him. I thought it would convince his feeble mind, and the dog never gave it back! If I had had it do you think I would have had such a hard time convincing those drunks that I was the prince?"

Michael wasn't listening. Peter had the prince's ring and if those soldiers caught him with it...

Philip, unaware of the advantage he was gaining, blurted out:

"I command thee! By your obedience to the king, do as I say!" His face was stern and his voice firm.

The hunter's arm twitched. Michael glanced up at the dark sky and wiped the water from his shirt. Reaching into his sleeve, he pulled out a woolen cap and placed it over his sweaty brow.

"Does not the obligation to obey the king," the father pointed out, "extend to his own son?"

A sullen silence followed while the two of them just stared; one watching the other, almost speaking without words. Michael wiped a drop rolling down his forehead. It was rain.



*Again the animal reared*

Suddenly a cutlass flew past the young boy and struck the wet dirt beside his foot. Philip's proud face filled with terror as he saw the horse rear up in fright. The huntsman rushed forward and grabbed hold of the boy; yanking him away, just moments before the large hooves fell. Again the animal reared, only this time to kick the carriage behind it. Dragging the boy against his will, Michael struggled to get clear of the flying wreckage. Shielding Philip, the hunter turned his back to the frightened horse who again struck the carriage. At the sound of the loud crash, a wooden plank came hurling through the air, striking Michael from behind. He stumbled forward and fell to the ground. His strong grasp thus loosened, the boy was able to break free. Michael, still stunned from the blow, saw Philip hurrying away .

"Richard!" He shouted, quickly scrambling to his feet. Suddenly another name, far more familiar to him, was shouted from behind.



## CHAPTER 16

“Michael Hawkson!” A feminine voice cried out.

In response, the hunter turned, only to see a band of soldiers standing beside a peasant woman.

“That’s Michael Hawkson there!” The young stranger pointed excitedly. But the soldiers were already heading towards him. Michael turned away and immediately fled - both in escape from the men and pursuit of the boy. But Philip was already gone.

“Halt, Hawkson!” A deep voice shouted. “In the name of the king!”

Michael paid the order no heed, save by quickening his pace. The horse too, excited by the commotion, began to bolt in the same direction as Michael.

“Halt, man!” The same soldier commanded. His voice was nearer.

The horse, dragging the wrecked carriage behind him, suddenly dashed in front of the hunter. Michael swerved to let him pass. Then came another shout - but angry.

“I said ‘Halt!’”

Michael never saw the blow that struck him from behind. Upon his immediate collapse, the hunter was overtaken by the soldiers. All he could hear were orders issuing out, as several of the men bound his hands behind him. Struggling to maintain consciousness, the hunter raised his head from the ground. By now, the rain was a downpour. Slowly Michael’s head fell again.

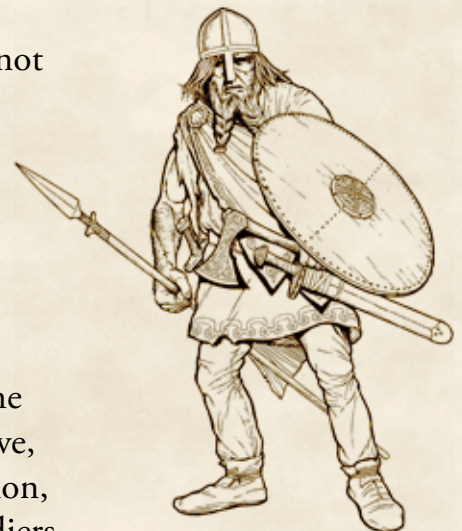
The darkness was taking him.

Through the fleeing horse’s legs, Michael thought he could make out a boy in the distance... watching him. Perhaps sensing the hunter’s gaze, the lad immediately disappeared. The hunter strained his eyes to see, but his vision was fading. His mind, still reeling from the blow, was slowly surrendering its consciousness. A clap of thunder shook him briefly to his senses. Michael was dimly aware of a strong rope being wrapped around his ankles.

“Blessed Mother!” Michael prayed, “Your prince is getting away.”

The soldiers yanked him to his feet. The unconscious prisoner could not stand and slowly crumpled towards the ground. A sturdy soldier caught him by the shoulder and slapped him across the face. Michael felt the blow but did not fully awaken. The soldier went to strike him again, when there was a loud noise. Michael heard only the thunder rolling through the air. The storm, however, was merely accompanying the shouts and sounds of a different clamor that was quickly approaching.

It was a hoard of pirates, who had inadvertently stumbled upon the group of military. Ironically, the brigands, seeing them bind a captive, assumed the prisoner to be one of their own men. With increased aggression, the pirates attacked the soldiers, seeking to free “their comrade.” The soldiers, completely caught off guard, valiantly confronted the villains.



*It was a hoard of pirates*

In the confrontation, Michael found himself suddenly dropped to the ground. His mind, still swirling with darkness, fought to see clearly the hazy figures around him. All about him, he could vaguely make out the loud shouts of the battle. Then he felt as if two hands had grasped him firmly and were dragging him by the shoulders. Still bound and barely conscious, Michael was incapable of seeing, much less fighting, his new captor. To him, it sounded as if the tumult was becoming more distant. With renewed energy, the hunter struggled to fight the blurry darkness that engulfed his mind.

As if waking from a dream, Michael heard his own voice weakly murmur: "No, I did not take him!" And then with more strength, he said, "Stop! The prince is gone!" The dark figure before him, slowly becoming visible to the huntsman's eyes, leaned towards him. Despite his bonds, Michael shrank away, struggling to evade the stranger, who was now reaching forward. Unable to move, the hunter cried out.

"Stop! Please! I did not know who the boy was!"

Michael shook his head violently as two hands firmly took hold of it.

"Shh!" A voice whispered. "They will hear you! Wake up!"

Michael suddenly felt a wet slap across his face. His eyes jerked open and he gasped in momentary shock.

"James?"

"Poor Michael," the older man muttered, working on his bonds. The hunter shook away the heavy darkness that lingered.

"I have a knife in my belt," he whispered, but his friend had already found it.

"Thank God that I found you! - " breathed James.

"I already have," interrupted the grateful hunter.

"- and I found your daughter," James continued.

"Which one?"

"The little one with a birthday today."

"You mean Catherine?" The hunter cried happily. His friend shushed him to be quiet. They were only a short distance away from the soldiers, in a wrecked house.

"George has her," James told the elated father, who didn't notice that his hands were now free.

"Is Peter with them?" Michael asked anxiously. The other man hesitated.

"Think, James!" the hunter pleaded. This waiting was like torture.

But at last, his friend just shook his head, "No, Michael. I don't think he was."

The father gave a weary sigh. Finding the last knot, James sliced its rope, unbinding his friend's ankles.

## CHAPTER 16

“Hurry!” James whispered when he had finished. “We’ve got to get away from here.” The two of them sneaked quietly past the fighting men and went down another road.

“I guess those soldiers coming was not a complete loss,” James said cheerily, “Even if there is no prince.” His companion’s quick stride came to a sudden halt.

“Where is he?”

“Who?” asked James, somewhat surprised.

“That boy?” Michael said. “Have you seen him?” But his friend’s face was blank.

“You remember, James,” Michael tried to revive his memory. “The one who knocked over your fruit stand.”

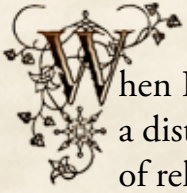
“Oh,” James frowned. “Yes, I do remember. I saw him go....” He squinted and peered around. “That way,” he pointed. “He was with someone.”

“*With* someone?” repeated the huntsman in surprise. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know, Michael,” James shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve never seen him before”.

The hunter glanced down the way his friend had pointed out. What trouble was that boy in now?

# CHAPTER 17



When Philip rushed away from the din of soldiers, he turned back briefly. He watched them from a distance, as they surrounded the hunter, and bound him with rope. The boy sighed. It was one of relief. Mostly. He stepped forward to continue on his way to freedom, when he stopped short. It was that man!

Coming down the road, directly in front of him was that angry fruit-seller who had tried to harm him yesterday. The prince hid beneath some rubble, waiting for him to pass. When the ill-tempered man was a safe distance away, Philip began to slowly crawl out of his hiding place. The boy nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard there was someone above him.

“Come with me, my prince,” a voice whispered urgently. The boy looked up into a familiar pair of eyes. “I shall take you to your king.”

As the fruit-seller was about to turn off the road, quick footsteps caused him to turn around. Running through the heavy rain was that clumsy boy! And a strange man.

Leaving James with instructions for George and his heartfelt thanks, Michael departed from his friend. His light shoes dragged through the thick mud. He hadn't gone far, when from out of nowhere a cart came pulling out in front of him. He had only an instant to jump out of its path as it hurried away. In that brief instant, he was inspired to look at the driver carefully. He had only a moment, as the cart swiftly sped by. Michael was struggling hard to remember anything about the face he had just seen, when he saw another one far more familiar to him. Hiding in the back of the cart, a small head peered out from under a large sheet. It did not see the hunter, and its smiling face dove back beneath the cloth. It was the prince.



*Beside him was a strange man*

Michael sprinted after the cart in quick pursuit. His chase was interrupted, however, by a group of soldiers who inadvertently marched into his path, causing him to hide behind a wall. When they had gone, the hunter continued his chase, only to find that he had lost the cart.

“Please, God,” The tall man said aloud. “Help me or I shall lose him!” Then, an inspiration suddenly filled his mind. The man in the cart!

“I have seen him before!” Michael said to himself. It was the sober drunk with whom the prince had argued, trying to obtain a ride.

“He followed us back here?” The hunter's brows furrowed in thought. There was more behind this than sheer love for the king or serving his son. Michael sighed. The prince had run away with the wrong crowd.

But now he knew where to start. Summoning his strength, the man started off for Fishersbrooke.

## CHAPTER 17

The path Michael was taking was a side one, since he assumed the stranger would use the main road. He hoped by this way to reach Fishersbrooke without being noticed by his adversary.

After some time though, not yet out of sight from his village, the hunter stopped and looked behind. One could barely see the smoke now, due to the excessive rain. He could still hear the distant screams and cries, though, as they traveled through the air. The tall man stroked his beard, his face dark with uncertainty. He completely turned his back on the road and faced Maristella. Surely by now, the soldiers would have discovered that he was missing. What of his poor family? Staring through the rain, he took one step toward the village.

“Michael,” a gentle voice inside whispered sadly. “You don’t trust me?”

The hunter wrung his hands with grief.

“Oh, Blessed Mother!” he cried. “If they find my son with that prince’s ring, they shall kill him.”

There was silence.

He reluctantly reached for his hat.

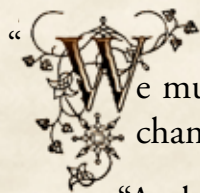
“Very well, Holy Virgin,” he sighed, uncovering his head with respect. “If you truly want me to do this...”

He looked down the muddy road. Every part of his being wanted to go back to Maristella. He gave the village one last look, before he turned around.

“Mary, I entrust them all to you.”

The soaking cap went back on that dark head, and the hunter’s nimble feet began to run.

## CHAPTER 18



“We must wait for cover of darkness, your majesty” a strong voice explained. “We must take no chances that anyone will see you.” The prince sat nearer to the fire, drying his wet clothes.

“And... And then,” the boy shivered from the cold.

“Then you will go to your father,” the man continued with a smile. He walked across the room and pulled a blanket off an old chair.

“Here,” he shook the dust and wrapped around the lad’s thin shoulders. “Take this.” The prince looked up gratefully.

“Thank you, my good man,” he said. “You will be greatly rewarded.”

“I know,” the man smiled softly. He went over to the table.

“Does anyone else know your identity?” he asked the child.

“The soldiers never recognized me,” the boy declared proudly. “And the others,” he stopped and looked down. In the dim light, the stranger could just make out a small smile on the hesitant young face.

“They won’t be any trouble,” he finished. “Not anymore.”

“Even that friend with you earlier today?” the man asked, sitting by the table. Philip nodded.

“He’s gone,” the boy said. “for good.”

It was still raining when the exhausted hunter finally came within sight of the neighboring village. Wiping his face with his sleeve, the man heard the universal peal of the church bells ring the Angelus. Michael removed his hat and knelt in the mud. It was six o’clock. One of the three times a day, when Catholics are called to remember the hour and moment when the Archangel Gabriel asked a young Jewish virgin, if she would be the Mother of the Messiah.

As the last Hail Mary ended, finishing the Angelus, the fervent hunter remained on his knees. In the steady rain, he may have been pouring forth a litany of prayers, begging for wisdom and guidance. Then again, as no sound escaped his lips, perhaps he said nothing at all. Those who can hear our silence, often understand it better than words.

It was a forty minute walk, but he made it, all the way to the tavern which he had just visited earlier that day. Now, however, he had the unfortunate pleasure of entering the filthy abode. As he approached the round man behind the bar, he was met with a bellowing invitation.

“Come,” the large person waved, “Have a drink to warm your blood. ‘Tis raining devilishly hard out there.” His fat hand went for a glass.

## CHAPTER 18

“Thank you,” the hunter protested, “But no. I’m looking for someone.”

“If he’s any sort of a man you’ll probably find him here!” the bartender laughed heartily. Try as he might, the weary hunter couldn’t even grin politely at the poor man’s humor. He *was* cold and starting to become tired.

“Hey!” Someone shouted across the room, “I know you!” A man stumbled over to the tall hunter.

“You were with that boy!” the drunk cried, pointing at him. It took everything Michael had to appear innocently calm. Too often today, had he been thus accused.

“Yes” another fellow agreed. “I saw him too!” Gradually, the interest of everyone present was centered on the huntsman.

“Where is that mad child?” one asked him.

“He had an ill look,” a drowsy man muttered.

“Has he finally fled for the king?” another laughed.

“Yes,” Michael smiled, playing along with their levity. “He’s gone.”

“Good!” the drunk man raised a mug to his lips.

“Good riddance,” joined in his friend. They toasted to this, their “good fortune,” and fell over each other with laughter. The hunter waited patiently for his chance.



*“Has he finally fled for the king?”*

“None of you, by chance,” he asked coolly, “would happen to know a fellow I met here, earlier today.” His casual manners smoothly banished the suspicion in their eyes.

“What’s his name?” the first drunk asked. Michael blinked.

“I don’t know.” He replied honestly.

“Well do you remember *anything* about him?” asked a loud man rudely. The hunter racked his mind for a clue. As he did so, an image quite clearly returned to him. He could see the stranger now, listening to the boy, leaning on a pole.

“Oh!” The bartender recognized the description. “That is Sam Cunnel. A fisherman. Lives right down this road, kind of near the river. You can’t miss his little shack. Its got a ring of hedges ‘round it. And he’s got no neighbors either for a good mile.”

Michael, again, refrained his excitement and thanked his oblivious guide. No, he wouldn’t have a drink. Yes, he was quite sure. Thank you all the same. Good night. And the polite stranger strolled merrily out into the rain.



A tiny ember jumped out from the flickering flames and onto the thoughtful boy’s lap.

## *THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT*

“Ouch!” Philip pulled his legs away from the fire and rubbed his knee.

“Not so close,” a voice calmly warned. “Your clothes must be dry by now, my prince.”

The young boy turned and looked into the dark room. “How late is it?” he asked drowsily.

“Almost eight,” the man replied, standing up. He walked over to the table. “Are you hungry?”

The lad’s hand went to his empty stomach. It had had nothing all day.

“Then come,” the fisherman said heartily, “Come eat.” His young companion eagerly scrambled to the table and sat down. The boy was mindful to place his chair with his back to the fire, while still facing his host. Before him was set a simple meal of fish and bread.

As he watched the youth devour his food, the fisherman rubbed his stubby chin and leaned back.

When pausing for a breath, Philip looked up at his quiet friend. “I do not believe I remember your name,” the boy said.

“Because I’ve never given it,” the man smiled. “But I will now, for we have an alliance, you and I.” This received a silent grin from the hungry youth.

“My name is Samuel Cunnel,” the dark figure continued. “And as our meal shows, I am a fisherman.”

“They are quite good,” Philip commented.

“Aye,” Cunnel agreed. “But fish are fish and they all taste alike.” His eyes stared past the prince, “Life needs a change.”

“I know,” the boy said. His mood grew solemn as he remembered his journey’s cause. “When life goes on, each day the perfect mirror of the yesterday, the... the...” his young mind searched for the word, “the spirit, the fire behind all your hopes and dreams is smothered and dies. And then you want to change,” the prince added, “and instead of encouragement, you meet opposition and rebellion.”

“True,” the man said passionately. “So many laws, unjust and ruthless, bind you down and prevent you from living as you wish.” The boy wiped his sleeve across his lips.

“And when you follow their rules, who rewards you? They just tell you what to do all the more. I think they kind of enjoy it,” the prince remarked.

“Why wouldn’t they,” added the fisherman.

“And the more you listen to them, the less they listen to you,” continued the boy. Then, thinking back towards days at the Castle, he added, “True, they may hold some affection for you. But that only lasts as long as you’re quiet and do their bidding. But then,” his back straightened, “they become arrogant.”

“And oppressive,” commented Cunnel.



## CHAPTER 18

“They think they know so much and yet understand so little. But even that is forgivable, except that they, believing to know everything, think that you must know *nothing* at all! They act like you’re stupid and helpless, a mere simpleton!”

“And they treat you like one,” the man said. “Like you have no mind of your own and need them to carry you along each step of the way.” Philip grabbed another bread roll and bit it forcefully. His passion against injustice once more rose to the surface. And this time, no dominating figure would stamp it out.

“Justice will be done.” The fisherman added quietly. The prince raised his eyes at his enthusiastic companion. Finally! Someone with the courage to follow his own will. *But then*, Philip thought, *does not every man act according to his own wishes?*

“I think, Samuel,” the boy said, “that those who stubbornly cling to the law or enforce it, either enjoy the power, or feel no discomfort. They like what they’re told to do and that is why they do it. Fine. I care not how they live their lives. Nor do I stop them in their designs. Why can they not leave me to live mine?”

“It is a cruel, but common, problem,” said Cunnel solemnly. “There are only a few of us who can fight this tyranny. All the rest are too weak to resist the oppression of authority.”

“Thank goodness, there are at least a few,” the prince smiled at his companion. “I would be nowhere without you.”

