

**Eaglethorpe
Buxton and the
Elven Princess**

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By Wesley Allison

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By Wesley Allison

For John and John and John

Eaglethorpe Buxton and the Elven Princess

(As Told by Eaglethorpe Buxton)

By Wesley Allison

Chapter One: Wherein I do not steal a pie, but pay a price none-the-less.

There was a pie. There was a pie cooling on the window ledge. Steam was rising up into the frosty air, illuminated by the flickering candlelight coming from within the building. Is there a more welcoming sight? Is there a more welcoming sight for a traveler from a far land, trudging through the cold, dark forest on a cold, dark night, waist deep in snow, frozen to the bone, than the sight of a pie cooling on the window ledge with steam rising up into the frosty air? You don't have to wonder. I can tell you. There is no more welcoming sight than such a pie. On this night there were sights and sounds and smells, all nearly as welcoming, and they were arrayed around this particular pie like the elements of a fine meal might be arrayed around a very nicely roasted chicken breast. Candlelight flickering through the shutters casting shadows on the snow, smoke rising from the chimneys in a quaint small town, the smell of burning wood and the smell of horses just overpowering the smell of pine, the sounds of men and women singing; all welcoming but not as welcoming as pie. I was as happy to see that pie as I was to see the little town in which it cooled on the window ledge.

I should stop and introduce myself. I am Eaglethorpe Buxton, famed world traveler and storyteller. Of course you have heard of me, for my tales of the great heroes and their adventures have been repeated far and wide across the land. Yes, I am sad to say that many of my stories have been told without the benefit of my name being attached to them. This is unfortunate as my appellation, which is to say the name of Buxton and of Eaglethorpe would add a certain something to the verisimilitude of a story, which is to say the truthfulness or the believability of the story. But such is the jealousy of other storytellers that they cannot bear to have my name overshadow theirs. In truth I am probably better known in any case as an adventurer in my own right than as a teller of the adventures of others. But in any case, there was a pie.

I had been traveling for through the snowy forests of Brest, which of course one might associate with a nicely roasted breast of chicken, but that is not necessarily the case. To be sure I have had one or two nicely roasted chickens during my travels in this dark, cold country, as I traveled from one little hamlet to the next. I would say though that I've eaten far more mutton and beef stew than roasted chicken breast. I suppose this has to do with the fact that eggs are dear, though

I've seldom found an inn that didn't offer a fried egg of morning. In fact, in distant Aerithraine, where I was once privileged to spend a fortnight with the Queen, I have had some of the finest breast of chicken dinners than any man has ever enjoyed. But notwithstanding this, there was a pie.

I had trudged through the snow for days, forced to lead my poor horse Hysteria who had taken lame with a stone, through drifts as high as my belt. So I was cold and I was tired. More than this though, I was hungry. And above the smell of pine and frost and people and horses and smoke, there was the smell of that pie. It smelled so very good. It smelled of warmth and happiness and home and my dear old mother. It was a pie for the ages.

I would not steal a pie. I did not steal this pie. Though I have been most unfairly accused of being a thief on one or two or sixteen occasions, I have never been convicted of such a heinous crime, except in Theen where the courts are most unfairly in control of the guilds, and in Breeria which is ruled by a tyrant, and one time in Aerithraine when the witnesses were all liars. So as you can see, I am not one to steal a pie. But being concerned that the pie might be getting too cold, I reached up to check the temperature. It was at this moment that I was laid upon by at least two pairs of rough hands.

"This is a fine welcome for a stranger to your town," said I.

They called me varlet and scoundrel and dastard and pie thief and tossed me bodily into the confines of a small shack just out behind the structure in which the pie had rested on the window ledge. I looked around in the darkness. It was not true darkness to be sure, because the shack was poorly put together, with wide gaps through which the cold and frosty air entered with impunity. It struck me immediately that it would not be too hard work to bust out of this prison, but I waited and put my eye to one of the cracks to see if my attackers had left and to see if I could spot what they intended for Hysteria my valiant steed, which is to say my horse.

The two ruffians who had attacked me were making their way back to the front of the nearest building and just beyond them I could see one short fellow attempting to lead Hysteria away, though she tossed her head unhappily and pulled at the reigns. I sighed, and could see the steam from my breath forming a little cloud just beyond the confines of the little shack.

“So,” said a small voice, and I turned to peer into the darkened corner of the shack. “They have caught another pie thief.”

Chapter Two: Wherein I become the sole guardian and protector of an orphan.

“I am not a pie thief,” said I, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the limited light of the little room. “If anything, I am a procurer of pies to be paid for at a later time, which is to say an eater of pies on account.”

“I don’t judge you,” said the little voice from the dark corner. “After all, am I not incarcerated for the same crime? It may well have been the same pie that I attempted to steal earlier in the evening that you tried to?”

“Check for doneness,” I interrupted.

“Steal.”

“Taste test.”

“Steal.”

“Borrow.”

“Steal.”

“For someone who doesn’t judge, you seem quite judgmental to me,” I opined. “And if self control did escape me for a moment, could I be blamed. Here am I, a cold and weary traveler from a far land, cold to the bone and hungry. And there sits a pie, and not just any pie, but a pie for the ages, sitting as if waiting especially for me, on the window ledge.”

“Mistress Gaston is an excellent pie smith.”

“I shall have to take your word for that.” said I, starting to make out the form of a child. “And what is it they call you, lad?”

“I am called Galfrid.”

“Come out of the corner and let me have a look at you.”

“Promise me that you won’t hurt me,” said he.

“All the country knows the name of Eaglethorpe Buxton and it knows that he is not one to harm children or ladies, nor old people or the infirm. Rather he is a friend to those who are in need of a friend and a protector to those who are in need of a protector and a guardian to those who are in need of a guardian.”

“So long as it is not a pie that needs guarding,” said he.

“Pies are something altogether unique. Pies are special, which is to say they are wonderful, but not rare. No, indeed they are common, but that does not make them worthless. Quite the contrary. Life is quite like a pie, at least in-so-much-as a life lived well is like a pie-warm and delicious on the inside with a protective crust on the outside. There are places in the world where pies are worshiped.”

“No.”

“No what?”

“There is no place in the world where pies are worshipped.”

“That is not worshipped, but revered as one might revere the saints.”

“No.”

“Far to the east of here, in the city of Bertold, in the land of Holland, they revere pies.”

“No. There is no city of Bertold in Holland and nowhere east of here do they revere pies.”

“You are a saucy child,” said I. “And if they do not revere pies east of here, then I should not like to travel in that direction.”

“So are you implying that you are this Englethorpe Boxcar and that I therefore have nothing to fear from you?”

“Eaglethorpe, with an A instead of an N, and Buxton, with an X and a ton, and yes, I am he and you have nothing to fear. Though to be sure there are plenty who would claim the name of Eaglethorpe Buxton, with an E not an N and an X and a ton, because greatness will ever have its imitators.”

“So you might well be an imposter,” said he.

“You may rest assured that I am not,” said I.

“But if you were an imposter, would you not insist that you were not an imposter?”

“You may be sure that I would.”

“Then how can I trust that you are the real Englethorpe Boxcar?”

“Just look at me!” I exclaimed, throwing my arms out and giving him a good look.

“Swear that you will not harm me.” said he. “And furthermore, swear that you will be my protector and guardian until I can return to my home?”

“How far away do you live?”

“Not far.”

“I swear to be your protector and guardian until you reach your home, though it be on the far side of creation,” said I. “Now come closer and let me get the measure of you.”

The lad crept forward until he stepped into a beam of moonlight shining through a space between the boards of the shack wall. He was a slight little ragamuffin, with a build that suggested he had not eaten in some time. He had a dirty face and wool cap pulled down to his eyes. His clothes were dirty and torn, but I immediately noticed that his shoes while dirty, seemed too fine for a ragamuffin such as this. I asked upon them.

“You see, Sir Boxcar, my parents were, um? cobblers? but they died, leaving me a destitute and lonely orphan child. These shoes were the only things they left me.”

“May they rest in peace,” said I, whipping off my cap, which is only proper courtesy to offer, even if one is only offering it to an orphan. “But on to the situation at hand. I see that you are a sturdy boy, despite your condition. Why did you not bust out of this shack? It looks as though it would take no more than a

couple of kicks.”

The lad stared at me with his mouth open, obviously chagrined that he had not thought of this means of escape himself. “Yes,” he said at last. “I am a sturdy? boy?. but I think you will find the shack is sturdier than it looks. It is hammered together with iron nails.”

I turned and leveled a kick at the side wall through which crack I had but a moment before been peering. One of the boards flew off, landing in the snow six or seven feet away and leaving an opening almost big enough for the boy to pass through. I kicked a second board off the side of the structure and I was outside in a jiffy. Turning around, I reached through to aid my companion’s escape.

“Come along orphan,” said I.

Chapter Three: Wherein I escape and lay my retribution upon my captors.

I pulled the boy out through the hole that I had created and into the deep snow that had formed in a drift beside the shack. He almost disappeared, as he couldn’t have been more than four foot ten.

“Grab the back of my belt,” said I. “I will guide you. The first thing we must do is find my noble steed.”

“The stable is on the other side of the Inn, just beyond the cart path.”

“Very good. Come along. I am sure that the noise of our escape was heard and any moment I may have to fight off a dozen or so angry villagers with pitchforks and such.”

“Do you have a weapon?” asked the boy.

“I have a knife in my boot, but I would be loath to stick it into a person over such a thing as this.”

“They deserve it,” said the boy, now trailing along behind me as I negotiated my way around the buildings in the gloomy night. “If my father was here, he’d lay waste to this town.”

“Quite the fierce cobbler was he?”

“Um? yes. Before he died...leaving me an orphan.”