“Think nothing of it, my prince.” The man waved aside the compliment. “I believe in you. And in your cause,” he added.

Philip reached out for his cup. “Has evening settled far enough, that we may soon go?”

In response, the fisherman stood up and walked over to the water-streaked window. It was almost impossible to see out of it, but Cunnel was looking at the darkness. The moon was not shining this stormy night. Yes, it was dark enough.

“But we cannot leave yet, my prince,” the man said. The youth’s face was not pleased.

“It’s my brother,” Cunnel went on to explain. “We are waiting for his help. He has a boat much faster and larger than my poor vessel.”

“How is he then late,” Philip commented, “if his boat be so fast?” The fisherman was about to defend his brother, when there came a knock on the door.

“Ah,” Cunnel pushed his chair aside. “There he is now, your majesty.”

The boy remained seated, though, leaning over his plate. Peering past the fisherman, Philip watched him give a hard tug at the wooden door.

A gust of wind and rain came pouring into the little room and the boy shivered, pulling tightly on his blanket. The prince wondered why his brother didn’t come right in. What little heat filled the

house was quickly escaping through the open door.

“Come in, if you must,” Philip said rudely, “but close the door! You’re soaking me with rain.”

“Forgive me,” the dark stranger stepped into the dim-lit room. “I did not know I was expected.” He slowly removed his dripping hat.

“You’ve been waited for, for a very long-” and at once his jaw dropped and his face froze. An awkward pause followed the boy’s own interruption.

“You!” the prince pointed an accusing finger at the rain-soaked figure before them. Cunnel backed cautiously away from the stranger. Philip jumped up from his seat and stood behind the table. The stranger just stood there motionless. He did not utter a word.

## CHAPTER 19



“How is this possible?” the boy gasped, staring at the drenched, dark figure that stood before him.

“‘All things are possible with God,’ ” the stranger said calmly, “as He is All-Powerful.”

“Will you have the decency of introducing yourself?” Cunnel asked incredulously.

“The boy can tell you my name,” replied the newcomer, “Although, I believe we have already met.”

“Say your own name, hunter” Philip fumed indignantly. “I vowed I would not utter it again!”

“And what,” the tall man asked, “have I done to merit such hatred?”

“You would come between me and my father,” the boy said solemnly,

*“The boy can tell you my name,”  
replied the newcomer*

“and no man shall do that again.”  
“I recall our meeting, earlier today,” the fisherman addressed his new guest. “But I do not remember your name,” he added, holding out his hand.

“Hawkson,” The man remained still. “Michael Hawkson.” A moment passed and the refused hand lowered slowly. Cunnel said nothing.

“How did you find me?” Philip demanded. The hunter turned and laid his hat on the table.

“God will not refuse to help His children,” he began slowly.

“He refused me!” the boy shouted.

“Far from it,” Michael said, “He was testing you, for your sake.”

“You did not answer the boy’s question,” Cunnel reminded him. “How did you get here? The prince said you were gone for good.” Michael’s eyes smiled.

“Did he?” he asked looking at the young boy.

“The soldiers had you bound! They knocked you unconscious. I saw you!” the lad insisted. The fisherman’s face twitched nervously.

“You never told me the soldiers were after him,” Cunnel said accusingly. Philip looked uncomfortable.

“What did it matter?” he asked. “They had him prisoner. He was no longer a threat to us. And that was all you needed to know.” He informed the scrawny fisherman.

"I'll tell you what matters," Cunnel answered roughly. "How did he escape the soldiers?"

"Ask him!" Philip snapped.

"I was," retorted the fisherman. All attention was now focused on the soaking wet huntsman, waiting for an answer. From the fire's orange light, Philip saw a smile beneath that dark mustache.

"What does it matter?" the tall man mocked innocently. "They no longer have me for a prisoner. And I am here."

"But what if they followed you here?" the fisherman said anxiously. Michael shook his head.

"Believe me, they did not."

"Then you'll lead them to us!" Cunnel pointed angrily at the wet hunter.

"No," a small voice spoke up. Both men looked over to the youth who was, ironically, smiling. "He can't."

"Why not?" the fisherman demanded.

"He will not risk his family's safety nor his own life, merely for a cause in which, quite truthfully, he has no possible gain." The hunter's eyes met Philip's. The boy's grin broadened. He liked what he saw.

"What do you mean?" Cunnel looked from one to the other. Apparently he was unaware of this aspect.

"His family is being held by my soldiers." The prince explained.

"Your father's soldiers," corrected Michael.

"They are the same," answered Philip.

"If," Cunnel looked at the silent figure before him. "If this man was arrested *because* of you, surely by *returning* you to these soldiers, he will obtain his family's release."

"Not if I can help it," the prince answered, looking at Michael. The hunter hesitated a moment.

"I did not come here for me or my family's sake," Michael told the boy. "Come with me, and I promise you, one day, you will thank me for it."

"I would rather die," the youth said hotly.

"You might," the father warned.

"Oh I like that!" The fisherman's mind was still back at the huntsman's offer. "Let us invite the soldiers right into this very house," he laughed mockingly. "You'd love to see me arrested for all this, wouldn't you?" But the hunter shook his head.

"No," Michael promised. "If he comes with me now, I give you my word, I shall leave you out of it."

## CHAPTER 19

As is within my power, the soldiers will never know.”

This offer was met with silence.

“Come,” Michael looked towards the boy, “I’m not asking much.”

“You’re asking for everything,” the prince said bitterly. An expectant silence hung on the air. At length the boy raised his head. His decision was made.

“Leave now,” Philip threatened. “while you can.”

“I’m not leaving without you,” Michael said firmly.

“Is that how you would speak to your prince?” Cunnel demanded sharply. The hunter answered him with a silent look.

“He does not believe that I am the prince,” Philip smirked.

“If I have to take you by force,” Michael said, addressing the boy. “I will.”

There was a distinct scraping noise and Michael turned to see the fisherman’s knife pointing towards him.

“Lay one finger on the boy, and you’ll leave this house a dead man,” Cunnel threatened. Philip tried to hide his smile. He nodded proudly.

“There are still *some* loyal men left in this kingdom.” The subtle emphasis stressed the hunter’s infidelity. “These men have the courage to serve their prince however they can; be it with a useful boat or a *true* friendship. They will stop at nothing to fulfill their prince’s will.”

“And some, the king’s will.” Michael answered quietly; his eyes lowered in a thoughtful stare. The prince had heard him though, and slammed his fist on the table.

“Get out of here!” he shouted angrily. The fisherman looked uneasily at the prince.

“We can’t just let him go.” Cunnel whispered.

“He won’t tell the soldiers. He cannot afford their help. They would arrest, if not kill him, before he could lead them here,” the prince said confidently.

“You’re so sure of that?” Cunnel asked incredulously

“You don’t believe me? *He* does.” Philip nodded towards the former prisoner. A few awkward moments passed before the hunter noticed they were talking about him.

“What?” Apparently, he hadn’t been listening. The prince was offended and indignant.

“Leave!” commanded Philip. “Before I let my faithful servant here have his way.” The hunter glanced



*He slammed his fist on the table*

briefly at Cunnel, but then once more at the boy.

“Richard,- ” Michael stepped towards him.

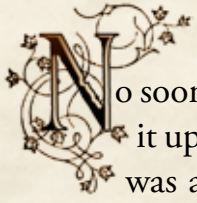
“Don’t call me that!” cried the youth. The fisherman came between them, his knife still unsheathed. The tall man retreated a few steps, while facing the prince.

“Forgive me,” the father said quietly. “But that is the name you gave yesterday.” Philip’s mouth opened, but without a sound. His frustrated mind searched for words. The hunter turned towards the door. Keeping the knife in sight from the corner of his eye, Michael pulled the wooden door open. A sullen voice called after him.

“I hope I never see you again,” the young boy said coldly. The tall man looked back. Philip no longer saw fear in his eyes.

“Be careful what you pray for,” was the grave response. “God leaves no prayer unanswered.” With that, the huntsman went out into the storming night.

## CHAPTER 20



No sooner had the door closed, then the fisherman spotted a damp cap lying on the table. Snatching it up, Cunnel strode across and yanked the door open. He peered out into the storm, but Michael was already gone. Glancing at the hunter's hat, a strange look came over his face. Then with a proud sneer, the fisherman threw it out into the darkness and slammed the door shut. He turned back, wiping his hands satisfactorily. Philip was silent, but gave the fisherman a slow and approving nod.

Not ten minutes had passed since their uninvited guest had left, when Cunnel told the prince that they were leaving.

"What?" Philip asked in shocked tones. "I thought we were waiting for your brother." The fisherman eyed him impatiently.

"He's too late." The man said. "We must leave now."

"Why?" the boy insisted. "We could use a faster boat."

"Mine will well serve our needs." Cunnel assured him. The prince rolled his eyes.

"You're scared about that stupid hunter, aren't you?" he challenged.

The fisherman blinked angrily. "I am in charge of this task." The unkempt man stood upright. "And we're going to do it my way."

The royal youth was indignant. "Need I remind you to whom you are speaking?" the lad said. "I have not yet forgotten your harsh refusal of me earlier this afternoon."

"Nor I," The fisherman's voice was hard. "Get yourself ready. We are going now."

*"Why?" the boy insisted*

The boy winced inwardly, but his voice did not lose its authority.

"Very well," he agreed. "But only because I deem it the right time. We have waited long enough." Philip turned away and Cunnel smiled.

"Let me get my things," he muttered and went into a rear room of the house. The prince snatched up his shoes, now dry, from the hearth. He gazed at the rain beating against the window. Strapping on his shoes, Philip grinned in excitement. The time had finally come.

"The darkness will suit us nicely, Cunnel." He spoke to the man behind him, who was reaching for something on the mantelpiece.

"Yes, my prince," he whispered, "It will."

Hardly had the words left Cunnel's mouth, when a thick rope was suddenly thrust around the boy's neck.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

Philip gasped for air. His anxious hands darted for the rope, trying to pull it off his throat. While thus distracted, a gag was forced into the prince's mouth. Philip instantly went to pull it out, but Cunnel grabbed his hand and pulled it behind his back. The boy attempted to get up, in order to face his captor. The rope around his neck, however, did not let him stand. As Philip was jolted back to his chair, he realized that the noose around his neck was fastened to something else; something that would not move.

The prince tried hard to pull his arm away from Cunnel, but the fisherman had a strong hold on it. If only Philip could stand up, he'd be able to break away! Again the boy yanked forward - but the rope around his neck was clearly stuck on something behind him. Frantically, Philip used his one free hand and pulled against the rope.

Cunnel was counting on this and caught his other wrist and immediately pinned both against the prince's back. As he felt his hands being tied, Philip began to kick the fisherman furiously. In return, Philip felt a sharp and sudden pain in his arms. The man grimaced at the boy's muffled screams. Cunnel was steadily forcing the tied wrists higher on the prince's back. The more the boy defended himself, the harder Cunnel pushed. The kicking stopped and immediately, Philip felt his ankles bound.

With frustrated tears, the prince tried once more to pull away. This time, the little stool that he was on, but not tied to, slipped out from under him and he fell to the floor. When his knees hit the ground, instead of smacking his face on the floor, the boy's head was pulled back at the neck and left hanging inches above the ground. Philip looked up and saw what had kept the rope from giving way. With one end tied around his neck, the other was knotted in a metal loop fastened to the wall. His eyes followed this to the dark figure, which stood exulted above him.

"Yes, my prince," Cunnel grinned, "the darkness will suit my purpose quite nicely." Philip glared at him hatefully. There was no room for fear in his angered heart.

"Yes, call me a liar." The fisherman said, answering the boy's thoughts. "But at least I'm an honest one." Cunnel walked over to the table, and Philip turned to watch him as far as the rope would permit him.

"You see," the man explained, "I don't lie to *myself* about who I am; what I do; or why I do it. Unlike," he pulled out his knife, "you." Cunnel watched the boy's eyes fix on the weapon and fill with fear. All at once, Philip realized his weak position.

"When I disobey the law," the man continued. "I know why I'm doing it. I have a good reason. My life is my own and yet others try to rule it." He stepped towards the bound figure, who squirmed and tried to back away. Gloating over the child's fears, Cunnel stood a while beside him, knife in hand. Then, he cut swiftly at the rope fastened to the wall. Holding the frayed end in hand, he smiled down at the prince.



*Cunnel stood, knife in hand*

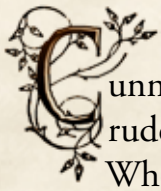


## CHAPTER 20

“Thank goodness,” he reminded his young lord, “for those few of us, with the courage to resist authority.” Philip’s eyes flashed at this mocking betrayal and then slowly lowered in shame. But the fisherman busied himself with finishing the task. Rolling the boy over, he slipped a rope around his knees.

“We shall not wait for my brother,” he told the prince humorously. Philip winced as Cunnel roughly yanked at his elbows and bound them tightly. The man turned his young captive on his side and looked into his eyes. Philip’s glares brought an amused and mocking smile to Cunnel’s lips. He brought his face near that of the boy’s and whispered in taunting tones: “Because, my brave and brilliant prince, it is not my *brother* who is coming.”

## CHAPTER 21



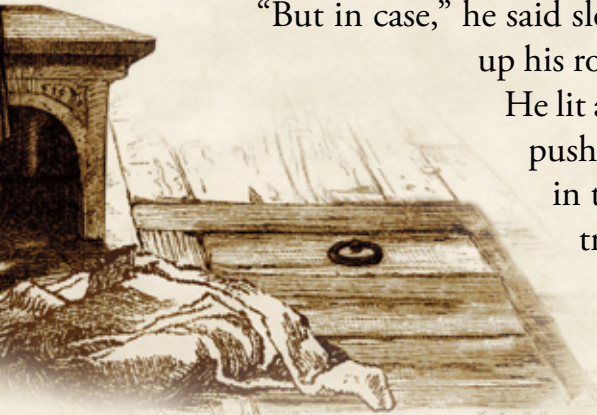
Cunnel slowly rose to his feet, and stepped towards the table. Behind him remained his royal captive, rudely gagged and tightly bound from head to foot. The prince's eyes followed his kidnapper. Who was Cunnel waiting for?

Setting his knife down on the table, the man suddenly turned as if he'd heard the boy's thoughts.

"But I will let my friend's identity be a surprise for you." Cunnel breathed. "I've spoiled it all too much already." He sat the boy up against the wall by the fireplace. Philip watched the fisherman eye him satisfactorily.

"Besides, we're not waiting for his boat," the man added. "He isn't bringing one." A thought then entered the captor's mind and his smile faded.

"But in case," he said slowly, "he gets any ideas, we'll keep you in safer quarters." Picking up his royal prisoner, the fisherman carried him back into a dark bedroom. He lit a candle and placed the boy down on the floor. Philip watched him push a large chair aside and pull up a heavy rug. There was a small knob in the floor. The boy's heart sank as he saw the fisherman open a tiny trap door. Quickly, but carefully, the man placed his young captive in the dirty hole. It was a tight squeeze and Philip was wedged in almost sideways. Even then, he could barely move. Cunnel looked pleased.



*There was a tiny trap door*

"No room for making noises," he smiled. "They won't find you without *my* help," The fisherman muttered as he closed the floor. The carpet was laid down and the boy heard the heavy chair thud above him. A panic seized the prince's heart. What if this 'brother' did not come soon? This air wouldn't last long.

*Oh that stupid idiot!* thought Philip.

*Which one?* A silent voice inquired. To his own dismay, the prince hesitated. Then, his eyes grew hard. That stupid fisherman, of course! But before he could answer the impertinent question, another voice echoed in his head. It was his own.

"There are still some loyal men left in this kingdom! Leave, hunter, before I let my *faithful* servant here have his way!"

Philip groaned. His complimentary description of his own kidnapper now came back to haunt him. The prince rushed to defend himself. Cunnel had betrayed his trust!

*The wretched liar!* fumed the prince.

Again, the quiet voice returned. *Which one?*

The prince sighed bitterly. He was not like Cunnel!

## CHAPTER 21

“He was the one who... I mean... I never did...” His thoughts stuttered through his head, searching for an excuse. None came forward, save for a single memory.

*“What good will it do your family, hunter, when they hang you for kidnapping the king’s son?”*

In answer, came the vivid image of Peter, his eyes filled with shock and terror, grasping the prince’s threat.

*“Not one of them will escape it, Peter!”*

Slowly, those eyes changed, and Philip imagined the boy’s father staring back at him, as he made leave of the fisherman’s hut.

*“Say your own name, hunter, ... May I never see you again!”*

A tear rolled down the prince’s dirty face. He did have faithful servants and it was him who had sent them all away, loaded with punishments and rebukes.

Cunnel was adjusting the carpet to look untouched, when he heard a familiar noise. Someone knocked at the front door!

*Finally!* Philip thought gratefully. *Now they’ll let me out of this horrid hole.* The fisherman’s footsteps indeed hastened out of the room and to the door. But when it opened, the prince heard a small cry and a heavy thud. Then there were footsteps. The boy tried to listen for how many. They stayed out in the large room though and it sounded as if furniture was being hastily moved about. Then Philip winced as he heard them approach the bedroom and shut the door. There was thumping sounds above him as the chair was moved away. The prince cringed in fear while he waited for his new captors to find him. But the footsteps kept walking about the room.

“This must not be Cunnel,” Philip deduced, “nor anyone who knows of this secret trap.” Cunnel was right. This friend clearly didn’t want to share the royal prize with the fisherman. Suddenly, amidst these thoughts, the boy realized that he was rapidly running out of air. He heard the noises above him cease.

*They can’t give up!* the captive panicked. He was suffocating. *“I don’t care what they do to me now... I’ll die in here.”* He tried to hit his knee against the wooden lid. His foot, though, stayed trapped beneath his weight. He tried two more times and each to no avail. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. His anxious breathing was consuming the little air left. Philip’s strength was beginning to leave him.

“God,” the prince begged, *“please!”*

Still, he couldn’t budge. The struggle was fierce. Not to move... but to pray. Somehow, it was not easy for the boy who had so confidently and so often trusted his own strength and followed his own desires to ask for help.

*“Blessed Mother,”* he cried *“I’m sorry.”* Was he really? Only God and the Blessed Virgin Mary knew.

Sensing hesitation in their judgment, the prince tried again to move. Nothing. He lowered his head in shame. He didn’t deserve their help.

Suddenly, there was a slight nudge on his leg, and Philip felt his knee hit the wood above him.

Silence.

Again, with renewed hope, the boy banged as hard as his space would allow him. To his relief, the prince heard a noise hurry over. One more hit, and the rug above him was pulled away. The lid was quickly opened and the young boy closed his eyes. Gratefully inhaling the fresh air, he cared little if a knife was waiting for him.

“Thank you, my Lady,” the voice above him whispered. “He’s alive.”

A thrill of joy filled the prince’s doubtful heart. It was not possible! The royal head turned to the figure kneeling above him. The candle on the table behind, only served to cast a shadow on the man’s face. But Philip did not need to see it. He knew it all too well. Although the last person he expected, the prince could not think of any other he’d rather see than Michael Hawkson. For once in Philip’s life, words failed him. And for this, he was glad to be gagged.

A cold hand swept over the boy’s face.

“And he’s not ill,” the huntsman thought. “Or hurt,” he added, gently lifting the boy.

Philip was barely out of the moldy hole, when a loud noise shook his startled nerves. Michael’s head turned sharply towards the door. Again a loud crash filled the prince’s ears. Peering over the huntsman’s shoulder, Philip saw what caused the commotion. That large chair, strategically placed by the hunter, was leaning against the wooden door. This heavy obstacle was evidently preventing someone’s entrance into the bedroom. Michael quickly rose to his feet and looked about the dark room. There were no windows. That door was the only way out.

Several more thudding bangs shoved the furniture and a scrawny man came tumbling into the room. Staring straight ahead, he scrambled over to the turned-up rug. Without a word, he snatched the candle off the table and squinted into the empty hole. His jaw dropped in astonishment.

“That fool!” Cunnel sputtered angrily. “How could he possibly have known-?” A tiny sound interrupted his thoughts. Spinning around, he barely caught a glimpse of a wet boot slipping out the doorway.

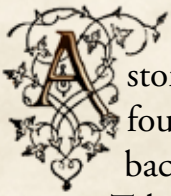
“No!” the fisherman shouted out as he lunged towards the escaping hunter. In his desperation though, Cunnel’s foot tripped on the forgotten rug which sent him hurling to the floor.

As Michael hurried away, the poor man’s curses came shrieking after him from the bedroom. Philip’s heart raced as the hunter’s strong arms carried him down the hall. Twisting around the disarrayed furniture, Michael lost his footing and slammed against the wall. Still standing, he shot a glance behind him. No one. With a grateful heart, Michael bounded towards the door. His outstretched hand went to grasp the handle when the wooden portal jolted open.



*His jaw dropped in astonishment*

## CHAPTER 22



A stormy blast swept inside the room and the hunter froze. Claspng the prince nearer, Michael found himself facing three dark figures blocking his only exit. The hunter quickly stumbled backwards and up against the fireplace. The intruders too, were shocked to see him and slow to react. Taking advantage of this, Michael darted a short distance and snatched a dagger from the table. Two of the men drew their knives, but the leader held up a restraining hand.

Before the stranger could speak, there was a dull thud, followed by the sound of footsteps hurrying towards them. Michael looked to his left and saw the shocked fisherman coming to halt.

“Finally, you’ve arrived!” Cunnel accused the newcomers breathlessly. “Wicksley, you would be late.” The prince watched the man addressed nod at a companion to shut the door. Then, turning a cold eye towards the fisherman, the man identified as Wicksley stepped forward. Michael drew back even further, pulling the boy with him.

*That must be Cunnel’s accomplice, Philip thought, For he is most clearly the leader.* The boy looked up at Michael’s face. The hunter’s eyes were fixed on the man in question.

*Would that he had known they were coming, as I did, regretted the prince. But, even I didn’t know there would be three.*

“Hold your tongue, Cunnel” Wicksley threatened, “It looks like I just rescued your part of the bargain.” The fisherman turned spitefully at Michael. The dark man, too, was examining the silhouettes before the fireplace.

“Who is this man?” The stranger indicated towards Michael.

“A confounded meddler, Wicksley” Cunnel responded vehemently, “who has been plaguing me and the prince all day. Had he not intervened, I would have had the brat this afternoon.” His eyes darted angrily at the boy. Philip shuddered at the thought and drew away from the fisherman’s threat. But his feet, being bound, slipped and Michael caught the thin lad by his shoulder. Gently lifting him back, the hunter turned and faced the men.

“Take my word for it,” Michael reassured them with a smile. “This boy is not worth the trouble.”

“Then why is he worth yours?” the stranger asked incredulously. “What? Is there something about him that you know and we do not?”

“The hunter has his own interests.” The fisherman said. “That I know. He seeks to kidnap the boy for his own purposes.”

A dark light flickered on Wicksley’s hooded face. *This huntsman was a competitor. Yes, he had caught the child first and by all rights had first claim to this prize. But...* A smile curved the cloaked man’s lips. *There are no rules left unbroken in this kind of business. And yet...* Wicksley studied the figure,

silhouetted before the fire. This man seemed calm for being outnumbered. But his peace did not result in tepidity or surrender. The hunter was alert and, as Wicksley noted, keenly aware of his situation. Wicksley breathed in long and deep. He enjoyed a good competition. He looked over at Cunnel's drawn knife. *Yes, there are ways of winning*, he thought, fingering his sword. But they were boringly quick and hardly fitting for this man's apparent courage. Surely, a compromise could be reached.



"So he has the same interests?" Wicksley smirked. Cunnel only spat in disgust.

"No," he said, slipping his dagger back in his belt. "The wretch just wants the boy returned to the king's castle."

*"Yes, there are ways of winning"  
he thought, fingering his sword.*

"Or so it seems" the stranger added thoughtfully, eyeing the hunter. His gaze came upon the lad now standing, or more leaning, against the huntsman's side. He quickly noticed the boy was bound.

"Name your price," Wicksley offered unexpectedly. The hunter was somewhat taken aback. Cunnel stepped forward anxiously.

"W -What?" the fisherman stuttered. He looked in astonishment at his companion, who did not retract his offer. But the hunter neither declined nor accepted it. His only answer was a quiet smile.

The stranger seemed somewhat impatient.

"Believe me," he assured Michael. "I'm willing to offer a very handsome sum for the prince." Cunnel approached even nearer, trying to intercept Wicksley's stare at the huntsman.

"First, I have a question," said Michael calmly. The fisherman turned sharply towards him. Wicksley grinned. Now the hunter was coming to his senses.

Michael looked from one to the other and then spoke: "You think this boy is the prince?"

Philip watched their expressions change from shock to anger, as the fisherman whipped out his knife.

"Who are you trying to fool?" Cunnel snapped. "You know he is!" Wicksley was now intrigued.

"Who are you really?" he asked. Michael did not hesitate.

"A simple huntsman, with a poor flock," he said earnestly. "Just retrieving a lost lamb."

"That's what he said earlier." The fisherman pointed an accusing finger. "But the prince denied it." Wicksley looked over at the boy.

"I notice you've kept him gagged," he told the hunter. "Or would his statements conflict with yours?" The question was added in sarcastic tones. Michael's response was calm, but serious.

## CHAPTER 22

“I at least have the wisdom to put little value on testimony without evidence.”

“I tell you he’s the prince!” insisted the fisherman. “And this rat just wants to return him to the castle, to keep himself out of trouble. Believe me,” Cunnel said to his cloaked companion, “If he is found empty-handed, it will mean certain death for him and his family. The prince has led everyone in Maristella to believe that this man kidnapped him. Ah ha! See!” He pointed eagerly at Michael’s face. “You can see it in his eyes. He’s afraid and knows what I say is true. I heard them talking about it. Just ask the boy... the prince!”

Wicksley listened with little emotion to the excited, but disjointed accusations. He turned his thoughtful eyes to the hunter. “So you seek protection?”

Michael shook his head. “I have already receive it from One far greater than you.”

“Your king?” Wicksley raised an ironic brow. “You will be dead before he returns. I know how a soldier’s mind works. They snatch every opportunity to further their interests and merit a good name. If they should chance upon the man who kidnapped their prince, they will swiftly avenge their king. Ha! You would not *live* to see your king.”

“I was not referring to my good king, but to -”

“Your ‘good king?’” the dark man interrupted. “It is his rebellious son that will be your ruin.” His eyes stared out into emptiness, “and *his* downfall.”

Philip tried to reposition himself against the hunter. His legs were hurting terribly and he felt that he would fall. Amidst the pain, he did not seem to catch that last phrase.

But Michael had already guessed the situation as such. These men intended to hold the prince for ransom. With the expense of war eating away at the royal treasury, this could wipe out the king’s finances and lead their country to ruin.

“If you are not interested in money,” Wicksley told his adversary. “I can offer you protection.” Though this was addressed to the hunter, Philip became alert and listened intently.

“Join me... and your family will be spared from all harm. Not only spared, but saved. I will see to it.” The hooded man spoke solemnly. “Just hand over the prince.” His confident tones emitted a nobility and power that made Philip cringe. He was afraid - but not of Wicksley. Rather, it was the indecision he could sense in the hunter. Even as Wicksley spoke, the boy could feel Michael’s grasp tighten on his shoulder.

“Without inquiring as to how you would fulfill this promise,” said Michael. “I must remind you of the unpleasant reality that you have no proof this boy is the king’s son.” At this, the fisherman broke his silence.

“If you’re stupid enough to refuse your only chance of survival, then die in your pride! But don’t try to rob me of my prize.” His angry voice filled the room, but was suddenly drowned out by an even louder clap of thunder. The storm outside was growing worse.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

But Michael paid no heed to the angry fisherman. His focus lay on the dark stranger, who remained motionless and quiet. In time, the thunder died away and still no one spoke. The hunter took hope in this hesitant silence. Without uttering a sound, Michael prayed.

Cunnel grew impatient with his companion's delay.

"Are you deaf?" he asked angrily. "Did you not hear him refuse your offer? He has chosen death." Turning back to Michael, he added, "Which will be dealt out swiftly."

"I heard him refute my offer," Wicksley answered with a touch of vexation. "And this is the second time I've heard you give a meager response to his challenge."

The fisherman was taken aback by this sudden change of character, and listened unwillingly to the same question re-uttered.

"Do you or do you not have evidence that this boy is the prince?" demanded Wicksley. Cunnel lowered his eyes.

"Answer me!" shouted the man. The fisherman raised a timid face.

"The boy *said* he was the -"

"I don't care what the brat told you," interrupted Wicksley, "or how convincingly he spoke. The question is does he or you have any proof." Cunnel looked across at Philip.

"He spoke of a ring," the fisherman's voice grew in confidence.

"Then let's see it," Wicksley said obligingly. He was more than willing to believe him. He waited and then caught a look in Cunnel's eye that he didn't like.

"Well, where is it?" Wicksley demanded. The fisherman turned accusingly towards Michael.

"His son has it!" he shouted defiantly.

"I have never seen this ring that he *claims* exists!" said the hunter truthfully.

"The prince said your boy took it!" Cunnel turned triumphantly towards his comrade, "You see! It is a conspiracy. He takes the prince and meets up with his son who has all the evidence they need. And you want to let them walk away with our prize." He added disdainfully. This last comment had seemed to make an impression on his companion, but the huntsman quickly interrupted his response.

"Did *you* ever see it?" Michael asked the fisherman. Cunnel's face grew white and then red.

"Thanks to your son, the prince could not show me." Cunnel made all evidence point to the huntsman's greedy and deceitful intentions. But Wicksley was growing impatient. Cunnel's points were vague and uneventful.

*The dark stranger remained motionless and quiet*

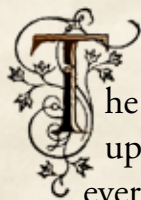


## CHAPTER 22

“So you’re taking the ring for granted, merely by this boy’s testimony?” Michael asked Cunnel. “May I remind you that it is this same boy who strove to assure you of his royal heritage, having nothing whatsoever for evidence other than his testimony.” The calm rebuttal to the fisherman’s logic had more influence over Wicksley than even Michael was aware of.

But they were all soon to find out.

## CHAPTER 23



The only movement around the dark men were the dull lights from the fireplace that flickered upon their faces and their weapons. Cunnel glanced over at Wicksley's thoughtful face. While everyone seemed to be waiting for his decision, the hunter's courage was slowly strengthened by an interior grace.

"If this boy is *not* the prince," warned Michael, "and you attempt to blackmail the King, you will have no leverage to bargain with, no shield to protect you from his wrath!"

Cunnel raised his dagger towards the huntsman.

"Wretch," he spewed, "you *know* he's the prince!"

"What *he* thinks makes little difference." Wicksley reminded Cunnel.

"Make this hunter answer me!" Cunnel insisted.

"Not until you have answered him," was the cold response. The fisherman was bewildered and nearly shaking with rage... and fear.

"Just whose side are you on?" he snapped at Wicksley.

At this, much to Cunnel's alarm, a long sword was swiftly drawn from beneath the dark man's cape. A flash of lightening lit Wicksley's face. Holding it just inches from the fisherman's nose, he whispered with suppressed emotion.

"You have brought me out here to your wretched shack in the heart of this dreadful storm, just to hear how you've senselessly kidnapped some brat pretending to be the prince? Without evidence, I don't care if his father is a sovereign emperor! This guttersnipe doesn't mean a darn thing to me if I can't prove who it is that I am ransoming!"

Cunnel winced. He knew *whose* anger he had aroused and the penalties that followed such offenses. In his fear, the fisherman swelled with hostility and turned angrily towards the hunter. Michael met his vehement glare with calmness. There was hope growing within the hunter, and he gently struck while the iron was hot.

"No harm has been done," the hunter said casually, then with a serious tone, "No one ever has to know." He lifted his terrified charge into his arms. Slowly, he took one step towards the door. Between them, though, were Wicksley's two men. Both looked at their master as the hunter approached. They obediently awaited his decision. At length, Wicksley gave a small and silent nod. His two accomplices stepped aside and Michael continued for the door.

"No!" Cunnel screamed, lunging forward in a fit of rage. He caught Michael by the collar. The unexpected attack sent both the hunter and child toppling to the floor. Michael heard Philip's muffled screams and turned to see the fisherman dragging the boy away. Stumbling to his feet, the hunter rushed over and knocked Cunnel down. Picking up the boy, Michael turned for the door, when

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Cunnel grabbed hold of Philip's sleeve. The sudden tension ripped the boy's shirt and the hunter's fist sent Cunnel flying to the ground. At this, Wicksley's two companions hurried forward and grabbed Michael from behind. With this aid, the fisherman wrenched the prince from the hunter's arms. Michael struggled to free himself, but his two captors returned each effort with a sharp blow across his head. Seeing his enemy thus contained, Cunnel defiantly rose to his feet.

"So," the fisherman sneered, stepping forward. The hunter raised his head and met his triumphant gaze straight on. Cunnel continued.

"You think you can escape my house so easily?" Without waiting for an answer, he struck the huntsman's face. Michael's head flew back, but he remained in the men's grasp.

"Confront me again," the fisherman dared and thrust his fist into the hunter's stomach. Michael lurched forward and Cunnel hit him over the head. The fisherman again struck him in the face and then his chest. Each blow released the criminal's fury against this man who had come so close to defeating him.

Wicksley's men just quietly stood there, holding the huntsman up as Cunnel avenged himself. When at length, Michael fell to the ground, the exhausted fisherman stopped. At Cunnel's command, the hunter was lifted up and held before the fisherman's knife.

"If ... if the boy is so completely useless," Cunnel panted, catching his breath. "We won't keep either of you." He brought his knife under the hunter's chin. The blade pressed sharply against the skin, but drew no blood ...yet. With or without Wicksley's approval, Cunnel was ready to be rid of this man once and for all.

Michael, however, far from intimidated, turned his eyes from the fisherman in search for the prince. He found him lying on the floor, still bound, a short distance behind Cunnel. Wicksley, seemingly intrigued, had stepped towards the young captive and grabbed him by the shoulder. Addressing the boy's current captor, Michael sought to reason with him.

"Come now," the hunter said, glancing down at Philip. "It really isn't worth having a murder on your hands for a mere -"

"- Prince."

Wicksley's abrupt statement took Cunnel by surprise. He quickly turned around to find Wicksley holding the boy with one hand and a small chain in the other. The hunter went pale. He stared at the golden medallion swinging before the dark man's face. Wicksley too was studying the ornament. But his eyes quickly fell on the hunter. The thin lips curved in triumph at the huntsman's defeat. He signaled to one of his men.

"We need the fisherman's boat!"

A broad smile lit Cunnel's face. He explained where to find his boat by the river. The downcast hunter listened without protest. They had their evidence... the prince was captured.



*He explained where to find his boat by the river.*

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

"It's not far," said the fisherman assuringly. Cryle, however, awaited his master's orders.

"Go and get it." Wicksley said with a smile. "We have our prize." The man hastened away, leaving Harkeyl to hold the huntsman. Wicksley turned towards Michael now with an approving look.

"It was a fine performance," he nodded. "You were very convincing." He held up the chain, "But gold convinces me faster." Philip turned from Wicksley to Michael and, for a brief moment, their eyes met. Although he received neither the reproach nor the anger he had expected from his friend, Philip was crushed. Looking back at the medallion, the prince recognized it as the one he had so eagerly put on to prepare for his sword fighting lessons.

*I guess I never took it off,* the boy thought to himself. He had completely forgotten all about it. Cunnel, on the other hand, was exuberant.

"I told you!" he bragged to Wicksley. Then, quickly thinking the better of it, he aimed his victory at the huntsman.

"I told you!" Cunnel sneered in the captive's face. "Did I not say he was the prince? And you!" He yanked the man's beard. "You tried to lie and cheat me from my prize. Thought you almost made off with your 'little lost lamb,' did you?" He spat on the ground.

Wicksley examined the golden disc in his hand. He displayed the back of it to Michael.

"Do your children always wear the emblem of Philip III?" Wicksley inquired sarcastically. Turning towards the prince, he added, "Or will you try to tell me you stole it?" Then, releasing the boy, he struck him hard and the prince fell to the floor.