I trudged through the snow around the large building that I now knew was the inn and crossed the cart path, distinguishable from the rest of the landscape by two parallel ruts in which the snow was not quite as deep as everywhere else. I perceived no danger from any direction and indeed could still hear the voices of men and women singing in the inn. The stable, which I would have recognized even without the orphan's help, was dark and silent. The pleasant aroma of horse dung enveloped me as the slight breeze turned in my direction. I crept up to the large double door and pulled one side open slightly.

“Hysteria,” I called in a whisper and was answered by a gentle knicker, which is to say the sound that horses make when they are neither angry nor excited nor otherwise engaged.

Inside the stable was pitch black, and I cast around for a lantern, but the lad needed no such artifice.

“I see your horse in the last stall,” said he.

“You have very good night vision, orphan,” said I.

The little ragamuffin guided me by the hand to the far stall and by the time we arrived there I could make out the more prominent shapes including that of Hysteria, which is to say my horse, who tossed her head in greeting.

“Poor girl,” said I, running my hands over her. “They didn't even bother to unsaddle you or remove your bit and bridle.”

“All the better for us and our escape,” said the boy.

I led Hysteria out of the stall, through the dark of the stable, and into the lesser dark of the night. It was in fact, quite a good night for traveling, at least as far as light was concerned. The moon was reflected off the white snow, and though the ghostly illumination created monsters of the many gaunt and gnarled trees, they were easily negotiated through. This put me in mind of a number of similar nights, when the moon was shining upon the snow. It seems somehow unfair that I more than most find myself sneaking in or out of town on cold, dark nights. I am not one to complain about my lot in life though. Then at that moment, as if to remind me that the lot of others was worse than my own, the boy tugged at my

sleeve.

“What are you doing?” said he.

“I am pondering life,” I replied.

“Can you ponder life once we’ve made our escape from this wretched town?”

“Quite so,” said I, placing my foot in the stirrup. Once I was in the saddle, I reached down for my charge. “Come along orphan.”

“In some circles it might be considered rude to keep calling me an orphan,” he opined.

“Your parents are dead and so you are an orphan,” said I, lifting him up to sit behind me. “If I call you something else, your parents will still be dead.”

“Even so,” he agreed. “Let us get out of here.”

“Not until we make this town pay for its injustice and our indignities,” said I.

I spurred Hysteria forward, though truth be told I did not spur her precisely because I do not wear spurs. Spurs seem unnecessarily mean and pointed and Hysteria is possessed of something of a fragile ego. If one speaks harshly too her, she is likely to go into a mope for weeks on end and jabbing her haunches or belly with pointy metal objects could send her into a serious downward spiral of depression. It would be a sad thing to see. So I encouraged her forward. I urged her forward. I coaxed her forward. I asked her to go forward and she went forward, which now that I think about it, is the direction that she is usually most likely to go.

I guided her through the snow, across the cart path, and around the corner of the inn to the spot where upon I had first been laid hold of. I fully expected that the pie I had originally seen would by now be gone. As cold as the weather was, the pie would have gone from hot to warm to cool to quite cold in the time that I had spent escaping from the shack and rescuing my valiant steed, which is to say Hysteria. I was not wrong. The pie was gone. But Ho! There were now two new pies sitting on the very same window ledge.

Sitting astride Hysteria as I was, the pies were now at a level between my

shoulder and my waist, and I could easily look inside the window. A fat woman with red cheeks and red hair and wearing a white apron was rolling out dough with a rolling pin. She was too busy to notice me. That was not the case with the stout fellow that at that moment entered from the common room beyond. He caught sight of me and let out a yell that could have, and in fact did, summon everyone in the place. The sounds of singing stopped as others rushed to see the source of his consternation.

“Let this be a lesson to you not to waylay innocent travelers!” I shouted, scooping up the pies, one in each hand. I urged Hysteria onward, but no doubt feeling the warm air exiting the window, she was loath to move. The orphan fixed that by slapping her on the backside, her fragile ego notwithstanding. She jumped and shot around to the front of the inn just as the gang of toughs from inside came out the front door. They were just in time to watch us race off into the darkness with two warm and steamy pies.

Chapter Four: Wherein we make decisions about our supper.

When we were not two hundred yards down the road, I let Hysteria drop to a trot, for in truth I did not expect anyone to follow us into the night, daring wild animals, bandits, or hobgoblins regardless of how fine a pie smith Mistress Gaston was reported to be. A few hundred yards beyond that, my horse dropped of her own accord to a walk and I expect she was beginning to feel a bit mopey because of the slap the orphan had dealt her. At that moment I was less interested in her mental condition than my own physical one though, because I was holding a cast pie pan in each hand and they were both heavy and still quite warm.

“Here.” I turned in the saddle and handed one pie to the orphan. “We can eat while we ride. If we wait until we find a campsite, the pies will be cold.”

“Do you have a fork?” the boy asked.

I mused that this seemed an unlikely request from any boy, most of whom I have found uninterested in tableware on the best occasion, and especially from an orphan whom one might have supposed to have been forced by necessity to dig into all manner of food scraps with his hands. However it was not a question to which I needed reply in the negative, for I always carry a fork in the inner left breast pocket of my coat, which I call my fork pocket. I gave the orphan my fork and pulled my knife from my boot to use on the remaining pie.

“This is a very nice fork,” said the orphan.

“Of course it is,” said I. “That fork came from the table of the Queen of Aerithraine herself.”

“You stole this fork from a Queen?”

“Impudent whelp!” cried I. “That fine fork was a gift from the queen, with whom I once had the pleasure of spending a fortnight.”

“What kind of queen gives a man a fork?”

“A kind and gracious one.”

That apparently satisfied the boy’s curiosity for the moment and for the next few minutes we concentrated upon the pies. I am not one to mourn a lost pie and that is well, for the pie that was lost to me on that night, as I have previously mentioned, was a pie for the ages. A fine pie. A beautiful pie. A wonderful pie. This new pie was almost as good though. It was a crabapple pie, which was a common pie to come upon in winter in those parts, which is to say Brest, as cooks used the crabapples they had put up the previous fall. This pie was an uncommonly good pie, with nutmeg and cinnamon and cloves and butter. I had more than a few bites by the time the boy spoke again.

“What kind of pie is that?”

“Crabapple,” I replied. “What pie do you have?”

“It is a meat pie.”

“A meat pie,” I mused, as I thought back upon how long it had been since I had eaten any other meat than venison. I had eaten a sausage a week before, but it had been a fortnight and half again since I had eaten mutton stew with potatoes and black bread in Hammlintown. That had been a fine stew and the serving wench who brought it to me had been nice and plump with the top two buttons of her blouse undone and she had smiled quite fetchingly when she had set down the tray. Stew is a wonderful food and even when it is not served by a nice, plump serving wench with the top two buttons of her blouse undone. It always seems to give me the same feeling when I eat it that a nice, plump serving wench with the top two buttons of her blouse undone gives me when I see her.

“What are you doing now?” asked the orphan.

“Pondering stew,” said I.

“Well stop it. Rather ponder this instead. You eat half of your crabapple pie and I will eat half of my meat pie. Then we can trade and eat the other halves of each others pies.”

“Alright,” I agreed. “But this will mean that I have to eat my dessert first and my supper after.”

“Just pretend that the meat pie is your dessert and the crabapple pie is your supper.”

“A crabapple pie could be a fine supper. In fact I have been to countries where the most common part of a supper is crabapple pie.”

“Fine then.”

“But a meat pie is in no country a dessert.”

“Then trade me now.”

“How much have you eaten?” I asked.

“About a fourth. How much have you eaten?”

“About a fifth.”

“Then eat another twentieth,” said he. “Then we will trade pies and each eat two thirds of what remains and then trade them back. At that point, we will each eat what remains of the pie we originally started with. That way you can think of the first portion of the crabapple pie as an appetizer, the portion you eat of the meat pie as your supper, and the final portion of the crabapple pie as your dessert.”

“You are a fine mathematician for an orphan,” said I. “But it suits me. Will it not bother you that your appetizer and your dessert are of meat pie and your supper is of crabapple pie?”

“I have decided that I will make this sacrifice,” said he. “Since it was you that

provided the meal.”

Chapter Five: Wherein I reveal the mystery of my family.

“You said that you do not live far from here,” I mentioned, once we had finished the pies. One might say the purloined pies, but I would not. I would instead insist that they rightly belonged to us in recompense for our unjust confinement.

“That is correct,” said he.

“The pies rightfully belong to us?”

“No. I live not far from here. Are you carrying on some other conversation in your head about the pies?”

“Of course not,” I replied. “You are an orphan.”

“I am well aware of that fact. There is no need to keep rubbing it in my face.”

“What I mean is you don’t have a proper home any more now that you are an orphan.”

“Even an orphan may have extended family,” he explained. “Perhaps I live with them.”

“Do you?”

“One might suppose that I do.”

“One might suppose a great many things,” said I. “But would it not be better to base our future activities less on supposition than on actual remembrances?”

“One might suppose we should,” said he.

“You have an odd way of talking,” I commented. “You don’t quite sound orphanish at all.”

“Really? How many orphans have you known?”

“Quite a few actually,” I revealed. “The Queen of Aerithraine?”

“With whom you once had the pleasure of spending a fortnight.”

“Indeed it is so. The Queen of Aerithraine, with whom I once had? well, she has a soft spot for orphans. Some years back she opened an orphanage called Elleena’s House.”

“Is that because her name is Elleena?”

“Why would her name cause her to have a soft spot for orphans?” I wondered.

“No, I believe it is because she was an orphan herself.”