In the corner of his eye, Wicksley watched for the huntsman's reaction. Harkeyl, too, had braced himself and tried to restrain the hunter. After an initial struggle, Harkeyl suddenly met no resistance and quickly pinned Michael's arms behind him. Cunnel sneered at his weak opponent, while the latter received a revengeful blow from his captor. Michael shut his eyes and the two men laughed at the 'coward,' little suspecting the intense self-restraint responsible for the hunter's 'weakness.' Outnumbered by the traitors, with his young companion as their captive, Michael knew that physical tactics would be not only useless, but harmful to the prince.



Cunnel, meanwhile, made sport of the hunter's patience and proceeded to mock him while yanking him about by the beard. Harkeyl only laughed, keeping a strong hold on the prisoner's arms.

Wicksley, all this while, had skillfully observed the hunter's self-control. Secretly admiring his courage, he again sought a means of winning him over. Raising his hand, he signaled for Harkeyl. Immediately, Michael was pulled away from the fisherman and brought before Wicksley.

"Think now," said Wicksley. "It is pointless to resist. See, we have the evidence now and the prince is in our possession. You are a clever man..."

*Immediately, Michael was pulled away from the fisherman*

## CHAPTER 23

He added thoughtfully, almost to himself. Michael saw the intention in his eyes, and quickly sought to change the topic.

“You think you can escape?” the hunter asked sharply. Cunnel’s eyes flashed. How dare he threaten them! Michael saw this and addressed the fisherman thus.

“Do you believe your king will allow his son to remain prisoner in his own land? Do you think he will pay for his son when you will be arrested before you can even write the ransom note? Oh, but you *have* chosen a poor time to kidnap the prince. On returning from war, his majesty will have little patience for such traitors as thee!” The words came out like fire. And yet there was complete control in his passion, no frenzy in his anger.

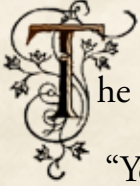
The fisherman’s initial reaction was to strike Michael. But even as he swung his arm, he stopped and a taunting smile spread across his shaven face.

“Your only defense is your lying tongue.” Cunnel sneered. “And even when defeated, you still find the gall to hurl insults at me. Do you think I am as stupid as you?” He stood staring at Michael, and then broke into a scornful laugh.

“Ha! You think I would hire a petty kidnapper to take possession of the king’s son? Or that I would demand a trifling ransom in exchange for the prince’s life? You believe me to be such a fool that I would hold my prize within the king’s reach? What little you know,” the man scoffed. “It is you who are the fool!” Stepping back, the fisherman gestured over at his dark companion. “This man is no ‘*traitor*’ to our king.” Cunnel said, mocking the hunter’s voice. “He owes him no allegiance.” Michael looked at the man in question. The fisherman continued, eyeing the huntsman’s face. “You think his name is Wicksley? You received a poor introduction. This is Valdigard, kin to Lord Missetheon. His brother in fact. Have you heard of him?” he added with a sarcastic grin.

At the mention of the tyrant with whom his father now waged war, Prince Philip’s blood froze. Looking up at his captor with new eyes, the boy saw his doom. Slowly it dawned on him. This man wanted more than money or even the life of Amadeum’s prince.

## CHAPTER 24



he full consequences of all of his actions were just beginning to dawn on Prince Philip.

“Your ‘lost lamb’,” Cunnel continued at Michael, “is the leverage that will secure his brother’s victory. It will end this war and King Philip’s rule.”

A heavy silence came upon the room. Only the storm’s incessant thunder filled their ears, as the two captives remained quiet with their own thoughts. Michael’s eye met those of the foreigner, which shone with a sinister pride. But this triumphal air was short-lived as the dark man turned an angry face at the fisherman.

“You have no guard over your tongue whatsoever!” he snapped. “Do you think we can let this hunter live with that knowledge?”

“Oh,” Cunnel laughed softly, “I had no intention of him living.”

The dark man sighed impatiently. “Well, I’m not going to deal with him now.”

The fisherman held his dagger before Michael’s throat.

“No. This one is mine.” He replied.

“Not HERE!” Valdigard insisted angrily. “I’m not going to leave a trail of dead corpses for them to follow! I don’t want anyone to know what’s happened, before the king finds out from us. Until he discovers *why* his son is missing.” He turned a piercing eye at the young captive, tightly bound before the dark man’s feet.

“Are you frightened?” he asked Philip. Although the gag prevented a response, the prince’s face answered Valdigard’s question. The man stooped over and grabbed the boy’s collar. With a sudden jerk, the twelve year old was roughly lifted up. With his bound feet barely touching the ground, the young prince was brought face to face with the Exthereon.

“You think you are afraid,” the man said after a moment’s pause. Despite himself, the prince found his eyes were locked on his. Valdigard brought his face even nearer. “You do not yet know fear.” Philip tried to repel his look, but in vain. Sensing his complete control over the young prince, Valdigard began to laugh viciously.

“So you are the son of that insolent king? He thinks he is so powerful. None have dared defy my brother and lived. He will see. He will learn to comply with Lord Missetheon’s wishes. One way or another.” The foreigner’s white teeth peered out from behind a small smile. Philip cringed. His mind raced to his father and the decision he would soon face. An inaudible groan escaped him.

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“What have I done?” the boy thought.

Valdigard snapped back to his former masterful composure.

“Harkeyl,” he barked. The man by Michael stepped forward. Cunnel’s dagger drew even nearer the huntsman’s neck. Valdigard pointed a brusque finger at the prince.

“Where’s the sack?”

Immediately, Harkeyl produced a black bag made of a leathery material. It was large, with a long and sturdy string around the end. Philip’s heart raced feverishly. He instinctively turned to the huntsman, who was watching Valdigard.

*“What have I done?”*

“You’ve done an excellent job, Cunnel.” The dark man commented, surveying the prince’s bonds. “But before we commence, I like my prisoners to be void of any energy to resist.”

Still looking at Michael, Philip saw fear flicker in his eyes. As Philip watched his friend, he suddenly felt a heavy blow on the back of his head. The boy slumped forward, and fell to the ground. Valdigard signaled with a single gesture. Harkeyl obediently began placing the unconscious prince in the sack. He had just finished tying off the bundle, when a gush of rain flew in. Everyone turned to see Harkeyl’s companion closing the front door.

“Good, Cryle!” Valdigard said. “Help carry out the prince. We’ll all go to the boat.” From the moment Cryle arrived, Michael eyed him intently. The drenched man was panting breathlessly.

“There ... there is no boat.” He gasped.

All eyes fell on the fisherman.

“So,” Valdigard sneered “You thought to take the child for yourself. Planned to cheat me out of my share, did you? And so all this while, you’ve hidden your boat!”

“No! That is not true!” Cunnel shouted defensively. “It was right where I told you. Behind the oak tree. You, Cryle! You must have looked by the wrong tree!”

“There’s only one blasted tree out by that river.” The dripping man fumed. “I searched everywhere.” A flash of lightning lit the room. Cunnel glanced nervously at Valdigard.

“I tell you, it *was* there,” he said, trying to direct himself at Cryle. “I never moved it. How can you be sure you didn’t miss it with this wretched storm blinding your vision.” Cryle was becoming indignant.

“I’ve hunted men on worse nights than this!” he bragged. “I know how to find a *boat!*” The fisherman turned from one man to the other.

“But why would I move it?” Cunnel cried. “You’re the one who’s going to pay me. What would I do with... the...prince?” His words slowed to a halt. Suddenly it came to him. The fisherman turned an accusing finger at Michael.



## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

"You!" Cunnel shouted furiously. "You took my boat!" Valdigard was not convinced.

"You cannot blame that man for all of your mistakes," he sneered. The fisherman was not listening. Only now was he just beginning to understand what had happened. Infuriated, he grabbed the hunter's shirt, pressing his knife against his beard.

"That is why you left!" Cunnel said. "I knew you had gone too easily. With all of your feigned virtue, you pretended to humbly obey the prince and leave." His grasp grew tighter as his voice rose. "Only to return after you'd stolen my boat!"

"This is getting us nowhere," the foreigner interrupted. "If you don't know where it is then just admit it."

"This man took it, I swear to you," Cunnel answered without taking his eyes off Michael. His companion only groaned impatiently. Time was pressing.

"Cryle, how far did you look?" The vague question received a confused expression. Valdigard hastily explained himself. "Go find a different boat."

"I didn't see any." The man reported. His master turned to the fisherman.

"There's got to be someone else besides you, Cunnel, with a wretched boat."

The fisherman spoke of a neighbor who kept one in his stable, about fifteen minutes away.

"But he's a very cautious man," Cunnel warned. "No one comes anywhere near his property without his dogs creating an awful din." There was bright flash of light outside the window followed by loud claps of thunder.

"Those animals will have to bark very loud," Valdigard said, "if they want to compete with this storm." The fisherman shook his head.

"He's a dangerous man to anger," said Cunnel. "He won't let you take his boat without a struggle." The Exthereon prince fingered his sword.

"I'm a dangerous man to refuse," he said coldly. "Cryle!" The man stood at attention.

"If there's any trouble," cautioned Valdigard. He calmly pulled out a dagger. "Make sure *you're* the one who's causing it." Cryle grinned understandingly.

"We'll meet you down by the river," continued Valdigard. "By that oak tree."

Thinking his orders complete, the man headed for the door. A sudden call from his master, though, and Cryle's brusque steps came to halt, as he looked back.

"Is it far?" Valdigard asked. Cryle shook his head. It was about ten minutes away, directly behind the fisherman's hut.



*Cryle's steps came to halt as he looked back.*



## CHAPTER 24

“We’ll be there, then.” The dark prince slipped the dagger into its sheath. “Now go!”

Cryle quickly left the house. Again, a torrent of rain swept in the opened door. When it shut, there was a loud clap of thunder, and Valdigard looked anxiously at the window. He’d been in this hut far too long. The unexpected encounter with the huntsman had delayed the foreigner’s plans. And now there was no boat! Valdigard glanced angrily at the fisherman. What if Cryle needed help carrying the boat?

“Harkeyl,” Valdigard snapped, “Go help find that boat and get it to the river.” The man bowed and hastened to leave.

“No, wait!” His master called after him. “Take the prince down to the water.” The fisherman tried to interrupt, but Valdigard waved him aside.

“Alone?” Harkeyl asked.

“My lord,” Cunnel ventured to speak.

“Not now, Cunnel!” snapped Valdigard. Then, turning to Harkeyl, he explained that with fewer men walking together, the less noticeable they will be.

“Don’t leave without us,” he continued. “Send Cryle back when the boat’s ready, if we’re not already there by then. Remember, we meet by that tree.”

With another nod, Harkeyl swung the heavy sack over his shoulders. Michael’s eyes followed them out. In his heart, he begged fervently for an angel to accompany the prince.

“Queen of Heaven and of the Angels,” the hunter whispered inaudibly, “You must send someone else to protect him now. There’s nothing left I can do.” His eyes closed. “You know that better than I.”

When Harkeyl had left, Valdigard quickly turned to the two men left.

“How big is this boat?” He asked. The fisherman answered without hesitation.

“Smaller than mine,” he said. “You’ll need to make two trips with all of us.” There was a brief pause. “Maybe three trips,” Cunnel added slyly, “If you’re keeping the hunter.” Valdigard snarled. He’d expected such.

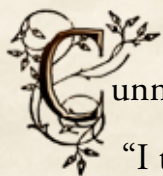
“I want people to think he ran away with the prince.” He explained to the fisherman. “I am not leaving him here.”

“You don’t have to,” smiled Cunnel. It was awkwardly silent. Michael quietly looked on, as the two men were locked in a thoughtful stare.

“I suppose,” the foreigner inquired, “that a corpse would be easier to manage....” turning first to Michael and then to Cunnel, he added, “- just *two* trips then?”

The fisherman answered with a grin.

## CHAPTER 25



Cunnel was delighted that his partner seemed intent on killing their prisoner.

“I think it would,” Cunnel agreed, but the dark man had turned to the hunter.

“Do you know where the fisherman’s boat is?” Valdigard asked. He received only a silent look. Stepping forward, Valdigard pressed the question. Again, only silence.

The Exthereon was in no mood for resistance.

“You are an honest man,” he told Michael. “and at times, a clever one. If you refuse to answer me, my logical conclusion is that you *do* know where it is. And that you hid it.”

“Oh, he stole it for sure,” the fisherman interjected. Valdigard gave him a stern look.

“I was not talking to you,” he snapped at the fisherman. Cunnel sulked away, muttering.

“Where is the boat?” Valdigard asked, looking back at Michael. The hunter said nothing.

“I’m a very patient man,” the foreigner boasted. “But you’re taking me to my limits.” This received no response.

“Say something!” The dark man grit his teeth angrily. The huntsman continued to simply look him in the eye, without the least sign of intimidation or fear. Valdigard’s pride was enraged. *His* prisoners were *never* deaf to his demands!

“Tell me where you hid the boat or I’ll let Cunnel here have his way with you,” Valdigard threatened. At this, the fisherman’s face perked up and Michael finally spoke.

“And if I did what you wanted,” the hunter answered, “I would be a dead man when I reached your lands.”

This simple and unexpected rebutal left the foreigner speechless with no response. Cunnel, on the other hand, stepped forward eagerly.

“Very well then, Hawkson, you’ve made your choice.” He grabbed the huntsman’s collar. “Now you must die.” Valdigard made no effort to stop him.

“You’re a fool, Hawkson!” The dark prince said bitterly. “You could still have a part in this.” The offer came sincerely and held an invisible hand on Cunnel’s dagger.

“Why resist?” Valdigard asked the hunter.

Michael slowly turned from the knife to the hooded prince. He silently returned the dark man’s stare. A moment passed and Valdigard, despite himself, turned away and looked down at the floor. Something in those calm, clear eyes disturbed him. Summoning what he thought was courage, Valdigard proudly met the simple man’s gaze.

## CHAPTER 25

“I can save you!” the dark man whispered. “What have you got to lose?”

“My soul,” was the quiet response.

“Why? You cannot be expected to die for a futile cause. The young prince is gone, and their kingdom is lost. All of your efforts were in vain. It is over. But it does not have to be so for you. There’s still a chance.”

“How would you judge a soldier,” Michael said calmly, “who betrayed his lord at the slightest sign of trouble? Or a man who joined the enemy, merely for his own gain? God expects nothing less than absolute fidelity to Justice, Truth .... and Him - even, and especially, in the face of death and defeat.”

Valdigard sneered at the brave man’s words. “And which god demands such absurdity?”

“The true and only One,” answered the huntsman. Valdigard paused a moment, confusion on his face. One god? Who was he talking about...? And then it dawned on him. Disgust filled the foreigner’s heart. This man was a Catholic.

“It is not too surprising,” Valdigard spoke in derisive tones, “that one who follows a Crucified Lord would imitate His folly unto death.”

Michael answered with a smile. “I am surprised. Not at His calling. But rather, at my response to His challenge.”

These subtleties were lost on the pagan, who now had abandoned all hope of winning over this hunter. Anyone stupid enough to be a Catholic, much less trust in such a God, deserved to die. The fisherman added his repugnance to his companion’s.

“Of course you are a Catholic,” he sneered. “That was a rosary in your hat.” Michael looked at the fisherman with some interest.

“Is that where I left it?” The question was sincere. Cunnel spit in disgust.

“Yes,” he answered. “I haven’t seen one of those in years, but I recognized it. Women’s superstitious foolishness is all that is.”

“Where is it?” Michael asked.

“Where it belongs,” scoffed the fisherman. “Out in the mud. I threw it after you, when you’d gone.” There was a mild concern in the hunter’s eyes, much to Cunnel’s enjoyment. Valdigard however, resumed his impatient urgency.

“Very well then, Cunnel.” The cloaked man made to leave. “I’ll take the prince over in the first trip. I’ll send Harkeyl back to get you. When you’ve finished with the prisoner, go to the river. Make sure you bring the body.”

Cunnel’s smile fell. Stay behind while Valdigard sailed off with the prince? Would there really be a second trip if it was only for the fisherman and a corpse? Cunnel was searching for a way to safely disagree, but Valdigard was already leaving. As his anxiety grew, the fisherman became less aware

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

of Michael, who was closely observing his captor. Leaning forward and speaking abruptly, Michael whispered Cunnel's name. Taken by surprise, the fisherman drew closer to hear the huntsman's confession.

"Your boat is in the hedge," Michael breathed in his ear.

As the fisherman gaped in momentary shock at what he heard, he suddenly felt himself thrown to the floor by a harsh blow to his head. Hearing the commotion, Valdigard paused his quick steps and, having turned around, received the hunter's fist squarely in the face. The foreign prince clutched at the table to break his fall and Michael snatched up a chair and broke it over the man's head. Thudding to the ground, Valdigard rolled beneath the table. The hunter quickly stooped down and pried Philip's medallion from the unconscious man's fingers.



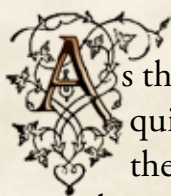
*Prince Philip's medallion*

The royal family's coat of arms was clearly etched into the front. Stirred by curiosity, the man turned the medal over. A faint smile came to his lips when the hunter recognized his Angelic Patron on the back. Encircling the image of the Holy Archangel Michael were the words "Protect and lead us, first Knight of God." As he read, a thought suddenly struck him. It was no small coincidence that the Heavenly Patron, under whom the young prince had unknowingly placed himself, had shown his protection through his own namesake - the hunter .

The kneeling man suddenly stiffened. The dim light with which he studied the medal slowly disappeared. Before he could recognize Cunnel's shadow, Michael instinctively threw himself to the ground and rolled aside. His enemy's dagger came slashing after him. Barely missing its mark, though, it was impaled into the table instead. The hunter twisted around and struck his adversary from behind. The fisherman fell forward on the table and Michael turned to escape. He had to reach the prince quickly before -

Michael firmly shook the thoughts from his head. He refused to be overwhelmed by the danger they were in. Instead of succumbing to fear, Michael fortified himself with a quick but fervent prayer as he headed for the door.

## CHAPTER 26




As the hunter neared the doorway, he remembered that his enemy still had a weapon. He turned quickly to check on Cunnel. It was a grace that he did, for the fisherman had stealthily followed the weary hunter and was not two feet away, knife in hand. Keeping his eyes fixed on the dagger, Michael began stumbling backwards. Cunnel lunged forward and jabbed at the huntsman. Missing his mark, the fisherman fell forward onto his prey. Michael's back slammed up against a wall, with the knife embedded deeply in the wood. The blade was inches from his face. Cunnel sneered at the hunter and struggled to dislodge his weapon.

"You lying wretch!" the fisherman hissed. "You think I'm stupid enough to believe you? You wouldn't hide my boat next to this house, in my own hedges!" Sincere disbelief flashed on the huntsman's face.

"I may say nothing..." Michael whispered. His fist came down hard on Cunnel's head. Stunned, the fisherman collapsed on the floor. The hunter quickly freed the dagger, and aimed its sharp point at his enemy.

"...But I will *never* say a lie!" panted Michael. The fisherman muttered a blasphemy. The dagger inched closer in warning. Cunnel's eyes only flashed with hate. The hunter stood above him, regaining his breath. As he looked down, Michael's just anger slowly abated. Something akin to pity rose up in his heart for the pathetic creature before him, fuming with hatred and arrogance. Michael's tense jaw relaxed. The man had no weapons now and the huntsman was safe to leave. The fisherman saw the virtuous pity in his enemy's eyes and snarled angrily.



*Stunned, the fisherman collapsed on the floor*

"Keep your mercy," Cunnel said proudly. "I have no need of it."

Michael shook his head. "No. I leave it to God to rebuke you. And I pray for His mercy."

"I would rather die than receive it," the fisherman snapped.

"You speak so lightly of death," the hunter said aghast, "you who have betrayed both God and your king." The lying man chuckled.

"I left your Church *long ago*. Once old enough to think for myself, I discovered the lying hypocrisy that it was. So much is demanded of the simple man and so little given. So little is allowed." The fisherman's stare fell on nothing now, focusing on the past. His shaven face grew dark. His features portrayed a short train of emotions as his mind reviewed a chapter of his life that had not been read in years. Cunnel quickly became aware of the silence he was creating and looked up at the hunter, who was observing him closely. The fisherman gave him a twisted smile.

"Oh, it is the same old story," he told Michael. "To you, anyway. There were too many Sundays

when I had other plans. Too often was I told in a stuffy confessional how my habits must be corrected, my business more honest. Oh yes, I was a simple fisherman. But when God failed to fill my nets with fish, I found it easier to earn my bread in the gambling hall. There at least, fortune favored me.” Cunnel paused. “As for Church, things became quite awkward. I did not grow up and become a man just to hear these “spiritual fathers” tell me how to live my life. Why stay in a religion that denies you your few and simple pleasures? Finally, I woke up to the realization that I didn’t *have* to stay.” He looked up at Michael. “And so I didn’t.” The hunter said nothing. Cunnel defended himself. “Don’t think I did not give your Church a chance. When Lady Luck began to frown upon me and my gambling career was on the brink of disaster, I did turn to God.” Michael’s eyes focused sharply upon the face of this wretched man. For the first time, a glimmer of hope had entered his story. But the change lasted only a moment, for the miserable creature quickly added: “And God failed me.”

He spoke in bitter tones, filled with self pity. “Don’t speak to me about betrayal. I owe God nothing. And I think my allegiance to the king ended when I was arrested for thievery. A man has a right to live. And when I gambled away the last of my money, I was forced to steal my daily bread. I could have lived with that; until I was caught and the king found it his duty to punish me. I have never forgiven either of them for that,” Cunnel told the hunter. “And I relish the opportunity to defy both God and my king.”

Michael had listened all this while in silence, without a sign of emotion. Inside though, the hunter felt a growing abhorrence and anger at the rebellious pride of this grown man before him, whose behavior and self-pity resembled that of a child. Still deeper though, Michael began to feel a horror, mixed with compassion for the poor fisherman. Had not the poor fool wasted his life, in growing to hate and despise God and His laws? By rebelling against the dominating authority of his “Father in Heaven,” Cunnel had thrown away the love and protection that accompany it.

There is no purer test than obedience. Michael, being a father, understood this well. For to despise a disciplining parent is to despise a loving parent. And when you think you’ve gained freedom, you’ve lost everything. Too many mistake the authority of God for tyranny, the silence of God for abandonment, and the justice of God for hatred. All these are facets of His love, as He works for our own good, striving to lead us to real happiness: to loving Him. If we love Him, we will obey His commandments. If we do not, then we won’t. It is that simple, and obedience is the test. And it is the sad case that people like this fisherman discover all this only when it is too late and their life is over. As much as Michael disliked him, he felt no satisfaction in the knowledge that this man was far from God. He looked at him instead with renewed pity. The dagger in his hand lowered. To kill him would rob the fisherman of what little time he had left to repent and be saved. Cunnel guessed the hunter’s thoughts and shook his head.

“No, strike!” he declared boldly. “And send this soul to hell.”

Michael stepped back in horror. True fear was in his eyes. To resent God’s laws was one thing. But to hate Him and maliciously desire hell!

“No,” The hunter admonished. “You do not know what hell is.”

## CHAPTER 26

"I know enough," Cunnel snapped. "God is not there." Michael squared his shoulders.

"Then you do not know Who God is," he said firmly. "Nor do you know *what* you are. I am sorry for you, truly. And I will not take your life," Michael added, almost in warning. The fisherman laughed.

"So you are afraid?" Cunnel sneered, growing louder as he spoke. "Not man enough to admit the hate you feel for me? Are you so warped as to believe that you are bound to show mercy where none is desired?"

"If my forgiveness saved more than your life," Michael's voice shook with restraint. "it would be worth the struggle I feel to release you." He paused and his face grew calm. "And if my life could save your soul, I would gladly give it. But your salvation lies in your own hands, as it always has."

"It's easy enough to talk forgiveness." Cunnel twisted his position. "I don't trust you. We've been through too much, you and I. You'll take two steps and I'll find that knife flying back at my heart."

In response, the hunter thrust the dagger behind his belt. There was a loud clap of thunder and a bright light that filled the room. Like the lightning, Michael's thoughts flashed back to the prince. He glanced at the window, blinded with the downpour. Those men would soon go across the river, with or without Valdigard.

"I must go," Michael thought, fingering the medallion. "I've lingered long enough." They could be setting out for Exthereous any moment. Maybe they already had. With one last look at the man sprawled before him, Michael spoke a final farewell.

"Do not see this as an act of mercy on my part, but rather as another chance... from God. Should you force my hand, I will defend myself." The hunter placed a warning hand on the dagger. Cunnel snarled, but said nothing.

Michael turned and took a quick step towards the door. The fisherman's cold eyes followed him. His face remained unmoved and a silent hand slipped into his sleeve.

As Michael was passing the fireplace, his foot snagged a chair and he stumbled forward a little.

It was then that he felt it.

A sharp pain suddenly penetrated his left shoulder and the hunter's fall accelerated. The fisherman had stealthily pulled out a hidden knife from within his tunic and flung it at the huntsman's back. Cunnel missed his mark though, for just as he'd thrown it, the hunter had tripped and the tiny dagger hit instead, his upper shoulder. In vain, Michael tried to remove the dagger; its thin blade was just beyond his reach. The fisherman sprang to his feet, and Michael instead went for the knife beneath his belt. Before he could reach its handle, his enemy was already upon him, knocking him completely to the ground.



*He pulled out a hidden knife from within his tunic*

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

Cunnel's knife fell out on impact. Michael fought the pain throbbing in his left arm and thrust his fist at his enemy's face. Cunnel, anticipating this tactic, used the opportunity to position himself atop the hunter. Michael was reaching for the knife in his belt, when a heavy knee came thudding down, pinning his right arm. With his other knee, Cunnel placed his full weight on the huntsman's chest. Michael cried out in pain. In desperation, he swung his left and wounded arm and dealt a feeble blow to Cunnel's side. Having received a return blow in his face, the hunter looked down at his hands. His only weapon lay trapped beneath the fisherman. Michael's first thought and fear was that his enemy would snatch the knife for himself. But Cunnel's plans had no need of a dagger.

In an instant, Cunnel's filthy hands were around the huntsman's neck. Michael immediately began pushing against the fisherman's arms with his free hand. But the weary hunter, wounded, hungry, and exhausted, was by now, no match for the infuriated fisherman. And try as he did, Michael's weak resistance served only to excite, not break, his enemy's strong grasp.

"You thought you could escape?" The snarling voice addressed Michael. The hunter peered up into the darkness. A flash of lightening lit the room, revealing the wicked smile that played on the fisherman's face. Michael shut his eyes. His oxygen was running out and his strength with it. Michael strove to focus his anxious mind in prayer.

"Holy Mary -" he thought and then tried to gasp for air. The fisherman was strangling him harder. Exhausted, Michael dropped his arm. He glanced around. Things were becoming darker. He tried to pull away from Cunnel's hold. He could not.

Michael's thoughts quickly turned to the prince. And then to his wife. His children. What would happen to them now?

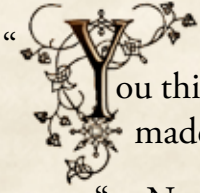
"Fool!" Cunnel hissed, almost as if he had read the huntsman's thoughts.

Michael looked briefly at his murder and then shut his eyes. No! He would *not* regret that he had tried to save the prince's life. No matter what it cost him. It was the right thing to do, and it was what God had wanted.... If he was sure of anything, he was certain of that.

"Mother of God," Michael silently continued, "Pray for us sinners, now and -" A clap of thunder shook the room. Cunnel's smile widened as he tightened his grasp. Finally, it would all be over soon ...



## CHAPTER 27



“You think I need to obey God?” The fisherman raged. He gave the hunter a violent shake. Michael made a final attempt to breathe. His sight was growing dark.

“...Now and at the hour of our death.” Finishing his prayer to the Mother of God, the huntsman lowered his head.

As he was losing consciousness, Michael heard the proud man whispering: “Even God can not stop me!”

Cunnel squeezed one last time.

A loud ‘Boom’ filled the air and with it, the sound of pelting rain. The fisherman was startled to feel a drenching wind sweep against his back. Then there was a loud and even more startling:

“Halt or we shall shoot!”

Cunnel turned around to two arrows aimed at his head. He looked about the room, to see two other men, all soldiers, inside his house. The fisherman noticed Valdigard had been awoken and was now standing with an archer guarding him.

“On your feet!” one of the soldiers barked at Cunnel. Michael felt his enemy quickly stand up and release his grasp. The hunter gasped and put his hands to his throat. He lay there panting and praying in gratitude, when a familiar sound caught his ear, namely, his own name.

“Which one of these men is Michael Hawkson?” A voice bellowed. It was a fifth soldier, and evidently the leader, who had just entered the room.

“Him!” Cunnel pointed eagerly to the collapsed figure beneath him. The nearest archer gave the fisherman a firm look but sarcastic response.

“Your meager testimony is hardly sufficient evidence.”

“Besides,” the voice corrected, “I was not asking him!”

Michael slowly rose to his feet, struggling to refocus his mind on his swiftly changing environment. Searching intently for the author of the voice, he found him, standing by the door, behind an archer. The leader turned his head sharply to the side and said “Come now, don’t tell me you do not know.” He spoke impatiently.

The hunter squinted in mild confusion. This leader was evidently speaking to another soldier, but one of short stature, Michael concluded, for he could not be seen behind the archer.

“You were able to spot his Rosary in the mud -” the commander continued, “- you can certainly tell me which one of these men is your father!”

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

The archer stepped aside to reveal a young boy. The huntsman stared in amazement.

It was Peter.

Yes, there he stood, upright by the soldier, his hands bound behind him. His feet were free as he evidently was forced to walk the whole way himself. Michael nearly burst with both joy and grief as he beheld his eldest son, covered in mud, his face drenched with rain and tears, and ready to collapse. Their eyes met and the father saw a heavy fear or sorrow burdening the boy's soul. Michael smiled in pity. Peter was terrified of betraying him and was resolved to stay silent. The agony that his son felt pierced the huntsman's heart like a sword. The father shook his head. Peter need not fear of betraying him.



*It was Peter*

"I *am* Michael Hawkson," the hunter admitted.

To his surprise, the nearest soldier hit him across the face.

"He was not asking you!" The man corrected sharply.

"No!" Peter cried out.

"Which one is your father?" The leader continued as if nothing had happened. The boy hesitated. Michael tried to make eye-contact with his son.

"It is all right, Peter." He whispered. "You can -" Another blow sent the hunter to the floor.

"Silence!" the archer stood threatening over Michael.

Peter stood straining his neck to see. "Stop!" he cried.

No one heeded him and so the boy turned to the leading soldier.

"Yes," Peter said through his tears, "that is my father."

"This one?" The archer pulled the hunter up by his shoulder.

The boy nodded. The leader too gave his men a nod and two of them began searching Michael. They did not go far, when one triumphantly pulled out the golden medallion from the huntsman's pocket.

"Where is the prince?" the soldier demanded loudly. Michael looked forlornly at the royal pendant. His focus shifted to the surprised, but then pleased, Valdigard. The hunter addressed the soldier.

"The prince is near here," Michael began, "in a bo-"

"You're wasting your time," a deep voice interrupted. All heads turned to the cloaked man in the corner. Valdigard looked at Michael and shook his head.

"The hunter will not tell you. But I will." The leading soldier shifted towards the stranger.

## CHAPTER 27

“Hawkson sold the prince,” Valdigard’s eyes met Michael’s. “He sold him to some gypsies.” The hunter’s face did not portray shock, but disgust. Cunnel looked from one to the other, his mind slowly grasping what was going on.

“Where were they going?” The head soldier asked.

“He wouldn’t tell us,” answered Valdigard.

“Where were they going?” The commander turned to the hunter. Michael met his look but did not answer.

“That’s not true!” Peter suddenly shouted. “My father didn’t do that.”

“Quiet, boy!” A nearby soldier hit Peter. Michael watched his son stumble forward.

“Leave the boy alone,” he cried. He strained to conceal his emotions. He could not afford for Peter to be their leverage.

The head man completely ignored the father’s comments. “Where is the prince?” he asked again.

Peter looked up angrily at the commander. “He didn’t kidnap your wretched prince!” the boy cried. The soldier gave him a piercing stare and the young boy returned it. The commander grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Peter!” Michael attempted to break the lock. His tone was warning, but suggested of patience. This mild rebuke received an unexpected reaction from his son.

“Why do you let them lie about you, Papa?” cried Peter, turning towards him. He yanked himself from the soldier. “It isn’t true.”

A moment or two passed and no one spoke. Everyone seemed to be waiting for either the hunter or his son, who were locked in a silent stare. Gazing into his son’s tearful eyes, Michael heaved a heavy sigh. Mistaking this for a reproval, Peter instantly hung his contrite head in shame. Despite his angry tones, the boy was crushed to think that he had caused his father any pain. Michael knew this as well as he knew the motive behind his son’s words. The boy was angry at Injustice, not at those who suffered at its hands. A single tear escaped the father’s eyes as he watched his trembling son suddenly gasp, stifling a sob.

Michael’s focus slowly shifted from Peter to the commander who had reclaimed his grasp on the youth’s shoulder. Addressing the soldier with all sincerity, the hunter calmly began to explain the whereabouts of the prince. Everyone listened intently as he described Philip’s position as being tied up in a sack on a nearby boat.

“A likely story,” Valdigard interrupted casually. The hunter ignored him.

“He’s being taken to Exthereous.” Michael declared.

His announcement was met with a strange silence. The leader slowly looked from one prisoner to the other. Cunnel carefully kept his eyes to the floor. Valdigard only shook his head with a thoughtful

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

grin. All was quiet, save the thunder. Michael watched and waited for the head soldier.

Suddenly the official raised an angry fist and knocked Peter to the ground.

“He’ll get worse than that!” He said, threatening the boy’s father. “With the next lie you tell me.”

The archer struggled to keep the hunter back, but Michael quickly broke away and dashed for Peter. He’d taken one step when, immediately, he found several swords pointing straight at him. Michael opened his mouth to speak when a sharp voice shouted above the din.

“What’s going on here?”

Everybody looked. A tall soldier had entered the room. The four militia immediately saluted and stood rigidly at attention. Their leader looked anxiously at the new arrival and nodded a welcome. This sixth soldier, clearly of higher rank, was in fact a knight. Immediately, he addressed himself to the situation.

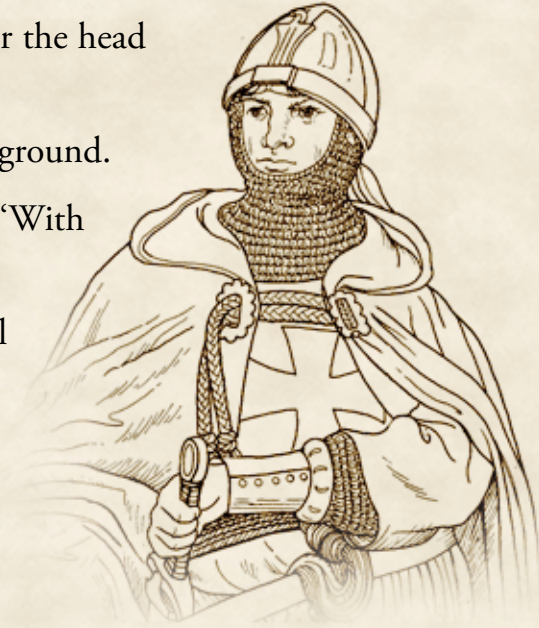
*“What’s going on here?”*

“Since when, Captain Martin, do you disobey the queen’s strict orders by harming the prisoners?”

Peter looked up from the floor. The soldier identified as Martin strained to keep an authoritative tone.

“You may tell the queen,” the captain declared proudly, “that I’ve found the man who kidnapped her prince.” His loud voice rung out with a touch of uneasiness.

“Forgive her majesty if she is duly unimpressed,” the knight mocked apologetically. “As Sir Henry de Authsville has already found the prince.”



## CHAPTER 28



‘hocked’ would be too mild an expression to describe the atmosphere of that room when Sir Reginald declared that Prince Philip had been rescued. Captain Martin was particularly affected.

“W -What?” he stuttered. “Where?”

“Tied in a sack down by the river.” The words were spoken in tones of irony and scorn. The captain’s pride was stung, but he was not convinced.

“How did you find him?”