“No. Is it called Elleena’s House because her name is Elleena? And how could a queen be an orphan? Doesn’t she have to be a princess? Or did the King find her in an orphanage and come to sweep her off her feet? That would be a lovely story.”

“Well, there is no king,” said I.

“Gah!” he exclaimed. “You are the worst storyteller in the world. You are messing everything up and making me confused.”

“Forsooth! I am the best storyteller in the world. I do not expect you to know so, as you are an unfortunate orphan without any knowledge of the world.” I looked over my shoulder at his pinched little face. “In truth I was not trying to tell you the story of the Queen of Aerithraine. If I had, you would be filled with wonder and excitement. I have made half my fortune from that story, and a better story, a truer story, a more profound story; you are not likely to hear in all the days of your life. But I was not trying to tell that story. I was trying to explain that the Queen of Aerithraine has a soft spot for orphans. In fact, I suppose that I do so myself, as I am almost an orphan.”

“You are almost an orphan?”

“Indeed.”

“How can you be almost an orphan?”

“Why couldn’t I be?” I demanded. “If anyone can be, I could be.”

“What I mean is?” He took a deep breath. “How can one be almost an orphan?”

“Oh. Well, it’s only that my parents aren’t dead.”

“I see,” said he.

“But they were kidnapped,” I confided.

“Are you sure they didn’t just run away?” he asked.

“It was a stormy night and I had been away from my parents’ home, which is to say my former home, which is to say Cor Cottage just outside Dewberry Hills, and I was returning for a visit. As I approached I heard a disturbance, though at first I attributed it to the sounds of the storm. Then I looked up at the cottage window to see figures silhouetted on the shade, locked in a grim struggle.”

“What did you do?”

“Why, I rushed forward to aid my poor old mother, who as I recall smells of warm pie, and my poor old father, and my sister Celia, and my aunt Oregana, and my cousin Gervil, and my other cousin Tuki, who is a girl cousin, which is to say a cousin who is a girl, which makes sense, because whoever heard of a boy named Tuki.”

“They were all struggling by the window?”

“They may all have been struggling by the window, or some of them may have been, or perhaps only one of them was struggling by the window. I don’t know, because when I burst into the front door, they were all gone. The back door was open wide and the rain was splashing in.”

“What happened to them?”

“I know not.”

“Were there any clues?”

“Indeed there were.”

“What were they?”

“The table had been set for nine, which was two places too many.”

“Three places!” said the orphan triumphantly. “You thought I wasn’t paying attention. There was your father, mother, sister, aunt, and two cousins. That makes six.”

“They would also have set a place for Geneva.”

“Of course they would have. Who is she?”

“She’s my other cousin, which is to say Gervil’s sister, only she’s imaginary, but she wasn’t always imaginary, which is to say she died, but Gervil still sees her, so Aunt Oregana always sets a place for her.”

“What other clues?”

I listed them off. “There was a knife stuck in Gervil’s bed. Floorboards had been loosened in several rooms. There were drops of purple liquid leading out the back door. And someone had hung bunches of onions from the rafters of the dining room. Most mysterious of all was the fact that the tracks led away from the house only fifty feet and then disappeared entirely.”

The orphan gripped me around the waist and squeezed. “How terrible,” he said, in a tiny voice.

Chapter Six: Wherein I begin to tell the story of the Queen of Aerithraine.

Hysteria clomped along slowly down the snow covered road for some time. The orphan was so quiet that for a while I thought he must have fallen asleep. But at last he stirred and shifted a bit in his seat, which is to say upon Hysteria’s flank. I myself had been quiet as I remembered the events of that horrible night.

“What are you thinking about?” asked the orphan.

“I’m thinking about that horrible night,” I replied.

“Did you never find your family?”

“No, though I searched for weeks. My mother was to make me a blueberry pie that night, and I not only have never seen my mother since, I did not get to eat that pie either.”

“I’m sorry I brought up such a painful memory,” he said, then paused. “Do you suppose that the purple drops on the floor could have been from your blueberry pie?”

“Fiends!” said I. “To rob a man of his mother and his pie in the same night!”

“Perhaps it were best that we think on something else,” said he.

“Perhaps,” I agreed.

“If you are really such a great storyteller?”

“The greatest in the world.”

“And if the story of the Queen of Aerithraine is a great story?”

“Wonderful. Exciting. True. Profound.”

“Well, maybe you could tell me the story.”

“I get half a crown for that story in Illustria,” said I.

“I have a shiny penny,” said he.

“The story begins in Aerithraine, far to the west, along the coast of the great ocean sea. From storied Illustria, its capital, to Cor Cottage just outside Dewberry Hills in River County, Aerithraine has been a great and powerful country for some seven hundred years more or less. By more or less, I mean that it has been more or less seven hundred years that Aerithraine has been a country and that it has been more or less great and more or less powerful during those seven hundred years. But about fifty years ago, it was less. That was when the old king died, and as is the way of kings, a new one was crowned. He was King Julian the Rectifier.

“He was called Julian the Rectifier because he was chiefly interested in rectifying. He spent most of his time rectifying. He rectified all over the place. And he was good at it. He rectified like nobody else.”

“It means setting things to right,” said the orphan.

“Of course it does and that is just what he did. Under his reign, the kingdom was prosperous and wealthy. And, as he wasn’t so interested in warring as in rectifying, there was peace throughout the land. King Julian had only one son, and he passed to that son the strongest and wealthiest kingdom in all of Duaron, and if it had only remained so, Elleena would have become nothing more than a minor princess perhaps.”

“Which would not have made a half-crown story,” pointed out the orphan.

“That is so.”

“Carry on then.”

“King Justin was the son of Julian. I hear tell that he was once called Justin the Good and Justin the Wise, though now when storytellers refer to him, they usually call him Justin the Weak or Justin the Unready.”

“What do you call him?”

“I just call him King Justin,” said I. “Though I truly believe he may deserve the title Justin the Brave, it is not what the listeners want to hear.”

“Go on.”

“King Justin married a princess from the faraway land of Goth. The Arch-Dukes of Goth, which is to say the rulers of that land, have for generations, maintained power through a tightly woven web of treaties with its mighty neighbors. Their chief barter in this endeavor is the marriage of the many female members of the family. I hear the current Arch-Duke has but four daughters at least as of yet, but his father who was Arch-Duke before him had seventeen, and his father, which is to say the grandfather of the current Arch-Duke had nineteen.”

“That hurts just thinking about it.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Go on.”

“It must have been quite a coup of diplomacy for the Arch-Duke of Goth to make a match with the King of Aerithraine, but he did, marrying to the King his

daughter Beatrix. And though I hear that the women of that country wear too much make-up, she was never the less accounted a great beauty. She had pale white skin, raven hair, smoldering eyes, and a gold ring in her nose, as is the fashion in the east.

“King Justin and Queen Beatrix had four strong sons, the eldest of whom was Prince Jared. He was particularly beloved of the people. I saw him once when I was a child of four or five, sitting on my poor old father’s shoulders as the Dragon Knights passed on their tall white steeds. That is to say, I was seated on my father’s shoulders and the Prince was not. Neither were the Dragon Knights or their steeds. I don’t remember why the Prince and the knights were in River County. It was too long ago. He would have grown to be King upon his father’s death if it was not for?”

“Goblins!”

“Yes, that’s right. You didn’t say you had heard the story before, though I’ll warrant it wasn’t told as well?”

“No!” screamed the orphan. “Goblins! Right there!”

He pointed straight ahead, and sure enough, stepping out of the shadows and into the moonlight were a half dozen creepy little man-things. They were no more than three feet tall, their over-sized round heads, glowing eyes, and gaping maws giving away their identity. As they came closer those mouths widened into grins filled with jagged little teeth, looking far too much like the teeth on the blade of a cross-cut saw for my taste. They brandished what weapons they had, mostly things they had picked up from the ground—a stick, a length of cord with a knot in it. But a couple of them carried old, discarded straight razors.

Chapter Seven: Wherein my story is interrupted by goblins, thereby explaining why it might not seem as good as it really was.

Goblins are nasty little blighters. They remind me of my cousin Gervil’s friend called Rupert. His name was Sally, which explains why he was called Rupert. But like goblins, he was short and had a big, round head. I don’t know why goblins have such large heads for their little bodies. Of course I don’t know why Rupert did either. There doesn’t seem to be much advantage in it. On the other hand, goblins have excellent night vision, making it very easy to sneak up on people in the dark. And they have abnormally large mouths with an abnormally

large number of teeth in them. This was very unlike Rupert, which is to say Sally, who as I recall had only five or six teeth, though he made up for that by having an extra toe. In addition to which I don't believe his night vision was all that it might have been, for once he kicked me in the head when he was on his way to the outhouse. Of course that could have been on purpose. Rupert was a bit of a nasty blighter too.

"What are you doing?" asked the orphan, as Hysteria took a step back.

"Thinking about a fellow called Rupert," said I.

"Well stop it, and get us away."

I said that Hysteria took a step back, but I should have said that she took two steps back, one on each side. I could tell she didn't want the foul little creatures around her feet. She's very particular about her feet, as most horses are wont to be. As they approached still nearer, she reared up a bit-not enough to bother me, but just enough for the orphan to slip off her haunches and land with a "poof" on his seat in the snow. The goblins cackled grotesquely and I'm sure that they thought they had secured for themselves a snack. They stopped laughing though when I kicked my leg over Hysteria's shoulder and dropped lightly to the ground.

With a quick motion, I pulled my knife, still stained red from crabapple pie, from my boot. It was a small enough weapon to face off six attackers and I would have much rather had a sword, but I had been forced to sell my sword in order to get a fellow out of prison. I didn't really know him, but he was the beloved of a poor but beautiful farm girl. In retrospect it would have been better if he had not turned out to be a werewolf, but that is another story. If I ever write this down, maybe I'll say that I sold it to get the poor but beautiful farm girl out of prison and that I slew the werewolf. Yes, that's a much better story.