“I didn’t. It was Sir Authsville. He had a little help, though, from an obliging man who was trying to steal a boat. As a matter of fact, that is how Sir Authsville found him. Sir Authsville had us searching Fishersbrooke, of course, for the prince. He himself led a band of men along the outskirts of this village. They were just finishing their search, when one of his men heard some dogs barking in the distance.” At this, Cunnel glanced angrily over at Valdigard, who purposefully turned away. Ignorant of this subtle exchange, Sir Reginald continued. “Hurrying to the scene, they discovered the cause of the commotion. The dogs were barking at a thief trying to take their master’s boat. Sir Authsville arrived before much violence had occurred.”

“But how do you know the thief had anything to do with Prince Philip?” Captain Martin interrupted. Sir Reginald gave him a look, more disappointed than annoyed.

“Captain, given the current situation, what other theory would you have for a strange man, clearly a foreigner, trying to steal a boat in the heart of a storm? But if you insist on evidence, by his own admission, among other things, the stranger is undoubtedly an Exthereon.”

“What of the boy? Is he all right?”

The knight turned a quizzical eye to the hunter.

“Prince Philip, as I said, was found in the captivity of a *different* Exthereon. The thief we caught, hoping to save his own skin, betrayed their meeting location. It was near some tree by the river. Sir Authsville and his men, following him there, discovered this second foreigner with the prince bound in a sack. It wasn’t long before Sir Authsville learned the whole story.”

“But how is the boy?” Michael insisted. The knight turned to answer him, when Captain Martin interjected his own question.



*One of his men heard some dogs barking*

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

“Where is Prince Philip now, Sir Reginald?” he asked.

“Due to our queen’s explicit orders, the prince is being returned to the castle immediately.” The reply clearly answered the Captain, but not the huntsman. The knight addressed this, interrupting Michael’s repeated question with an abrupt and sharp response.

“His majesty, Prince Philip, was found completely unconscious. Even now, as they rush him to the castle, he is unaware of his rescue.” The knight sent a piercing glance at the three men under arrest. “The young prince had better survive... if his captors even hope to.”

The tone of the faithful knight was far more threatening than his words. One was led to believe that, if need be, he himself would carry out this threat.

The tense silence was interrupted by Captain Martin, who was still trying to piece everything together.

“If the prince is being taken to the castle - along with those Exthereons, I presume -” the captain addressed Sir Reginald, “Then what are you doing here?”

The knight’s armored glove patted his sword.

“Not only were the two men identified as Exthereons,” Sir Reginald said slowly. “But their leader was admitted to be under *this* roof.”

A hushed silence fell upon the group. It was broken with a tiny snap of the knight’s fingers and several other soldiers piled into the dirty room.

“My orders are to arrest him and his accomplices.” The knight explained. “And bring our men back home.”

Again, a guilty air hung over the quiet crowd. Several glances were exchanged amidst the soldiers. Holes were stared through the three captured men. Their tension increased in anticipation of the knight’s judgment. Cunnel, in particular, grew quite anxious as a drawn arrow approached his head.

“I didn’t do it!” The fisherman frantically pulled away from the men. “I had no part in it.”

“Then who did?” the knight asked skeptically. Michael and Valdigard watched the fisherman give them hurried looks. At this, Captain Martin spoke up.

“That man Hawkson is clearly a kidnapper, sir.” He pointed at the hunter. The knight turned to respond when another voice was heard.

“Yes,” Valdigard joined in. “He had the prince’s medallion.” This was news to the knight and the captain was quick to verify it. Valdigard continued addressing Sir Reginald.

“He was planning to sell the golden piece when things had settled down.”



*Several glances were exchanged amidst the soldiers*

## CHAPTER 28

“You also said that I had sold the prince to gypsies,” Michael pointed out, “And instead, he has been found with the Exthereons, as *I* described.” The foreigner turned sharply, when a sly grin lit his face.

“That is how they described themselves,” Valdigard shrugged. “But then again, you can’t expect that they would identify themselves as servants of the Exthereon Lord.”

“You also said they were heading east with the prince.” Michael continued.

“By river,” The dark prince explained.

“Why would they go east when Exthereous lies to the south?” the hunter insisted.

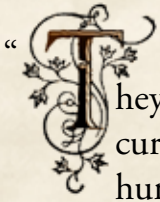
“They’re not looking to bring the prince back to their country. *You* were planning to ransom him, correct?” Valdigard asked casually, suppressing a smile. He continued without pause for any response. “What better place to use this leverage than bringing the prince to the front battle lines. And everyone knows the war is raging in the *east*.”

For a moment, Michael was shocked at this bold statement. The war being fought in the east! Now Valdigard’s lies would be shown for what they were.

“No it isn’t! Our king was headed south.” declared the hunter. Valdigard only grinned. Then, to Michael’s utter shock and dismay, he was answered by Sir Reginald.

“Actually,” the knight began slowly, “The plans changed. They *are* fighting to the east.” Sir Reginald’s voice was solemn and his eye stern, as he now faced the hunter. Michael looked hurriedly at Valdigard. The prince’s dark smile only broadened. He could sense the huntsman’s frustration. Michael was cornered.

## CHAPTER 29



They were *your* men,” accused Michael. At this, the knight grew curious. Valdigard sensed this curiosity and quickly retorted: “Can you prove that?” The soldiers’ attention now returned to the hunter. Michael bit his lip. He knew he could not.

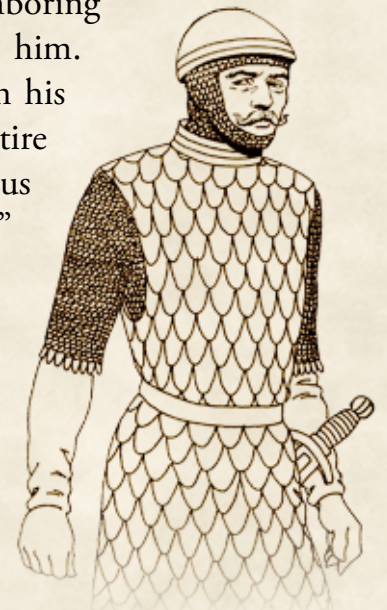
Valdigard said curtly, “On the other hand, it is you who had the medallion.”

At the sight of the crestfallen hunter, Cunnel gleefully added, “And your son had the prince’s ring!”

Sir Reginald turned to the captain, an inquiring look in his eye. The soldier quickly produced the royal ring and pointed out the boy who had it. For the first time, the knight’s full attention was drawn to the young boy, bound beside the captain. Peter could feel his gaze and slowly turned away. Sir Reginald watched him wince, but could not discern if it was from fear or pain.

Sir Reginald’s eyes went from Peter to the Captain. He took the ring and thoughtfully turned it in his hand. None could deny it was Prince Philip’s. And yet... somehow, something was not coming together for the knight. The hunter had used Peter to participate in the kidnapping. Why would this man expose his young son to the dangers of war?

“Yes,” Captain Martin explained. “We had caught this hunter, in the neighboring village Maristella. Shortly after that, due to the pillaging pirates, we lost him. Our suspicion had fallen on him, because the prince’s dagger was found in his house. Naturally my men promptly arrested his family. But it was not his entire family. Later, this boy was found with his sister, and both were identified to us as Hawkson’s children. We attempted to catch them, but the girl escaped.” As he spoke, the captain sent a piercing glance at Peter, who had evidently been the cause of their failure. “When the prince’s ring was found in the boy’s pocket, all doubt fled our minds. We asked the boy if his father was nearby. His answer was ‘no’ and that we would not find him there. After, uh... *pressuring* the boy,” the soldier chose his words carefully, “we came to discover that his father was last headed for this village of Fishersbrooke – in pursuit of the prince! We made our way to the edge of town and some witnesses testified that a man had left earlier that day on foot in the direction of Fishersbrooke. It had been several hours, but the time of his departure from Maristella accurately coincided with his escape from my men.”



*As he spoke, the captain sent a piercing glance at Peter*

“Yes, yes, yes... and so you made your way to Fishersbrooke.” The knight interrupted Captain Martin’s proud discourse. “But why *here*? Why this house?”

“Hawkson was seen to have taken a path to Fishersbrooke other than the main road. This led us roughly to the outskirts of town. The only building in sight, where we could rest and dry our drenched skin, was a tavern.”



## CHAPTER 29

Here, the captain hesitated. Peter watched his guilty face fumble for the right words. The young boy shook his head.

“So we stopped in and... and... after some time,” the captain stuttered. Sir Reginald raised an ironic brow, but said nothing. “We were able to inquire of the, ah, ... ‘local residents’... if they had seen our man. As luck would have it, they did!” He beamed. “Unfortunately, the directions were somewhat vague. In fact, we would have nearly missed the house if this boy had not cried out when he saw his father’s rosary.”

Michael had been listening intently to the Captain’s narrative and at these words, he instinctively looked at Peter. Their eyes met, and the boy’s head fell in shame. On the contrary, a small smile lit the father’s face.

With broad shoulders, the captain continued his list of achievements until he had ended with the knight’s arrival. Sir Reginald, however, was far from impressed, nor did he seem at all pleased.

“One thing is lacking,” said the knight. “Why did Hawkson come all the way over here from Maristella to sell the prince? Why not make his bargain there?”

“It’s nearer the river for the Exthereons to purchase his prize?” Valdigard suggested.

“Why should he care for their travel expenses?” Sir Reginald insisted. “But assuming that he did, why did he choose here? This building. Is this his house?” The soldiers shook their heads while their captain stood thoughtfully silent. At length, Martin answered, “no” and in fact went so far as to say that the bartender had directed them here, because the hunter was looking for fisherman Samuel Cunnel’s home.



“Evidently a conspirator,” Captain Martin concluded. Again, silence, broken only by the thunderous storm, filled the room. The fisherman fidgeted uneasily as he watched the knight’s thoughtful expression turn to impatience.

“And which one of you is Samuel Cunnel?” Sir Reginald demanded. To Michael’s astonishment, Cunnel volunteered instantly.

“I’ll tell you!” he shouted out.

The hunter sensed anxiety in the kidnapper’s voice and immediately suspected foul play. Valdigard, too became tense and alert. His dark eyes flashed. He sensed the same deceit and his mind raced to the conclusion. This wretch would portray Valdigard as Samuel Cunnel, to save his own life. The foreigner gritted his teeth. *Two could play at this game.* As quickly as Valdigard had discerned the problem, he had formed a solution.

While the fisherman was yet opening his mouth to declare that Samuel Cunnel had *escaped*, Valdigard raised his hand in interruption.

“No, I will tell you!” The dark man protested. His outstretched arm swung down with its finger

pointing straight at the guilty fisherman. "HE is Samuel Cunnel! And an accomplice with the hunter."

"But," Captain Martin scratched his head. "We found the both of them fighting when we arrived."

Valdigard shrugged his shoulders. "Greed will turn faithful brothers into the most treacherous of enemies. I have seen it time and again."

"And who are *you*," Sir Reginald suddenly spoke up, turning towards the foreigner. "Who are you that you know so much?"

Valdigard's resolute face hesitated. His mouth opened and then shut again without uttering a sound. It was as if his mind went blank and no coherent thoughts could form. Moments seemed like minutes, and each second of silence pressured him to come up with an answer. Up until now, his arguments and excuses had been logical and played well on the soldiers' ears. Their confidence had grown with his words and he had become their trusted witness. But this delay was his downfall... in more ways than one.

Cunnel who had, since the time of his betrayal, kept his hateful eyes fixed on the foreign prince, now grimaced at his chance for revenge.

"I will tell you who *he* is!" said the fisherman, turning to the knight. Sir Reginald gave him his full attention and a nod to continue. The traitor's back straightened as the accusation poured forth.

"He knows so much, because he is the brain behind this operation. His participation came only after I first conceived the idea, yes, but I swear to you that this man readily agreed and took over the plans to kidnap the prince."

"Why?" Sir Reginald spoke quickly. A flash of lightening followed the question and filled the room with thunder. The knight's intent face remained focused on the fisherman. A silent anticipation hung in the air. Michael, too, was watching Cunnel expose the Exthereon lord, when a sudden thought struck him.

"*Why does Valdigard not defend himself?*" The thought was in his head but, having not put it there, Michael almost laughed at it. "*How can he?*" he thought. His Guardian Angel humbly did not press the matter and a mild guilt touched Michael's heart. Stirred by almost a curiosity, he glanced over at Valdigard.

"*See!*" Michael smiled. "*Valdigard has nothing to say.*" His attention had nearly returned to Cunnel, when a tiny glimmer caught his eye. Turning back to Valdigard, his brief smile vanished. There was something shimmering beneath the dark man's cape.

The fisherman raised a triumphant arm into the air.

"That man," he shouted, "is none other than - "

Suddenly, the proud proclamation was interrupted by an even louder cry.

## CHAPTER 29

“Cunnel!”

Samuel Cunnel jumped at the huntsman’s scream and felt himself shoved aside. He stumbled and fell to the floor, watching the hunter’s blurry image rush past him.

Valdigard cried out as Michael knocked him to his knees and grabbed the arm that held the knife. In an instant, Michael had twisted this arm behind the villain’s back. A metal clang immediately followed, and the hunter reached forward to grab the foreigner’s knife.

But Michael had underestimated his enemy, whose strength and fury now resembled that of a trapped lion. As the hunter leaned forward, Valdigard pulled away and sprang to his feet. Now behind him, the foreigner gave a sharp blow to the back of his head. As Michael collapsed to the floor, he caught a glimpse of the Exthereon snatching up the fallen knife.

Several soldiers sprang forward and grabbed at Valdigard, but he threw them off like a madman. Lunging at the half-conscious huntsman, the foreigner held out his weapon for the kill. Michael, however, without a glance, rolled aside and let his enemy land beside him on the floor.

The soldiers, taking advantage of Valdigard’s miss, pounced again on the foreign prince. The lion, however, was not put off and he struggled to his feet. Firmly planted against their efforts, Valdigard shoved two of the men aside and raised his arm, knife in hand. His eyes met Michael’s for a brief instant. That look was all Michael needed. But before he could defend himself, a blinding flash of lightening shut his eyes.

In the darkness, Michael suddenly heard the high pitch, rapid sound of scraping metal, followed by a dull thud...

The rolling thunder, lost amidst the previous din, now rumbled through the sudden silence. The hunter looked down and saw the knife - intended for his heart - wobbling at his feet. Slowly, he leaned back and peered up at the scene before him.

Valdigard, held between two men, was furiously glaring at the knight, whose quick sword had interrupted his dagger’s path.

“I believe,” Sir Reginald addressed the fisherman, “you were going to introduce our friend here.”

Cunnel, however, still stood dumbfounded, staring down at Michael. The question aroused him from his shock and he continued, although with less drama.

“That man is Valdigard, brother to Missetheon, lord of Exthereous.”

A gasp ran through the soldiers, starting with Captain Martin whose shock was inexpressible.

## CHAPTER 30

**H**ow is this so?” the captain asked dumbfounded. “Can you prove this?” No one needed further proof than the villain’s own face. Never had guilt been so clearly written on a man’s features. But, despite this, evidence was still necessary. And when the fisherman was powerless to give it, the knight had already guessed its location.

“Turn him around!” The two soldiers dutifully obeyed his command and held the struggling prisoner before Sir Reginald’s scrutiny. Several curious heads stretched to watch their leader as he examined Valdigard. At length, a victorious sound escaped his lips and the knight turned around.

“Few of you may know our enemies’ emblem. Even fewer are aware that these heathens iron this symbol onto themselves, burning it onto the back of their necks. It is simply a snake coiled around the earth. The Exthereon royalty wear a crowned serpent. This man *is* nothing less than a prince of Exthereous.”

The range of emotions differed throughout the room as the soldiers’ went from an eye-opening fear to a triumphant joy. They eagerly fulfilled their leader’s orders and bound their regal captive. Cunnel too, found himself being tied, as he had willingly acknowledged his conspiracy with Valdigard. Captain Martin echoed the knight’s orders with a victorious pride. His joy, however, was short-lived, for the knight turned to him with a stern eye.



*“These heathens iron this symbol onto themselves”*

“Not only did you disobey your explicit orders, Captain Martin,” rebuked Sir Reginald stepping towards him, “But you nearly let our enemy’s brother slip right through our fingers!”

“How was I supposed to know?” The soldier foolishly defended his hopeless position. He pointed at Michael, still stretched on the floor. “*That* man kidnapped the prince! Are you going to let him just escape, simply because we’ve caught a bigger fish?”

The four other soldiers stood waiting. Sir Reginald motioned for one of them to fetch the hunter. Michael was pulled to his feet and brought before the knight.

“Were you working with the Exthereon?” he asked the huntsman.

“No,” answered Michael simply.

“You expect him to say otherwise?” the captain scoffed at his superior. “What *motivation* would he have to betray himself?”

His question was left unanswered, except by the sounds of the raging storm outside. Peter watched his father lower his head. The young boy stood aghast. Why did he say nothing? Prayer was all well and good, but it was not helping the situation. An armored hand was set on the hunter’s shoulder. Before Peter could protest, a dull voice broke the silence.

## CHAPTER 30

“No, he did not work for the Exthereons.”

The soldiers turned and Michael looked up.

“Nor was he my accomplice,” Samuel Cunnel added. He shifted somewhat uneasily and then admitted “His interests were his own.” Having finished, the fisherman promptly shut his lips and turned away.

Despite his own surprise, Sir Reginald sent the astounded Captain Martin a confident look.

“Tell me the fisherman’s *motivation* for that!” mocked the knight. The soldier recognized his error, but was not put off.

“So he had his own motives! He had the prince’s medallion and should still be arrested!”

“Unlike *you*,” Sir Reginald responded indignantly, “I *obey* the orders I am given. And I was told to arrest the Exthereon along with all his accomplices. This man is neither.” The knight motioned for his men to leave.

“Take the prisoners to the castle as quickly as the storm will permit.” The soldiers struggled to move Valdigard, but eventually got him moving at sword point. Only one took Cunnel, who reluctantly followed his lead. He sought in vain to shield his guilty face from Michael’s look.

“What of the huntsman?” one of the soldiers inquired.