"What are you doing?" asked the orphan.

"Recalling the time I slew a werewolf," said I.

"Finally something useful!" he exclaimed.

The two foremost goblins looked at one another. While six or seven goblins might sneak up on a man when he was asleep, or might chase down a maiden

who was alone and defenseless, they would have to be extraordinary members of their species to take on a seasoned warrior with a weapon.

“That’s right potato head!” shouted the orphan, jumping to his feet.

“Werewolves, vampires, giants; he’s killed them all.

“Gree yard?” said the first goblin.

“Grock tor,” said the second goblin.

“I don’t think they understand us,” said I.

The first began to skirt around me to the right and the second began to skirt around me to the left. The others were following along. I don’t know whether their intention was to surround me so that they could attack from all sides at once, or to get by me and at the boy, but I wasn’t going to let either of those things happen. I took a quick step to the right and kicked the big round head of the first goblin, which flew almost as far as the kickball I kicked as a child, and of course the rest of the goblin went right along with his head.

As a child, kickball was one of my favorite pastimes. We had our own little team and I was almost always the bowler. Sally and Gervil and several other boys made up the outfield. Tuki played first, second, and third base.

“Look out for the other one!” the orphan cried, interrupting my fond memories.

I twisted around to my left and kicked the head of the second goblin, sending it in a lovely arc off into the forest. If my first kick had scored a double, which is to say a trip to second base, then this kick must surely have been a triple. And I would dare Tuki to say that either of those goblin’s heads went out of bounds.

“Look out!” the orphan shouted again.

I turned to give him a dirty look and saw a third goblin who was attempting to use the distraction of his fellows, which is to say their current use as substitute kick balls, to slice my Achilles tendon with a rusty old razor. With a quick jab, I thrust the point of my knife into his head and he dropped to the ground-dead. When I looked back around, the other goblins had wisely run away.

Chapter Eight: Wherein I return to my story of the Queen of Aerithraine.

I put away my knife and then climbed back into the saddle. The orphan had regained his feet and I reached down, took his hand, and lifted him back into his spot behind me. He reached around my waist and held on tight.

“Thank you,” he said.

“All is well,” said I. “A few goblins are no match for a trained warrior.”

“Then how did they manage to prevent Prince Jared from becoming the King of Aerithraine? Did they catch him asleep and murder him?”

“One might have supposed that under ordinary circumstances.” I continued my story. “These times were not ordinary. Goblins are not only small and stupid and smelly; they are disorganized. But every once and so often, there comes along a goblin who is big enough and just smart enough to unite the goblin tribes and lead them on the warpath against the civilized lands of humans.”

“I had always heard that none of the human lands were truly civilized,” said he.

“What an odd and unorphanish thing to say.”

“Um? oh. I’m just discombobulated from the incident with the goblins.”

“Even so,” I agreed. “Well, at the time my story takes place, there was one such goblin king, who came to power by killing and eating his many rivals. And as happens when the goblins become unified in such a way, they experienced a population explosion. The mountains of the Goblineld were teeming with the little blighters. When the mountains could no longer contain them, they swept out across the southern third of the Kingdom of Aerithraine, destroying everything in their path.”

“Frightening,” said the orphan.

“Quite frightening.”

“Still?”

“Still what?”

“Humans are so large and goblins are so small. You vanquished three pairs of

goblins, and did it quite handily too.”

“Thank you.”

“And you don’t seem particularly skilled or particularly bright.”

“What?”

“I just wonder that an entire human kingdom could not put together an army to destroy even a large horde of goblins,” said the orphan. “I would imagine that even a well-trained militia could do the job. I once heard the story of the Calille Lowain who held off five thousand goblins at Greer Drift.”

“I don’t know that story,” said I.

“Perhaps I will tell it to you sometime,” said he. “But what about it? Couldn’t the humans defeat the goblins?”

“There were tens of thousands of them. Hundreds of thousands. Thousands of thousands. But you are right. In other times, such hordes were sent packing, back to their mines and tunnels in the Goblineld. This time though, the goblins had a hidden ally. Far to the east, the Witch King of Thulla-Zor, who is always looking for ways to cause destruction and chaos, saw this as an opportunity. He supplied the goblin king with magic and weapons, and sent trolls and ogres to strengthen his ranks. None of these facts were known to King Justin when he rode forth with the Dragon Knights to meet them.

“King Justin, his three younger sons, and all of the Dragon Knights were slaughtered— to a man. Prince Jared, who had been in the north fighting sea raiders, hurried his forces south, only to meet a similar fate. The goblins were waiting for him. The entire southern third of the kingdom fell— and remained in the goblins’ filthy little hands for almost twenty years. And the Goblin King feasted on the spoils of war, sitting on his throne far below the surface of the mountains, drinking his disgusting goblin wine from a cup made from the skull of King Justin.”

“How horrible,” murmured the orphan.

“Yes indeed,” I continued. “And I think the worse part of the story is what happened to Queen Beatrix.”

“What happened to her?”

“She died. She died of a broken heart. And her unborn child almost died with her.

“Unborn child? It didn’t die?”

“No, the court physician cut the child from the Queen’s belly. It was a tiny baby girl.”

“Queen Elleena!” snapped the orphan.

“She should have been,” said I.

“What do you mean?”

“She should have been Queen the moment she was birthed, but that wasn’t to be. There were too many competing interests at court. Too many nobles wanted the throne for themselves. And in the chaos that followed the fall of the south lands, they might have done it, had it not been for the church. Little Princess Elleena Postuma was whisked off to the temple in Fall City, where she stayed for the next fourteen years, and Pope Bartholomew I became the regent of the kingdom.”

“Did they keep Elleena prisoner in the temple?” wondered the orphan.

“Of course they didn’t,” said I. “Though I will wager she sometimes felt that she was in a prison. She could go anywhere she wanted to as long as she stayed in Fall City and under constant protective guard. In the meantime she was given all the training and education that was necessary for one who would one day rule.”

“It is like prison,” said the orphan.

“Neither you nor I will ever really know the truth of that.”

At that moment, I spied a light in the distance. The story, or at least this chapter of the story over, conversation ceased. I urged Hysteria forward, which is to say I encouraged her onward toward the distant light, which turned out to be a small cabin on the side of the road. Yellow light spilled from its tiny windows onto the snow.

Not having had the best of luck so far that night with regard to welcomes, which is to say that I had been attacked three times already that night, two times of which I have already described for you here, I dismounted and crept around to the side of the cabin to the window and peered inside. Lying on the floor in a pool of blood was a man in common work clothes. The single room of the little cabin had been ransacked. And dancing around, or sitting and singing, or drinking; were more of the little, round-headed blighters, which is to say goblins.

Chapter Nine: Wherein I demonstrate the value of a classical education.

“Do you think they are the same goblins that we saw earlier?” asked the orphan, at my shoulder, peering into the window.

I could only shrug, for in truth one goblin looks much the same as another to me. Though I had relatively close contact with three of the creatures earlier that evening, which is to say having kicked two and poked one in the head with my knife, I can’t say that I had become familiar enough with any of the three to distinguish them from any other of their race. That being said, I was relatively sure that the one I had poked in the head with my knife was not among those now in the little cabin. These goblins were singing or drinking or dancing or doing some combination of the afore-mentioned, all of which are extremely difficult if not impossible to do when one is dead.

“What are you going to do?” wondered the orphan.

“Why do you suppose I should do anything?” I wondered.

“Shouldn’t you avenge the poor man lying on the floor? After all, he is a human being killed by foul goblins, and you are a? I mean we are human beings too.”

“Aye, it is true that we are human beings.”

“And he was killed by goblins.”

“I do hate goblins.”

Hysteria knickered. She hated goblins too, probably because they stand so low to the ground and as I have pointed out before, she dislikes anything too near her feet.

“And I am frozen,” the orphan continued. “I would love to spend the night inside of doors and near a warm fire.”

“Now you make a compelling argument,” said I.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Have you ever heard of Brementown?”

“Uh?no. Why?”

“There is a story told there of a group of musician animals.”

The orphan rolled his eyes. I explained my plan, devised on a variation of the Brementown story. Turning Hysteria so that her rear end was pointed toward the wall of the cabin, I left her with the orphan while I went back to the front and took a position by the door. Pulling out my knife, I placed my fingers in my mouth and whistled, which was the prearranged signal for both my noble steed and the orphan.

At the signal, Hysteria began kicking the wall of the cabin with both hind feet and the orphan commenced to making all manner of strange noises. I was so surprised by the cacophony of sounds, which is to say noises that came out of the youngster’s mouth that I almost forgot my own part of the plan. I am aware that boys are well-versed in the creation of creative noises as well as all kinds of mimicry, having been a boy myself once. But this orphan was a true artist. He belted out the yowls of a wildcat, the braying of a donkey, the barking of a dog, the screech of harpy, and the gurgling growl of a frog-bear. Not to be outdone, Hysteria let loose with the squeal of an angry equine, which is to say a horse.

It was scant seconds before the door burst open and the goblins began pouring out into the snow, their shrieks clearly indicating that they were frightened out of their tiny little minds. The first two who came out were quickly dispatched with my knife. After that I decided that it was too strenuous to keep bending down to kill them, as they are so low to the ground and I had been riding all night long, which under the best of conditions can give one a sore back. Thereafter, I reverted to my now well-practiced maneuver of using their heads as makeshift kick balls, which is to say I kicked them on their kick ball-shaped heads.

In the space of twenty seconds, I managed to get rid of all the goblins, which

turned out to be seven. I can't swear that all of the goblins were dead, as five had been sent in long arcs through the air into the darkness of the woods. They were gone though. Scant moments later, the orphan, Hysteria, and I were inside the cabin. I put Hysteria in the corner furthest from the fireplace and directed the boy to stoke the fire, while I pulled the body of the unfortunate former owner out into the snow next to two of his apparent murderers. Thereafter, I went back inside and bolted the door.

"That was a wonderful plan," said the orphan.

"Indeed it was."

"I'm surprised you thought of it."

"Just one of the benefits of a classical education," said I. "If I did not know the story of the Musicians of Brementown, I would not have known what to do. And as I recall, you looked noticeably unimpressed when I mentioned my knowledge of this particular bit of culture."

"I do admit I thought it a waist of time, um? at the time," admitted he. "I offer you my apologies."

"I suppose I will have to accept them," said I. "What with you being a poor, ignorant orphan."

"Your magnanimity is wonderful to behold," said he. "In any case, I think I would like to hear the story of the Musicians of Brementown."

"Oh no!" cried I. "You still owe me a shiny penny for the story of Queen Elleena of Aerithraine."

"But you didn't finish it."

"Of course I did."

"No. You didn't. When you stopped, she wasn't even Queen yet. She was stuck in the temple in Fall City."

"When she turned fourteen, she returned to the capital in Illustria and was crowned Queen by the Pope, after which she took control and banishing him

back to Fall City.”

“How did she do that?”

“No one knows.”

“Gah!” he cried. “You are the worst storyteller ever!”

“What would a poor, ignorant orphan know about it?”

“I know you’re not getting my penny!”

“Go to sleep,” I ordered him. “You sleep on the rug by the fire. I will take the bed, after I give Hysteria a good rub-down.”

Chapter Ten: Wherein I discover the true nature of my companion.

I never did find out what the man who owned that cabin did for a living. I didn’t examine his body closely enough to see if he was old enough to have retired from somewhere else to settle in the country. I didn’t see if he had any outbuildings where he could have carried on a trade. I don’t know if he was a good man or a bad one. And to tell the truth, I didn’t notice much about him physically. I do know this? he had a very fine bed. It had been nearly three weeks since I had slept in a bed and this one was at least as good as that one had been. Before you ask, the other one was in the second floor of an inn called the Lonesome Hedgehog, where incidentally a nice, plump serving wench with the top two buttons of her blouse undone had brought me a very nice mutton stew. No pie though.

What with all the adventures that had come upon me of late, and what with not having slept on a bed in a fortnight and a half, as you can imagine, it didn’t take me long to fall asleep. I had brushed down my noble steed, which is to say Hysteria. Then I had taken off my boots and wiggled my toes. Then I put my knife under my pillow. When my head touched lightly on the pillow, I was dreaming. I don’t remember exactly what I dreamed about. Only that it had something to do with my cousin Gervil, and that for some reason he was chopping onions. I never found out why he was chopping onions because I was awakened by the sound of the cabin door opening.

I didn’t stir. I kept my eyes squinted so that they looked shut to someone looking

at me, but I could still see. At the same time I slid my hand under my pillow to take hold of my knife. I needn't have worried though, as it was the orphan returning from outside and bolting the door after him. I suppose that he had stepped out to answer nature's call. I started to return to slumber when something about the orphan stopped me.

I continued to watch him as there was something different about him. It took me several moments to realize what it was, but then it hit me. I was seeing my companion for the first time without his cap. Where before his head had been covered by a ratty wool creation, it was now covered by long, golden locks, held down with braided strands around the temples. And on either side of his head was a long slender pointed ear, pierced three or four times by thick silver rings. He was a girl! He was a girl and he was an elf! This was quite a strange development and I didn't know what to do about it, so I did nothing. I simply went back to sleep.

The next morning the orphan was waiting for me when I woke. His long golden hair and his long pointed ears were now carefully tucked under the cap. I suppose at this point in my story, I should probably begin calling the orphan she instead of he. Truth be known, I still think of her sometimes as a boy. It just goes to show that my poor old mother was right. First impressions are important.

"It's about time you woke," said she.

"Did I have some specific reason to rise early?" I wondered. "Do I have an appointment at the apothecary? Is the Queen of Aerithraine, with whom I once had the pleasure of spending a fortnight, waiting to give me an audience?"

"No need for sarcasm," said she. "I merely point out that the sun has been up for some time. I've gone through the larder of the poor human? I mean the poor man who lived here and found some food not spoiled by goblins. We have a jar of crabapples, a jar of pickles, and a few bits of dried meat. There are also bags of coffee, flour, and dried beans that you can take with you."

"Why didn't you whip up a pot of coffee for us?" I asked. "Especially as you are so concerned about the hour. It would have woken me up earlier."

"Um, I don't know how to make coffee."

"Really? Oh well."

We ate our bit of dried meat and crabapples for breakfast and saved the pickles for later. I put them, along with the coffee, flour, and dried beans in my pack, then loaded the pack and the saddle onto Hysteria. And though she and I were both loath to leave the relative warmth of the cabin to return to the snowy outside, we did. The frosty overnight weather had frozen the bodies of human and goblin alike to the ground, so that I would have had to wait until they thawed a bit before I could give them a proper burial, even if I had been so inclined. I wasn't. So, hoisting the orphan back up behind me, which is to say, upon Hysteria's haunches, we started off again down the road.

Chapter Eleven: Wherein we start to get down to the truth of things.

We rode in silence for most of the morning. I don't know precisely what the orphan was thinking, but I was thinking on him, or rather her. I am well aware that one is just as likely to come upon a female orphan as a male one, but the more I thought on it, the more I realized that if my young friend had lied about being a boy, then it was just as likely that she had lied about being an orphan.

It was just about time for elevenses when I spied two snowshoe hares sitting beside the road munching on a few sprigs of green which poked out of the snow.

"Hop down," I told the orphan.

"Why?"

"I want you to get a rock and bean one of those hares," said I. "If you can kill it, we can eat."

"I don't know that I can hit it."

"It can't be more than thirty feet away. Any boy could hit it with a rock from this distance."

"I don't know?"

"Come on boy."

The child slid to the ground and then picked up a likely looking stone from a small pile not too far from her feet and hefting it back, launched it in the general direction of the hares. She didn't have much heft, and with the lob she put on the

rock, if it had hit the hare, it would have done nothing more than make it angry. Of course there was no chance of that, since the course of the missile was off to the right by a good thirty degrees. The hares started and took off over the snow, disappearing among the trees.

I dropped down to the ground and pointed my finger accusingly. With my finger pointed and my back stiff, I cut an intimidating figure. One can often get what one wants simply by being intimidating. I know of a few warriors, warriors of great renown mind you, who in truth had never done much warring at all. They simply struck an intimidating pose when the time was ripe and their reputations were made. Now that I think about it, I quite possibly could have avoided fighting the goblins the previous night, by just striking my intimidating pose, finger out and back straight. I mean of course, the first goblins, the ones on the road, as the second group of goblins, the ones in the cabin, were in quite a rush to get out the door and had I simply stood in an intimidating pose, they quite probably would have run me over.

“What are you doing now?” asked the orphan.

“I am thinking about intimidating poses.”

“Well, you certainly have managed an intimidating pose there.”

“Thank you. I put a lot of work into it.”

“Well it shows.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to have one’s work appreciated.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And don’t change the subject,” said I.

“And just what subject was that?”

“You are a girl.”

“Um, no.”

“Um yes. And not only that, you are an elfish girl.”

“An elven girl.”

“So you admit it.”

“Um, no.”

“Um yes. I saw you without your cap.”

“Oh.”

“Besides,” said I. “You throw like a girl.”

“Well what do you expect?” the girl asked. “I’ve never thrown a rock before.”

“Oh-ho!”

“Oh-ho yourself,” said she. “Alright I’m a girl. That doesn’t change anything. I still need your help to get home.”

“It changes quite a bit,” I said accusingly. “For one thing, you are a liar. You told me that you were a boy. If you lied about that, what else have you lied about?”

“I never actually said I was a boy.”

“You most certainly did. I said ‘I see that you are a sturdy boy, despite your condition?’ and you said ‘Yes, I am a sturdy boy...’”

“Who would have guessed that you had such a perfect memory?” grumbled the child, folding her arms over her chest.

“So,” I said, again striking my intimidating pose. “What else have you lied about? I will wager your name is not really Orphan.”

“I never said my name was Orphan, you bloody great buffoon! I said my name was Galfrid. You just keep calling me orphan.”

“Is your name Galfrid?”

“No.”

“You see? Liar!”

“It wasn’t a lie. It was a disguise.”

“You were disguised as an orphan named Galfrid?”

“Yes.”

“Are you an orphan then?”

“Not really.”

“Liar!”

“I’m more of an orphan than you are,” she said sullenly.

“How can you be more of an orphan than I am?” I asked.

“Why couldn’t I be,” said she. “If anyone could be, I could be.”

“I mean, what makes you more of an orphan than me.”

“My mother died.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I was taken aback. “My condolences on your loss.”

“That’s all right. It happened a long time ago.”

“How long ago?” I wondered.

The girl looked up into the sky as she counted the years in her head.

“Sixty five years ago.”

“Sixty five years! How old are you?”

“Seventy nine.”

“An old woman and only half an orphan,” said I.

“Hold on now,” said she. “The natural life of an elf is close enough to a thousand years as not to matter. I’m only seventy nine. I’m scarce out of puberty.”

“So not-Galfrid, what is your story?”

“I don’t think I want to tell you,” said she. “You won’t believe me anyway. You think I’m a liar, so why bother explaining.”