“I will deal with him,” assured Sir Reginald. “Now make haste! The night grows late.” The men hurried the prisoners outside. The fisherman turned back towards his house. Through the open door, he again caught a glimpse of the hunter’s face, an opportunity which Michael had waited for. Slowly nodding, the huntsman silently acknowledged his enemy’s apology. Cunnel understood the gesture, which came only a moment before he was shoved forward and onto the road. The fisherman was soon out of sight, but not before a silent prayer had left the grateful huntsman. In that brief moment, Michael had seen a peace in Cunnel’s eyes, but one rooted in a deeper reconciliation - that of the fisherman’s soul with God.

Some soldiers lingered in the house, still focused on the hunter.

“You can’t just let him go!” Captain Martin complained. Sir Reginald, in response, turned his attention to Michael.

“The queen has not the time to deal with the likes of you at the moment,” he told the hunter. “I know you will believe me, when I say this Exthereon prince gets priority. But you must understand that you are a walking prisoner. You have tonight to return to your home. If you so much as set foot out of your village until we have returned to deal with your actions, you’re a dead man.”

“What of my family?” the hunter demanded boldly. Sir Reginald gestured for Peter’s release. One of the soldiers obediently cut the youth’s bonds.

“There.” he muttered, thrusting the boy into his father’s arms, “Take him and go!” The knight headed for the door.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

“What of the rest?” Michael called after him. The knight turned around impatiently. His upheld hand beckoned for a soldier.

“Return to Maristella,” Sir Reginald explained to the archer. “and see to it that this hunter’s family is released.” The soldier bowed and hurried out into the rain. The knight looked back at the “prisoner”. He raised a warning finger.

“One foot...” Sir Reginald threatened. “And you are a dead man.” Wrapping his cape about him, the knight walked into the storming darkness.

Peter watched him go and then thrust his arms about his father’s neck. Michael, too grasped his son tightly, when suddenly the boy recoiled.

“Papa!” Peter looked at his own hand, covered with his father’s blood. “Your shoulder! You are hurt!” The man smiled away the boy’s fright.

“I’m alright,” he assured him, taking the child’s hand. “And how is my son?” In response, the boy threw himself into his father’s arms, crying outright.

“I thought,” he gasped. “I thought that you were dead!” Michael put his hand on the young man’s head.

“So did I,” he sighed wearily. Peter caught the pain in his voice and shivered. The father felt the quiver and understood it. Slowly, he sat down on the hard floor and gently adjusted Peter onto his lap. The severest trial endured by the eleven-year-old that day had been a test of Faith... in God.

“But God protects us, Peter!” He patted his son’s back, “Doesn’t He?” The boy pulled away.

“Papa!” His voice betrayed the struggle. “They’re going to come back for you!” Michael looked into his fearful eyes.

“I know,” he whispered.

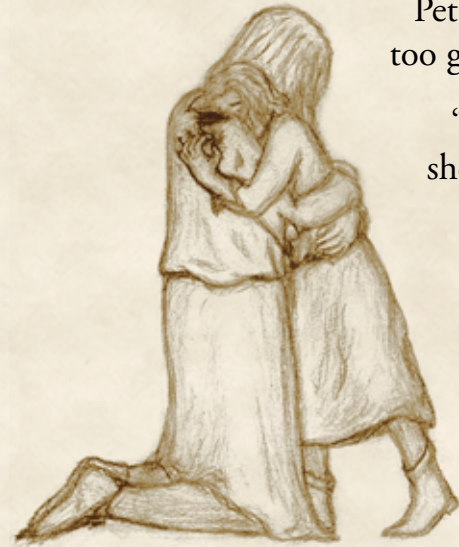
Peter stared at him dumbfounded. His father sounded so calm. He barely made it away with his life! They both did! How can he be so sure? The young boy groaned and slumped against his father’s chest.

“After all this,” Peter wiped his sleeve across his eyes. “I’m just so grateful that I am here with you.”

“So am I.” the hunter smiled. His son leaned back, and just sat staring at him.

The man suddenly took the young head and pressed it gently against his shoulder. Peter felt a strong squeeze. The boy returned the hug with all his strength, little guessing that this ploy was used to hide the father’s tears.

A flash of lightening lit the dim room. Claspng his son all the tighter, Michael listened to the

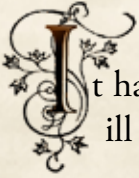


*Peter thrust his arms about his father's neck*

## CHAPTER 30

raging storm. The rumbling thunder brought with it the memory of the Queen's knight and his parting words. Though the deadly threat still rang in his ears, the hunter refused to dwell on future dangers. He must face them, yes... but for now, fear had no place in his heart - so grateful to God and Our Lady. They had kept him safe so far, and he would leave his fate in their hands.

## CHAPTER 3 I



It had been two weeks since the pirates' raid and still the tiny village, Maristella, suffered from its ill effects.

Although the unexpected presence of the king's soldiers had limited the thieves' crimes, the raid had left the village in a pitiful state. Several homes were destroyed, many were damaged, and the people's provisions – namely food - had been either stolen or ruined. There were also several casualties, and these kept both the physician and parish priest exceptionally busy. Not unlike other villages, however, Maristella's doctor suffered from poor equipment, not to mention his lack of supplies due to the raid.

Bolstered up by the prayers and example of a few good men, headed by their priest, Maristella slowly struggled to its feet. Limping forward, the town scrimped and saved, patched up here and there and worked to supply what it had lost.

Many families, after the raid had given up hope and abandoned themselves to a miserable and fatal winter. Were it not for the courage and faith of a few men, this may have been the village's fate. Yet this band of Catholics strove to serve their neighbor's need. Be it a house to repair or food to supply, these men were quick to help to the fullest extent of their capacity. Their good example was slowly, but soon followed by the other villagers. Included in this original band was Michael Hawkson. Despite his valiant efforts and participation, few were willing to except his help. Many wished to keep him at a safe distance. No one was ignorant of the stories surrounding him, involving the king's son. In fact, if the rumors were to be believed, it was only a matter of time before he would be arrested by the king. Therefore, no one wanted anything to do with him. And although many were reluctant to receive his help, they nevertheless accepted it, for times were bad and help was scarce. However, due to his involvement with the prince, nobody offered assistance to the huntsman or his family.

There were a few exceptions to this cold behavior. Two men in particular did not forget their friend in this difficult time, nor his history of generous charity. Although their provisions were scarce, George the butcher and James the fruit seller did what they could to support the hunter's large family.

Despite their many warnings, Michael refused to leave Maristella. And although the danger of his arrest was imminent, the hunter's time was mostly spent around the village, assisting in whatever way he could.

As each day passed, his family's dread grew and they considered it a blessing whenever he returned home.

It can easily be understood then, why a fortnight after the raid found the Hawkson family in a nervous and distressful state.

Early one evening, Greta was shoveling up the fire's ashes when the front door opened.



## CHAPTER 31

“Papa!” little Anna cried, without even looking.

“No,” Catherine answered, as she shut the door. “It’s only me.” The disappointed five year old slumped onto the floor. Greta smiled and turned back to the fireplace. A minute later, the door opened again and Anna sprung to her feet.

“No, it’s not Papa!” Teresa said quickly, hoisting up her bundle. “Only me.”

The little girl frowned. She had forgotten her sisters were gathering firewood.

“Don’t worry, Anna,” Greta called out, “Papa will be back soon with Peter and Matthew.”

Anna nodded and bravely suppressed the tears that came to her eyes. She turned away to forget her disappointment, when Bridget muttered something. All of a sudden, Greta heard her youngest daughter burst into tears. The woman dropped the ashes and hurried over to her child. Taking the weeping girl into her arms, she gently tried to soothe her.

“There, there, my dear,” Greta whispered, “Don’t cry. What would your father think?”

“I tried, Mama!” Anna looked up at her mother, “I tried to be brave like Papa told us. But then Bridget said that he may never come back!” A brief look was exchanged between the guilty daughter and her mother.

“Well, it’s true.” Bridget defended herself.

“I know,” the mother sighed. This evoked more tears from Anna.

“Shh,” Greta rocked her gently back and forth. “Remember what Papa said?” She had meant it as a question and was waiting for an answer. None of her girls, however made an attempt to do so. Greta looked around at their melancholy faces and forced a smile to her lips.

“Have you all forgotten so easily?”

“I know what he said,” volunteered Teresa.

“So do I,” the others slowly admitted. Sensing their reluctance, Greta refreshed their memories once again.

“Who’s our real father, Anna?” Greta softly nudged the young girl with her chin.

“God,” was the choked response.

“And does He love us?” The girl’s face turned into her mother with a sob.

“Of course, He does,” Greta answered, stroking the child’s hair. “Even when He permits bad things to happen, we know that He still loves us.”

“But Papa didn’t do anything wrong!” Bridget protested.



*Anna bravely suppressed the tears that came to her eyes*

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

“Neither did Jesus or His Mother Mary,” the woman reminded them. “And they suffered horribly! Yet we know that God Our Father loves them. So what must we assume? That God allows those whom He loves to suffer unjustly for their own good or the good of others.”

“What good could it do us, Mama?”

“It helps us to earn Heaven, Catherine, and it brings us closer to God.” Though Anna had quieted down, the other girls’ faces bespoke their fear and sadness.

“No matter what happens, Heaven is our real home. And whatever price we must pay to get there or to help others to get there is surely worth it. And believe me, God knows your father’s innocence and if He permits something bad to happen to him it is to test him and all of us.” The mother paused, and looked around at her children. “He will reward us to the degree that we suffer cheerfully, or at least willingly,” Greta added with a smile, “for His sake. He does not expect us to enjoy it –but to trust Him. If we suffer because we did what was right, then God is very pleased and will not forget it!” The mother bounced her little one as she spoke and a tiny smile escaped Anna’s lips.



*The girls’ faces bespoke their fear and sadness*

“So you’re not scared, Mama?” the girl asked. Greta kept her composure and gave her daughter an encouraging smile.

“I know that God will take care of us, even when Papa’s gone, until we’re all together again forever in Heaven.”

This satisfied her youngest daughter who quickly leaned back against Greta. Catherine, however, looked away. She noticed there was no “if” in her mother’s statement; only a “when”. Teresa sighed. She knew what it cost her mother to give them hope. Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud exclamation across the room.

“They’re coming! They’re coming!” Bridget danced by the window. “Papa, Peter and Matthew are back!” Catherine hurried to her side and Anna jumped from her mother’s lap. Teresa groaned impatiently. Bridget’s vague cries had scared Teresa for a brief, but intense, moment.

Just as Anna was approaching the door, it was quickly opened by her father who swooped her into his arms. His youngest daughter showered him with kisses and tears as the hunter made his way into the house. Greta’s eyes went from her husband to a bag hanging on Peter’s shoulder.

“It’s from James, Greta,” Michael explained, reading her thoughts. Peter handed it to his mother.

“It isn’t much,” Matthew said innocently.

“But it’s more than he could spare,” his father added without reproach, tossing his hat on the table.

“May God bless and reward him,” said Greta, taking the bag of fruit. “With this and our bread, we shall have a real feast!”

## CHAPTER 31

Michael grinned at her cheerful courage. This would barely feed them today and who knows where tomorrow's supper would come from.

"Yes! We shall!" The huntsman tossed Anna into the air. "Blessed be God!"

Anna squealed with delight as she landed gently on the floor. Teresa crossed over to her brother Peter.

"Any news?" she whispered. The boy shook his head. The girl sighed.

"This waiting is like death."

"Maybe it won't happen," shrugged Peter. His sister sent him a skeptical glance.

"But before dinner, children," their father called out, "let us say our Rosary." He led Anna into their "living room" while the rest of the family slowly gathered. As Michael settled down, he beckoned for his daughter Catherine.

"Come, my dear," the father's gentle hand touched the girl's shoulder. "Would you be so good as to get me my Rosary? I believe it's in my hat on the table."

The beaming child nodded and eagerly hurried over.

While waiting for Catherine, Bridget thought she'd ask about the village repairs.

"Papa?" the girl began. Her question was interrupted by a gesture from her father's hand. But what truly silenced her was the look on his face. He was listening.

No sooner had Catherine picked up the Rosary, than her eyes glanced across the room and froze on the window.

"Papa..." Catherine breathed. Michael turned to see his daughter petrified, her eyes locked on the window. "Papa!" she shook herself from her paralysis. "The soldiers!"

In an instant, the hunter had sprung to his feet and was by his daughter's side. There *was* a group of soldiers, some on horseback, others on foot, all coming down the road. They were headed for his house.

"Come away," Michael pulled the girl's arm.

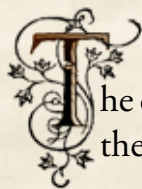
"Stay back," he called to his other children, now crowding around him.

"What do we do?" Matthew cried out.

"Papa, hide!" whispered Bridget.

"No," The father smiled at his daughter's untimely suggestion. "I've had a fortnight to escape, I'm not going to try now."

## CHAPTER 32



The distinct sounds of horses and soldiers marching could clearly be heard now, steadily approaching the Hawksons' humble home. They were coming for him.

"But...?" Anna pulled frantically at her father's arm. "Why won't you try to escape?" Instead of answering, the huntsman laid a gentle hand on the girl's frightened face.

"What does it matter?" a bitter voice muttered. "They'd catch him anyway."

Michael glanced at his eldest son. Of all of them, he worried for Peter.

Throughout the past two weeks, the hunter had spoken often with his children, especially Peter. They must all understand that God was allowing this and they must *trust* in *Him* as their Father – their first and greatest Father. But they did understand and they would try. Despite their tears, Michael knew they would. By God's grace they were strong. It's just now, when it's actually happening, it's easy to be afraid. The younger ones clung to their father, promising to be brave while the others nodded in silence.

Michael's eyes met his wife's. Without realizing it, his heart searched hers for a quiet peace, a place to leave his strength. A sigh escaped him, while a smile lit the woman's tear-stained face. No words, not a sound – their souls had spoken – each understood the other.

The only thing that Michael was afraid to leave... was Peter. The boy had valiantly contained his emotions thus far, but his father could sense that forgiveness had not yet found a home in his heart.

The hunter quickly approached his son.

"Do you forgive him, Peter?"

The question took the boy by surprise and his anger swelled before he could suppress it. His mind raced through a hundred memories – all of Philip. Forgiveness? For everything the prince had done – to him, his father, and his family? Maybe. But to forgive the prince for this – his father's arrest and probable death?

The boy turned away without a word. He could not lie and yet he would not break his father's heart.

"I have, my son." Michael laid a hand on Peter's shoulder.

The boy sighed and quickly muttered, "I *can*."

This pained the hunter even more. Before he could respond, the door shook with a loud thud.

The other children shuddered and crowded around their father.



*The horses and soldiers could be heard approaching the Hawksons' home*

## CHAPTER 32

“Here,” Michael quickly led them to Greta. “Stay with your mother,” he whispered. Anna would not let go. The hunter gently released her hold and placed her in his wife’s arms. As he pulled away, his hand caught his wife’s. Greta looked up from her daughter.

“Open in the name of the king!” a voice shouted from outside. A loud bang sent a quiver through the door.

“God will protect you,” Michael assured them. His voice faltered for a brief moment. Then, he quickly, though reluctantly, released his wife’s hand and headed for the door.

Just as he turned though, another “knock” caused a final ‘boom.’ A loud crash immediately followed, as the feeble door was knocked to the ground.

The little dust quickly settled and Michael saw an uneasy foot soldier staring at the broken door. Shifting awkwardly, the little man bellowed out:

“Michael Hawkson?”

“I am he” the huntsman answered.

“Step out into the light!” a voice shouted from behind the soldier. Michael obediently followed the command. The door down, his children peered past him at the group of armored men. Some were standing, while others were on horseback. The one who had just spoken appeared to be of leading rank- mounted on a steed at the head of the line. He in turn, looked past the hunter and into the home.

“And your family?” the knight asked. “Are they here?”

Without answering, Michael bowed his head, “I pray that our good queen has given you permission to limit the king’s justice to only me. I beg her majesty to acquit my family, particularly my eldest son, who is only a child.”

The foot soldier standing beside him clarified the request. “You are claiming the consequences for his actions?”

“I am.” Michael raised his head.

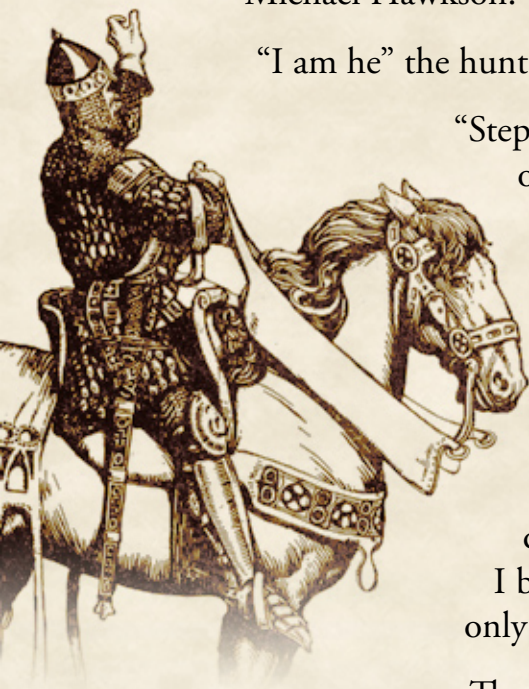
“I am afraid that will not be possible!” declared the knight on horseback.

The hunter turned beseechingly to this spokesman.

“Please, good sir - ” the father began. But the rider interrupted.

“Do you think I am ignorant of your son’s participation?”

Michael looked up at the elegantly dressed knight. This was clearly one of her majesty’s most powerful and influential men.



*“Step out into the light!”*

“No. But surely,” the hunter pleaded. “as his father, I have primary responsibility for him.”

“Yes,” the knight assured him, dismounting his horse. “You do!” Then with a snap, he called out “Sir Reginald!”

Michael recognized the approaching rider. The standing knight spoke to the other.

“Confirm for me, Sir Reginald,” the man said, staring at Michael, “That this is the man *my son*, Philip, spoke of.”

The astonished huntsman stepped back.

*Prince Philip's father?*

Sir Reginald bowed, “Yes, your majesty.”

The hunter dropped to his knees.

“My... my king!” he humbly lowered his head before the young monarch. Michael's family, suddenly realizing what was happening, followed his example and knelt down.