“I don’t think you are a liar,” I replied. “I know you are one. And now that I think about it, maybe I don’t care to hear your story. Maybe you’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

“Really? What about Eaglethump Boxcrate, friend to those who are need of a friend and a protector to those who are in need of a protector and a guardian to those who are in need of a guardian?”

She had me there. It is well known that Eaglethump? Eaglethorpe Buxton is a friend to the friendless and all those other things. So I had little choice but to help the old lady out.

“Well,” I took a deep breath. “What is your name?”

“Princess Jholeira.”

Chapter Twelve: Wherein I hear the story of a Princess of the Elves.

Not having a hare to cook for our morning meal, and in truth I never really expected there to be one, I didn’t bother building a fire. We shared cold pickles and Hysteria ate the last of her oats. The sun was high in the sky and even though we were eating our meager meal amid large drifts of snow, as long as we stayed in the sun, it was pleasant enough. As you can imagine, my mind was reeling at the possibility that my orphan boy was not only a girl and an elf, but quite possibly a seventy-nine year old half-orphan princess. My mind was so awash in the news that I scarcely paid any attention to the pickles I was eating. It was a real shame, because I enjoy a good pickle. My poor old mother made some of the best pickles ever.”

“What are you doing now?” asked the half-orphan princess.

“I’m attempting to ponder pickles.”

“That figures,” said she.

“But I find myself unable to.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Because of you, my very own little liar.”

“Stop calling me a liar. I didn’t lie. Everything I’ve told you is the truth? except for the part about being a boy and being called Galfrid and being an orphan.”

“And now you claim to be a princess.”

“I am a princess,” she argued. “My father is Jholhard of the wood elves.”

“Come,” I said, wiping the pickle juice off my fingers. “Let’s get going and you can tell me your woeful tale as we ride.”

We remounted my noble steed, which is to say Hysteria, and started off once again down the road. The mood was subdued. At least the mood was subdued between myself and the half-orphan princess. Hysteria seemed quite jovial, and threatened to break into a trot on several occasions. I can only assume that she was happy to have had oats for elevenses. I am sure she didn’t realize that we had no more.

“It is just like in your story of the Queen of Aerithraine when she was trapped in Fall City,” Jholeira said at last.

“What is?”

“Being a princess. It’s like being in jail.”

“You were locked away?”

“Well, not really. I had the run of the entire wood. It’s just that I didn’t realize just how small a world that wood really was until I left.”

“Now we come to the first plot element,” said I. “Why did you leave?”

“I ran away,” she said. “I ran away because my father was going to force me to marry.”

“Well that’s hardly worth running away over,” said I. “I mean, fathers all across

the world are busy arranging marriages for their daughters. What was wrong with the fellow? Wasn't he tall enough? Was he bald? Did he have a wooden eye? It was a wooden eye, wasn't it?"

"He didn't have a wooden eye."

"If he didn't have a wooden eye, then what was wrong with him?" I wondered. "Maybe you are just being too picky."

"There was nothing wrong with him. I just didn't want to marry him. I didn't want to marry anyone."

"That seems a bit obstinate to me," said I.

"Don't berate me about it now," she sulked. "I have paid dearly for running away. I was captured by slavers and taken halfway to Lyria. I only escaped them when they were attacked by bandits. The bandits took me captive and carried me away to their camp in the mountains. I was taken from the bandit camp when it was attacked by trolls. The trolls took me into the woods. Then I was stolen away from the trolls by ogres, who put me in a cage and took me to their horrible city. There things got even worse when I was captured from the ogres by a band of wererats."

"Hold on." I counted them off on my fingers. "Slavers, bandits, trolls, ogres, and wererats? If this were my story, then next would come? harpies."

"Pixies."

"Oh, well, that doesn't sound so bad. Pixies are little."

"Evil pixies."

"Still. Little."

"Evil pixies from hell."

"Ah. But at least you got away from them."

"I managed to escape."

“Because they’re little, right?”

“Um, yes. But then I was captured by pirates.”

“Pirates in the middle of North Lyria? By the Ogre Mountains? Far away from the ocean?”

“They were on holiday.”

“Pirates on holiday?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. And how did you get away from them?” I asked.

“One of the pirates, a woman named Prudence released me. I think she was jealous that the pirate captain might fancy me instead of her.”

“Prudence? Prudence the pirate?”

“That’s right.”

“And you say she was jealous?”

“Yes.”

I ran through the details in my mind. Slavers, bandits, trolls, ogres, and wererats. Then came the pixies, but I would change them to harpies. Finally there was Prudence the pirate. Prudence who was jealous. Possessive! Possessive Prudence the pirate. Or Prudence the possessive pirate. Yes, I quite like the sound of that. Prudence the Possessive Pirate-that had to be a half-crown story if ever I heard one. I could take a title like that, work it into something, take it to every pub and inn in Illustria, and make a fortune. Of course I would send the half-orphan elf girl a percentage. On the other hand, she said she was a princess. Princesses are rich. She probably doesn’t need the paltry amount made from the sale of a story. She might be insulted if I tried to pay her.

“Now I’ve had more than enough,” said she.

“You don’t want any money?”

“No. I’ve had more than enough adventure and I want to go home,” she replied. “Are you carrying on some other conversation in your head about how you are going to take my story to every pub and inn in Illustria, and make a fortune, and not pay me anything for it?”

“Of course not,” I replied. “You want to go home. And besides, I am a firm believer in maintaining all the appropriate copyrights.”

Chapter Thirteen: Wherein I run into an old friend unexpectedly.

Princess Jholeira and I, and of course Hysteria, made our way east, following the road which is called the East Road, which is only appropriate, as it goes east? and it is a road. I had pretty much accepted that the girl thought she was a princess. She was convincing enough as she told me of life growing up among the royalty of the elven wood. I listened to her descriptions, because you can never have too much local color to throw into a story, but I didn’t commit much to memory as far as the events of her life were concerned. There just wasn’t much of a plot there. But to return to the point, generally speaking, if someone thinks they are a princess, I have found that it doesn’t much matter whether anyone else thinks they are or not.

At tea time we stopped and I made a fire, brewing some coffee and whipping up a pan full of biscuits. These were not like biscuits in Aerithraine. There biscuits are crunchy little sweet things-what my poor old father called “cookies” though you bake them instead of cooking them. These were what they call biscuits in Lyria-something in the sort of a soft scone made with flour, salt, and animal lard. If we had only had a bit of honey they would have been quite good, but alas I had no honey. They filled us up though and both Jholeira and I were glad for them. Hysteria didn’t think very much of them though and she was mopey again for the rest of the day.

We traveled until dark was starting to settle. I had just decided that it was time to look for a campsite when my little orphan princess spotted the lights of houses some distance away. We continued and arrived at a thorp, which is to say a hamlet or a small village. It was very small too, having only a single inn and half a dozen farm houses. The inside of the inn was warm and inviting. We were greeted at a large counter just inside by a husky innkeeper with arms like tree trunks and hands like hams. He had thick whiskers on either side of his face and when he smiled he revealed that both front teeth were gone.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

“We would like a room.”

“Two rooms,” said the girl. “And stabling for our horse.”

“Ixnay on the ootay oomsray,” said I. “I don’t have the money to pay for the one. I was hoping I might pay for it with my storytelling?”

“Is that the good-for-nothing no-count Eaglethorpe Buxton I see?” called a voice from the doorway beyond.

While the proprietor squinted at me as if to see if it truly were the good-for-nothing no-count Eaglethorpe Buxton in front of him and not a good-for-something mathematically fluent version, I turned to see my accuser. There in the doorway was my oldest and dearest friend— Ellwood Cyrene. He had a mug of ale in his hand and a smile on his face. He looked quite at home having left his armor and swords off as he relaxed, though I could see the two daggers he kept in his belt, the one he kept up his right sleeve, and the one inside his back collar, as well as his knife in his right boot and the throwing stars in his left.

“That cannot be Ellwood Cyrene,” said I. “walking around defenseless and drunk.”

He stepped forward and we embraced. It was a manly embrace. He held onto me a bit too long, but what of that? He was a bit tipsy no doubt. No one could ever doubt the manliness of Ellwood Cyrene.

“This is for two rooms and stabling,” said Ellwood, tossing the innkeeper a big gold coin. “No doubt Eaglethorpe will want to pay for his supper with storytelling.”

The proprietor’s face lit up. “It has been a long while since we’ve had a storyteller.”

“And it will continue to be a long while,” said Ellwood, punching me in a very manly way on the shoulder. “I said Eaglethorpe wanted to pay for his supper with storytelling. I didn’t say that he could. Come my friend, let me buy you a mug of the muddy liquid that passes for ale in these parts.”

And throwing his arm around my shoulder, in a very manly way, he led me into the common room of the inn. The orphan princess followed. We sat at a rough-hewn table and Ellwood waved for the serving wench. She was attractive, though not as plump as I like, and she didn't have any of the buttons on her blouse undone, and it didn't matter anyway because she had eyes only for Ellwood, who gave her a wink in return.

"Ale for my good friend," he said. "And? when did you get a pet boy?"

"She's a girl and an elf," I whispered to him. "But I want to keep it quiet. You know how much trouble women can cause."

He nodded sagely, and then smiled at the wench. "A glass of milk for this poor pathetic ragamuffin."

Jholeira playfully stuck out her tongue at him and the serving wench let loose with a peel of musical laughter as she went to get our order. Ellwood bought round after round as we sat talking of our service in the Great Goblin War and about our many adventures together. At some point, when neither of us was paying attention, the wench brought us a loaf of bread and a joint of beef and we ate like kings.

We had almost finished our supper, when Ellwood left to answer nature's call. I had gotten up several times by that point, but Ellwood is renowned for his large bladder. As he walked away, my little elf girl leaned over to me.

"Have you ever noticed what a pretty man your friend Ellwood is?"

"Yes. I mean no," I answered. "Absolutely not. How, why, how would I notice something like that?"

Chapter Fourteen: Wherein we spend the evening and night in the inn.

Ellwood had just returned when the husky innkeeper appeared in the common room and made an announcement. His announcement wasn't loud and it needn't have been. The room wasn't that large and there weren't that many people in it. I counted sixteen, ourselves included. There were the three of us, the innkeeper and serving wench, six men and two women who were obviously locals-farmers no doubt, a traveling tinker; a sellsword, which is to say a mercenary, who from the looks of things had not been doing too well; and a darkly cloaked figure in

the corner. Now one might expect a darkly-cloaked figure in the corner to be the cause of potential mischief, but the truth is that I have hardly ever been in an inn or a pub or a taproom or a tavern or a bar or a saloon that didn't have a darkly-cloaked figure in the corner. Most of the time, they do nothing more than mind their own business. It's only those few who end up in stories causing trouble, that the name of darkly-cloaked corner lurkers everywhere becomes tarnished.

"We are privileged to have in our presence today," said the innkeeper, "the world famous storyteller Eaglethorn Beltbuckle."

Ellwood snorted into his recently filled cup. Was it his twelfth or thirteenth refill? I stood up.

"Eaglethorpe Buxton at your service." I casually moved around the room to find the best spot for storytelling, eventually settling on a stool near the fireplace. "And this is the story of the Queen of Aerithraine."

"Oh God! Not her again!" shouted Ellwood. "Don't you have any new material?"

The sellsword at the bar began to get up, whether in defense of the Queen or of my storytelling or just to make for the outhouse I don't know, but a single steely look from Ellwood put him in his seat again. Apparently neither of them had any doubt who was top dog.

"I shall recount the tale of how I sold my sword to get a poor but beautiful farm girl out of prison and then slew a werewolf using only this fork!" I triumphantly pulled the fork from my fork pocket.

Suddenly the darkly-cloaked figure in the corner jumped to his feet. He swept aside his cloak to reveal black armor and a dozen long thin knives on a bandolier across his chest. He began plucking the knives and launching them directly at Ellwood Cyrene, so quickly that seven were in flight at one time before the first met its destination. That destination was not, as had been intended, the torso of my friend, for Ellwood had jumped up at almost the same instant. With a quick flick of his wrist, he deflected the first two knives toward the wooden bar, where they stuck with loud thunks. He ducked to the side of the third and fourth knife, then grabbed the fifth, sixth, and seventh right out of the air and sent them back at the cloaked figure. By this time the assailant had thrown two more knives, but Ellwood easily dodged them. One of them hit the wall just near my head. The

other went into the fireplace causing a cloud of embers to float up into the air like fireflies. And then it was all over, for the three knives that my friend had returned to the would-be assassin had all found their marks— one in the man’s right hand, one in his chest, and one in his throat.

Everything was quiet for one moment, then chaos erupted as the townsfolk and the traveling tinker rushed this way and that to get out of the way of a battle which was already over. In thirty seconds, the three of us and the darkly-cloaked dead body were the only ones left in the room. Even the sellsword had fled.

“That’s better,” said Ellwood. “Everyone likes a werewolf story.”

I recounted my story of the farm girl and the werewolf, at least so far as I had revised it up to that time, to my friend and my half-orphan companion. I’m not going to tell it now, because I want to make some final editing before it sees print. You should always get a true story just right before you print it.

Afterwards we made our way up to our rooms and I have to say that they were quite nice. I would have half a mind to write up a review for a travel company and give that particular inn three stars if only I could remember what the name of the little town was. In any case the rooms were very nice, all the more so since they were free to me. I made sure that my little elf princess was settled in and had the door locked before preparing for bed myself and was just about to lie down when there was a knock at my door.

I pulled the portal open a crack to find Ellwood Cyrene. He leaned in very close to me. I could smell the ale on his breath.

“I have something to tell you,” he said.

“Yes?” I leaned closer only to better hear him.

“I’ll be gone when you wake Eaglethorpe,” said he. “Don’t continue on the East Road. There will be a battle fifteen miles east of here tomorrow. You will have to make a detour.”

“Alright.”

“And Eaglethorpe?”

“Yes?”

“Be careful, won’t you?” He reached up his hand and brushed aside a strand of hair from my forehead. Then he turned and walked down the hallway to his room.

Chapter Fifteen: Wherein we take the road less traveled.

The following morning found both Jholeira and me awake and refreshed. So we made an early start. It was not as early as Ellwood Cyrene who had left at the crack of dawn. However when I went down to the common room that morning, not only did I find that my friend had paid for breakfast for my elf girl and myself, but he had left a package for me as well. Wrapped in a large oiled cloth were several pounds of dried beef, a wheel of yellow cheese, two or three pounds of raisins and a small cloth sack with a half dozen coins in it.

Ellwood Cyrene never seemed to be in need of money, despite the fact that he seldom took payment for his many acts of manly heroism. I have seen a bucket of gold coins gathered together by a town to pay the hero that saved them from the threat of a raging monster, only to have it politely refused by a smiling Ellwood Cyrene. I have seen him pass out coppers to every orphan in a six block radius of the inn in which he was staying. To be fair I have seen him plunder more than one baggage train, and on numerous occasions he has rifled through the pockets of a man he has just stabbed— but who hasn’t done that, when you get right down to it.

I was not able to procure any oats for my poor steed, which is to say Hysteria, but I did get a small bundle of dried hay to supplement the small amount of forage we were likely to find in that country in winter.

We set off on the East Road, but following the advice I had been given, we soon turned off to the north, following a cattle path that wandered over the hills and down into the valley. Our new path veered off from our previous course, but not enough that I thought we would lose our way. In fact at tea time, we stopped among a small copse of trees at the top of a hill. From this point we were able to look down to the south across a vast valley. True to Ellwood’s warning, a great battle was being fought. It was impossible to tell who the two sides were, as their banners at this distance were too difficult to read. All that was certain was that both sides were humans. I took some small pains to make sure that we weren’t

spotted, but considering the distance and the chaos on the battlefield, I judged that there was little chance of it.

After journeying the remainder of the day, we made camp just off the path in a little hollow which had been formed by three massive boulders piled one atop of the other two. I can only imagine that some giant piled them up thus as there was no nearby mountain down which they might have slid to come to rest in such a fortuitous configuration, which is to say a pretty good shape.

“We should reach the edge of Elven Wood tomorrow,” I told my companion.

“Really? I don’t seem to recognize any landmarks.”

“Maybe when we get closer,” I offered. “How long since you’ve been home?”

“Six or seven years I would suppose.”

“That must be tough, being without your family for so long.”

“Yes.” She sighed. “And what about you? You’ve been without your family for quite a while now too.”

“What?”

“How long has it been?”

“How long has what been?”

“How long has it been since your family disappeared?”

“Oh. That. I really can’t say.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking.” Jholeira stood up and began to pace back and forth beside the campfire. “The purple drops on the floor, as I’ve already said, could be from the blueberry pie you were expecting.”

“Fiends!” said I.

“As far as Gervil’s knife being stuck in his bed is concerned, that could be an indicator of foul play or of nothing at all.”

“I see.”

“The floorboards being pried up however tells us something. Whoever the culprit or culprits were, they were looking for something hidden under the floor. Money maybe? Family jewels?”

“The unpublished manuscripts of the world famous Eaglethorpe Buxton,” I offered.

“I suppose that is conceivable,” said she. “What I don’t understand is the onions in the rafters. The only thing I can think of is that they were trying to ward off vampires.”

“Monsters!” said I. “But wait. Isn’t that supposed to be garlic?”

“Maybe they couldn’t find any. Or maybe they didn’t know the difference. Garlic looks a lot like an onion.”

“Oh, my family would know the difference,” said I. “My poor old father was a fine onion farmer. In fact one variety, the Winter Margram onion was named for him. My cousin Gervil wrote an epic poem about onions, though I was never able to memorize more than the first five hundred twelve lines.”

“Is that all?” she wondered.

“Tuki was Onion Queen three years running.”

“So it is possible that your family would have had onions around? Say, hanging from the rafters?”

“Only at harvest time.”

“Was it harvest time?”

“Was what harvest time?”

“Was it harvest time when your family disappeared?”

“It could have been.”

“So there really are no clues at all,” postulated the half-orphan.

“What about the tracks?” I asked. “What about the tracks that ended mysteriously after only fifty feet?”

“You said it was a stormy night. The rain probably washed the tracks away.”

“You’re right,” said I. “The next time it will be morning.”

“What do you mean next time?”

“Um, nothing.”

“You mean the next time your family gets kidnapped or the next time you tell this?”

“Well?”

“Your family never was stolen at all!” She stood up with back straight and finger pointed accusingly. She looked quite intimidating. “You lied!”

“It’s wasn’t a lie,” I explained. “It was a story. Well, it was a first draft.”

Chapter Sixteen: Wherein we travel for two days without my companion uttering a single word.

Jholeira curled up in my blanket next to the fire and went to sleep without another word. I didn’t think this strange, but when she did not deign to speak to me the following morning I began to feel a little put off. I decided that if she wasn’t going to speak to me, then I wouldn’t speak to her either. We packed up and left our campsite in complete silence. By elevenses I was getting rather tired of the quiet. Over a brief meal of raisins and cheese I tried first to coax her and then to trick her into speaking. She would have none of it however and I eventually stopped trying.