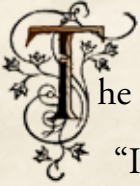
“It is a great evil,” The king slowly approached the hunter, “that justice has hitherto neglected your deeds.” The knight stopped short before his bowed subject. Taking hold of his sword, the king murmured:

“But no longer.”

Greta quietly turned Anna's tear-stained face away. A moan escaped the woman's lips and Bridget began to cry. Michael listened to their parting grief, but kept his head lowered.

The king swiftly unsheathed his weapon and swung it into the air. Several cries were heard from within the house as the children turned away, cowering in fear. Peter alone looked on. His eyes would not leave his father.

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he sword's swift fall came to an abrupt but mild thud on the hunter's shoulder.

"I dub thee knight." The king's voice echoed vibrantly through the air.

These solemn words were followed by a profound silence. Then, with equal grace and skill, the regal weapon was returned to its master's side.

"Rise, Sir Michael," the king beckoned.

The speechless hunter remained staring at the ground.

"Your Majesty," Michael said at last. "I am your servant."

"This I know," King Philip III answered, raising the huntsman to his feet. "And now you are my knight."

"Your highness," Michael protested, "there must be some mistake."

"The only mistake," the young king corrected, "was that it took a fortnight to happen. But even wars take time to finish."

"The war is over!?" the hunter cried out, forgetting himself. King Philip smiled broadly.

"And we are victorious!"

"Blessed be God!"

"Aye." The king nodded. "And we owe it to you."

"To me, your majesty?"

"You saved my son's life," King Philip explained, "and prevented a ransom that would have meant death for this kingdom."

"But to win the war?" Michael insisted.

"My son's would-be-kidnapper, that foreigner, was himself a prince of the Exthereons. Seeking an easier victory for his brother, the man entered and spied on our kingdom, searching for valuable information. Not in his wildest dreams, would he have ever hoped for the opportunity that came before him: to kidnap my own son, and hold his life as a threat for my surrender. And yet, because of you, it never came to that. Instead, this Valdigard was returned to his brother... on the condition of their departure and our complete victory."

The band of soldiers listened proudly to their king. Their eyes went from the young monarch to the knighted peasant and several bowed their heads.

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

“But,” the hunter boldly protested, “I am not to be thanked for this. This is God’s work.”

“But He used *you!*” the king insisted.

“For that I am grateful, but I only acted according to my conscience.”

King Philip smiled and put a friendly hand on his knight’s shoulder.

“I cannot ask for more. Would that all my subjects responded thus to God’s grace. My only comfort is knowing that the King of Kings will reward you beyond what I could ever hope to.”

Michael nodded gratefully, but remained silent. The sound of joyful tears, however, could be heard coming from little hut. King Philip glanced past the hunter.

“Come,” he slapped the peasant’s soldier. “Let us be off.” He turned back to his horse.

“But where, my king, are we going?” asked Michael.

“To the castle.”

A flood of hushed excitement came from the hunter’s children. Their father however was slow to follow.

“Thank you, your majesty, but we cannot.”

A wave of shock and indignation ran through the soldiers. The king, on the other hand, remained calm, though disappointed.

“But why not?” he asked.

“Our village,” Michael answered, “is only now recovering from a pirate raid, and - ”

“What?” the king spun ‘round to his soldiers. “I had no knowledge of this!” Their king’s heated tones caused the men to remain awkwardly silent. “What has become of this village!” he demanded. In face of their continued silence, the hunter intervened.

“Your majesty,” he said kindly, “You have only just now returned from a war. Come, take heart! Hope is not lost for Maristella.”

Philip III turned back. His mind was deep in thought.

“What would you suggest?” The young king asked.

“Well, for starters, the food is scarce,” began the peasant. King Philip surveyed the nearby trees.

“The hunting?” he asked. “How is it in these woods?”

Michael shook his head sadly. “Terrible.”



*“Hope is not lost for Maristella.”*



## CHAPTER 33

“Well,” the king stroked his beard, “It’s been a long while, but I remember the royal forests to have ample game. Do you think it would suffice?”

“Oh assuredly!” said the hunter eagerly. “Another ideal source of food would be the gardens. Several were burnt, but if some healthy soil...”

“It will be brought this very day!” The king slapped his hands together, then rubbed them in earnest thought.

“Now let’s see, how many people are in need of homes?” His slow stride halted by the hunter.

“Well,” Michael stepped forward, “There are at least ten families.”

“Now suppose,” the king continued, “that supplies were brought tomorrow,” he glanced at the huntsman beside him. “Are there enough hands to go to work?”

“We could use a few more strong men,” Michael admitted. The king assured him of their aid and then inquired as to the animal stock.

One by one, the children’s heads peeked around the doorway. They followed the soldiers’ gaze down the road. There was their father walking alongside their king, discussing plans. By now, the two were arm in arm, heading for the village.



“Here, Bridget. Catch!”

“Slow down, Teresa! I cannot keep up with you.” The girl scrambled for another apple.

“These are beautiful!” Teresa paused and examined the fruit.

“Are these all going to Maristella?” Bridget dropped the captured apple into their basket.

“Yes.” Teresa blindly tossed another apple at her sister. “His majesty is most generous.”

“Is the king really counting on Papa to distribute them?” Bridget asked, chasing the runaway fruit.

“These and all the other supplies that are going to the village.” Teresa picked a bright red apple from the tree.

“That reminds me,” Teresa commented aloud. “Mother is looking for our help with the linens. Matthew should be taking our place here any minute. Here you go.” She tossed the apple back over her shoulder. An indignant cry spun Teresa around and a mischievous smile sprang to her lips.

“Whoops,” she grinned. “Sorry, Peter.”

“Be careful, Teresa!” Complained her brother, with mock indignation. He rubbed his ‘injured’ arm.

“It was an accident!” The girl defended herself.

"Yeah," laughed Bridget, arriving at the scene, "If it wasn't, the apple would have hit you in the head."

Teresa made a face at the rude comment. Then, pretending to ignore it, she snatched up the fruit basket and handed it to her amused brother.

"Here, Peter," Teresa said. "Mama is expecting us."

"Wait a minute!" the boy protested.

"Try and get the higher apples," advised Bridget as she dropped one into his basket. She followed after her older sister. "The basket is almost full."

"But..." Peter called after them.

"Don't worry," the girls smiled. Teresa told him how Matthew was on his way.

"He'll help you!" Bridget reassured him.

With a skeptical grin, Peter watched his two sisters hurry away from the orchard. He *almost* didn't believe their excuse about the linens.

The past few days, however, had been quite busy at the castle. The king had "Sir Hawkson" supervising the distribution of all the provisions that were going out to the various villages. Yes, it was not Maristella alone that benefitted from the king's new urge for repair and relief. As King Philip continued to seek counsel from Sir Hawkson, he found it only logical to place on the hunter's shoulders the burden of leading this task. Although, to say that the responsibility and hardships fell solely on Peter's father would not be true. Together, the hunter and king worked for the benefit of Amadeum and the glory of God.

So, despite his natural inclination, Peter accepted the girls' excuse and assumed their previous task of apple picking. He laid the basket on the ground and hoisted himself up into the tree. The thick branches made it difficult to see, so the thin lad scrambled higher until there was a clearing. It was impossible to see outside the tree, but he had an excellent view of the apples. He wasn't long picking, when he decided to climb back down to the basket. In his descent though, Peter could not help but grab some particularly attractive apples and stuff them into his pockets. Two especially caught his eye, both clumped on an outer branch. The hunter's son placed one hand on a sturdy limb and reached out with the other. Carefully keeping his balance, the boy skillfully plucked one without causing its companion to fall. Without emptying his hand, Peter grabbed at the other apple. The fruit came off the tree but slipped past his full fingers.

"No!" The frustrated boy reached for it, but too late. Peter watched the promising apple fall through the branches. But before it hit the ground, a hand from below swiftly shot out and caught it. Matthew! Peter smiled. He could only see his hand, but was all the more impressed by the boy's quick reflexes.

"Good catch!" he called out, swinging himself to a lower branch.

"Thank you."

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The voice was familiar to him, and Peter recognized it instantly. His smile vanished. Philip's grin, on the other hand, broadened at the sight of Peter's shocked face.

"Come now," the prince spun the apple "Don't look so surprised." The peasant slowly came further down the tree.

"You couldn't possibly think that you could live in the castle, Peter, and avoid... an apology." The peasant boy stopped short, his eyes fixed on the ground. He remained in the tree.

"If all I had to do," said Peter slowly "was admit to a false guilt, say 'sorry', and be done with it, that would be easy. But to be punished for standing by what's right, when giving in to error is so much easier, makes doing the right thing as appealing as it is rewarding. But even if I knew beforehand everything that my decision would cost me – I would do it all over again. Except..." He paused a moment with almost a smile on his face. "I may not have argued with you for so long."

"Peter, this is not what I meant –"

"No I know what you want, Richard, er Philip – I mean, your majesty." Peter caught himself each time, ending with a bitter grin. His face softened as his thoughts turned to the past controversy over Philip's identity. "You know, I didn't doubt that you were the prince. But that would *not* have changed my mind. Even if it had cost me my life, as it almost did, I could never have joined your disobedience. And if somehow –" His voice momentarily rose to prevent the open-mouthed prince from interrupting. "If somehow, you believe your father's victory was God's approval of what you did, then you're wrong, Richard!"

Peter, still in the tree, stood staring down into the prince's eyes. A tense silence hung in the air.

"I mean, ... your majesty."

Philip laughed. "You really believe that?"

"You want me to prove it?" Peter dropped down from the tree. The prince watched him approach and kneel before him.

"Peter, don't –" Philip shifted awkwardly.

"Why not?" The boy asked without raising his head. "You've wanted this ever since I refused you a ride to Fishersbrooke."

"Perhaps with a little more sincerity."

"Actually, I find relief in paying homage to my prince without betraying my conscience."

"As I betrayed mine?"

The peasant looked up. Philip hesitated.

"You've misunderstood me," the prince said at last. "The apology I was referring to was my own." There was a moment's pause and Philip lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry, Peter. I'm sorry for everything."

He sighed and, raising his head, looked at the kneeling peasant.

“You were right, Peter, not to help me. I know that now. Every reason that you gave me was true; your father’s rules, my running away, all of it. But you know...” the prince looked down at his apple. “Do you know what really convinced me of the truth more than anything else? You know what showed me how wrong I was?”

He paused as if waiting for Peter to answer.

“It nearly cost you your life.” the boy muttered. Philip nodded.

“And the entire kingdom,” added the prince. “But even more than the danger that threatened - it was the good that I witnessed...” Philip paused. His eyes met Peter’s.

“...In you and your father. And in light of everything that happened – despite all the pain and trouble I caused- you both *still* did what you did. And why? Because of what you... believed in, I guess. I acted according to my belief and you acted according to yours. And...” The prince’s thoughts returned to the past. “I know how I behaved. I saw what almost happened. And after all that your family did!” So vivid were the memories, the young prince buried his face in his hands.

“I was there, Peter,” His head slowly emerged as he spoke. “And your father ...” Philip stopped with a shudder. “Oh I can never forget it. And I don’t ever want to.” There was a determination in these last words, a tone that bespoke a will far beyond his years.

“I’ve heard of many brave deeds in the golden tales, but none more noble than what I saw two weeks ago. All my life, I’ve longed to imitate the heroes of old in many a victorious battle. There, I would bring honor and glory to my father, the king! It was for this that I set out, to prove myself his true knight.”

Even now, Philip’s words rung out with royal vigour and Peter involuntarily lowered his head.

Staring ahead at nothing, the prince seemed momentarily oblivious to everything around him. He could see the valiant image he had so often dreamed of: the King’s True Knight! Surpassed by none in his courage, heroism, or fidelity, this ideal model was the sole ambition of the young prince. Yet even as Philip dwelt upon this valiant warrior - who truly in his mind was never anyone but himself - the image slowly changed.

The prince breathed in deeply and gave a heavy sigh; not one of remorse or grief, but one of satisfaction. He had *changed* the image.

“In the end, Peter, I *found* the king’s true knight. Your father.”

The peasant, listening all this time, looked up at these words. But the prince was not looking at him. His eyes and mind were fixed on the hero he’d hoped to be. Yet Philip was far from discouraged. On the contrary, he now had before his eyes a true example of knighthood, one that would counteract the false ideals he had clung to for so long.

“Whatever you and your father believed in, that urged you to act the way you did, even in the face

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of danger; and whatever gave you the courage to face it - that's what I want too."

Philip looked at the peasant kneeling before him.

"Peter," he took the lad by the arm, pulling him to his feet. "I'm not asking you to think better of me, for that has no just cause."

"But," Philip slowly knelt down. "I do beg you to forgive me."

A quiet breeze swept through the royal orchard. The rustling branches alone interrupted the silence that hung in the air. As the prince knelt before the peasant, the silence grew into an awkward pause as the forgiveness was late in coming. At length, Philip spoke, his head still lowered.

"If you do not, I cannot blame you."

"No!" Peter turned away, as if arguing with himself. The prince watched the boy shaking his head. "Would that I had forgiven you long before now," Peter muttered.

"Why?" Philip asked. The peasant shrugged his shoulders with a sigh.

"Because God wanted me to. And more than that, I knew He did. After all that God had asked of me, somehow, I could not give Him that." He turned and faced his companion. "And so, your majesty." Peter raised the prince to his feet. "You not only have my pardon, but my apology. It seems we both had a struggle we did not overcome."

For a moment, Philip just stared in shock. An apology for not forgiving his crimes! The prince laughed at the comparison.

"You surpass me in everything, Peter. When it came to obedience, there was no contest, and now! In minutes, you're able to achieve what took me weeks to accomplish. Namely, Peter, admitting a fault. And to compare your fault with mine! Ha!" The laughter ended with a smile that lit the prince's eyes and face.

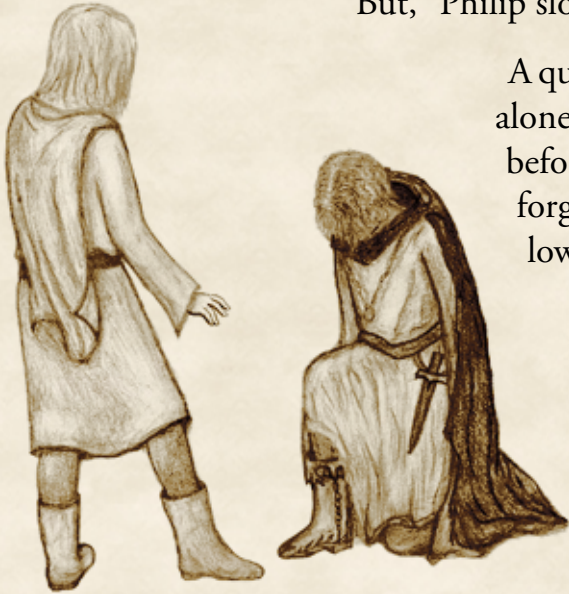
"There is one thing, however, in which I have not yet been outdone. In all fairness, though, I must give you a chance to prove your superiority."

Peter eyed his companion curiously.

"And what is that, my prince?"

"Hunting! - That is," Philip added quickly, "if you still want to." The peasant clearly did, but a sudden memory raised an interesting contradiction.

"I thought you did not know how to hunt!" Peter objected mildly, with a touch of suspicion. The prince grinned.



*"I do beg you to forgive me."*

## THE KING'S TRUE KNIGHT

"I just listened to see how much you knew. I have long sought a fitting competitor. And if your father enjoys hunting as much as mine, then perhaps we..."

"- could all go together!" Peter interjected excitedly. A mischievous look flickered in Philip's eyes.

"Well..." he began slowly. "*Someone* has already brought up the subject. And our fathers have made the arrangements."

"So we shall?"

"This afternoon."

The prince smiled with satisfaction at his friend's surprised and exuberant face. Peter hurriedly grabbed at the large basket.

"What! This afternoon? Are they waiting for us?" His eyes fell on the many apples. "Oh, look at all this! 'Tis a shame Matthew isn't here to help me with these. I don't know what's keeping him!"

"Here," Philip held out a hand. "Let me help."

"Oh," Peter hesitated but then nodded gratefully. "Thank you, your majesty. I hope it's not too heavy."

"You must be joking!" the prince laughed, pulling up the basket, "We handled the bench well enough." Both grinned at the memory and Peter started walking towards the castle, carrying his side of the basket.

"Oh..." Philip stopped suddenly and set the apples down. Peter did likewise and met his thoughtful gaze with a quizzical look.

"By the way," the prince said. "It's 'Philip'"

The peasant hesitated a moment and then smiled at the reference to his friend's "old" name.

"Not 'Richard'?" Peter teased, laughing. The prince, however, remained serious, but not grave.

"Or 'your majesty'."

The smile slowly faded from the peasant's face, only to return in his eyes. The two boys looked at one another. No words were spoken, for volumes could not describe what was exchanged in those few moments. Their friendship, uprooted by a tragic fault was now planted so deep within them, that it would stand, for years to come, whatever violent blows life would bring.

Philip smiled and lifted up his side of the load. As Peter eagerly took up the other side, both boys were struck with the same thought that would turn into a reality. This would not be the last task which the two of them would share.

And so the friends continued their errand, with redoubled and steadfast strides.

Had they looked behind themselves, the boys would have seen something which would have instantly seized their attention. At some distance away, quite out of hearing range, though still in clear

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view of the orchard, a pair of heads came peeking from around a corner. One head, being higher than the other, bent down to the little one's whisper.

"It worked, Papa!" young Matthew said.

"Prayer does, my son." Michael returned his smile and looked back at the boys. "And often in ways we don't expect."

The hunter's gaze turned upwards. Matthew looked at his father, whose eyes were closed. Slowly, the man smiled and his lips formed a silent "Thank You."

Matthew knew how much was said in those two words and he wondered what was said in return. Facing the orchard and the two boys, Matthew quietly slipped his hand into his father's. At this, the hunter's eyes opened and he turned to his son.

"Are you happy, Papa?" the ten year old asked, still staring ahead. He felt his father's strong hand gently squeeze his own. Matthew returned it with a content sigh.

"I am too," The boy whispered. And then, within his own heart, Matthew echoed his father's prayer to God and Our Lady.

*"Thank You!"*



# THE END

*Lady Gwendolyn*

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