The little path that we followed wound down through a series of small valleys, eventually coming to the stream. The trees grew thick on both sides of the stream and indeed on the far side there was a vast expanse of forest that is Elven Wood. The stream itself was no more than twenty feet wide and its broadest expanse and in those places where it widened out thus, it was only a few inches deep. Though the banks were icy, the water was clear and free-flowing. Upon reaching it in late afternoon, we followed it southeast until, finding a narrow spot

where the water deepened to several feet, I stopped to drink and look for fish.

The greatest skill I ever learned, with the single possible exception of storytelling which is more of an art form than a skill, is that of guddling fish. Fish which have swum up the shallow part of a stream, will often take shelter under a rock or a ledge when they come to a deeper and slower moving part of a river. When they do, they become prey for the guddler. He reaches his hand under the ledge, knowing where a fish ought to be, and carefully locates the fish's tail. Then he begins tickling the fish with his finger, tickling its tail, then tickling its belly, and finally tickling right under the gills. Then with a quick grasp, he pulls the fish from the water and tosses it up onto the shore, ready to be cleaned, cooked, and eaten. If the temperature of the water made the fish sluggish, you couldn't tell it by the ones I found, though it didn't do me any good sticking my arm in. I caught two lovely river trout that day, one which I cleaned and cooked over the fire for our supper, and the other which I kept captive by running a string through its gill, and tying one end to a sapling, and tossing the other end, attached to the fish, back in the water. This second fish we ate for breakfast.

It was late the following afternoon before we reached the intersection of the stream with the East Road. By this time I had resolved myself to the fact that my little orphan boy/girl was never going to speak to me again, but as we crossed the small bridge which spanned the juxtaposition of the road and the stream, as bridges are wont to do, she at last broke her silence.

“We should spend the night on this side of the stream.”

“Why?”

“The forest is dangerous, especially at night.”

“I don't care,” said I. “I'm not talking to you.”

“Yes you are,” she replied.

“No. I am not.”

“I was not talking to you, but now I am. But you are definitively talking to me.”

“No, I'm not.”

“Yes you are.”

“I’m not talking to you. I’m just telling you that I’m not talking to you.”

“That means that you are talking to me, because in order to tell a person something you have to talk to them.”

“No you don’t.”

“Now you are just being contrary,” said she.

“No I’m not.”

“Fine,” said she. “I don’t care whether you are talking to me or not?”

“Yes you do.”

“I don’t care whether you are talking to me or not and I don’t care whether you are being contrary or not. In either case we should spend the night on this side of the stream.”

“No we shouldn’t,” said I.

“No?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” I explained.

“Well as long as your reasoning is sound,” said she.

“No it isn’t.”

We spent the night on the west side of the bridge, just at the edge of the trees on that side of the stream. By the time we made camp, it was too late for me to find any fish to guddle, so we ate dried beef and drank coffee for our supper. Jholeira curled up in the only blanket while I snuggled up in my coat and set my head upon a large flat rock to use as a pillow.

“Are you cold?” she asked.

“No.”

“I’m sorry I stopped talking to you. You have been a very great help to me and you didn’t have to and here I am wrapped up in your only blanket while you have nothing but your coat to keep you warm.”

“I have the fire. Besides, it is only fitting that you have the blanket, being an orphan or a girl or a princess or some combination of the three.”

I stayed awake quite late watching the stars and listening to Hysteria complain about her lack of oats. She should have happy, as in that particular spot by the bridge there grew not only an abundance of grass but some early flowering szigimon, which any stable master can tell you is the very best horse feed in the world. Many times she has had to make due with busy grass, which is the least best horse feed in the world-not that it is bad for horses, but it does nothing more than give them something to chew on and doesn’t provide any real nourishment. You would think by now she would know when she had it good.

“What are you doing?” asked a small voice from the other side of the campfire.

“I’m pondering horse feed,” said I.

“Well, go to sleep.” It must have been some kind of elf magic, because no sooner had she said this than my eyes closed, seemingly of their own volition.

Chapter Seventeen: Wherein I become prisoner of the elves.

I must admit that I slept well, notwithstanding the fact that I was using a rock for my pillow, and I had no mattress but the bare ground, and I hadn’t even my own blanket to keep warm. I slept well. I slept well until just before dawn, when suddenly, which is to say all of a sudden and without warning, I felt the weight of several bodies fall upon me. I struggled and threw one or two punches which found their targets, but having been attacked in my sleep and no doubt lulled into a state of drowsiness by elven magic, it was inevitable that I was overpowered. They took me captive, which is to say they tied my hands behind my back, gagged me, and put a sack over my head. Then they hobbled my legs with a piece of rope so that I could take only the most mincing of steps.

I heard some shouting and I thought I recognized Jholiera's voice, but with the bag over my head it was impossible to make out what was being said. Once I thought I heard her demand my release, but I wasn't released. I wasn't sure who had attacked me, but I was relatively sure that it wasn't goblins. Oh to be sure, goblins are thick in those parts. But had goblins come upon a sleeping man, they would have sliced his throat rather than taken him captive.

The point of something sharp jabbed me in the back. I didn't know if it was a dagger or a sword or a pike or a javelin or a sharp stick, but the meaning behind it seemed clear enough to me. I was to go in the direction opposite from the side in which I was being jabbed, which is to say the back of me, so I should go forward. I did, but I didn't go very fast, being hobbled as I was. Despite the fact that it had been my captors who had hobbled me they didn't seem to want to take that into consideration, for they kept jabbing me to hurry me up.

It is hard to judge time when your senses are deprived, which is to say your head is in a sack. But as I was marched along, enough light came in through the weave of the cloth that I could tell when dawn arrived and could more or less make out in which direction the sun was to be found as it move up and across the sky. We didn't stop to break our fast, and we didn't stop for elevenses, and we didn't stop for lunch. When we didn't stop for tea, I tried to protest by planting my feet on the ground and refusing to go on. The only effect that my protest had was an even fiercer jab with a dagger or a sword or a pike or a javelin or a sharp stick right below my left shoulder blade-fierce enough to draw blood. This, as you can imagine, didn't make the walk any more fun at all.

Fortunately it was only a few more hours after that fierce jab when we arrived at our destination. I was jerked and pulled around until they had me right where they wanted me. Then my hood was pulled off, revealing to me three of my abductors. They were warriors, wearing shining armor. Their long golden hair and long pointed ears, as well as their stature, gave evidence to their obvious relation to my little half-orphan friend, who was at that moment nowhere to be found. The warriors removed my gag and hobble but kept my hands tied. Then they left me.

I looked around to find that I was in a small cave that had been turned into a prison with metal bars across its entrance. From the mouth of the cave I could see nothing but trees and forest. Inside the cave there was nothing but a ratty old blanket on the rough stone ground. You may think that it would be impossible to

sleep under the circumstances, and ordinarily I might agree with you. But as I had been awakened in the middle of the night and cruelly marched almost an entire day, I was very tired and very sore and the wound in my back was beginning to sting. I suspected that without being cleaned it might gather an infection, especially in such a place as I now found myself in, full of noxious cave vapors.

When I woke, there was a small bowl of mush sitting just inside the bars. It was mildly humiliating to have to eat like a dog, since my hands were still tied behind my back, but I did it. I have learned on the few occasions that I have found myself behind bars that one should keep up one's strength if possible. So if you are behind bars and you are given food, you should eat it. In the jails of Theen, I was lucky when I got a maggot-filled potato. In the prisons in Aerithraine I have eaten curds and stale bread. Food in Lyrian prisons are a mixed bag, depending upon which city-state you find yourself. And woe be to him who is imprisoned in Thulla-Zor. I was once thrown in a tomb-like cell there and had to hunt for my own food-and you don't want to know what it was. Imagine my surprise when I ate this bowl of mush then to find a delicious mix of unborn grains and dried fruits. So I ate, I sat down against the wall, and I waited to see what would come.

Chapter Eighteen: Wherein I find out what fate the elves intend for me.

It was well into the morning before I was given a clue as to what was going on. Three new elven men arrived outside the bars of my cell. I mean that they were new because I hadn't seen them before, not that they were new because they were newly born. In fact, they were fully grown though their age was indeterminate, all looking quite youthful. One had long grey hair while the other two sported long blond locks. It was the grey-haired elf who spoke to me.

"You are to be tried for the kidnapping of a princess of the elven people," he said.

"This is a big mistake," said I. "I had nothing to do with any kidnapping. Quite the contrary. I was helping her return to her home."

"All the important details will come out in the trial," he replied. "Our only purpose at this moment is to introduce ourselves. I am King Jholhard and I will act as your judge."

“Well, that’s a relief,” I sighed. “I know that I will be treated fairly by Jholiera’s father.”

“This is Iidreiiion, Jholiera’s betrothed, who will act as the prosecutor.”

I didn’t know what to say to this fellow. I looked into his face and didn’t see any obvious malice. Maybe he would simply present the facts as known. I certainly hoped he was dedicated to the truth and not to seeking out a conviction at any cost as is so often the case in human societies.

“And this is Iidreiiior and he will act as your defense counsel.”

“I am very pleased to meet?” I stopped and looked from my defense counselor to the prosecutor, back to my defense counselor, back to the prosecutor, back to the defense counselor, back to the prosecutor. They looked exactly the same. They were twins.

“Um, well when is my trial to begin?” I asked.

“In one hour,” replied the king. “You should take your rest until then.”

I was not going to rest until then. I defy anyone to “rest until then” in a similar situation. Try this with someone you know. Tell them “I’m going to tell you something that will change your life in one hour. Rest until then.” See if they rest. Or tell them “In one hour you will find out if you live or die. Rest until then.” I will wager that they won’t rest. Or tell them “In one hour I’m going to give you a pie. Then don’t give them a pie.” They won’t rest. That may not be exactly the same, but they won’t rest. Watch and see.

“What are you doing now?” asked the king.

“I’m pondering the future.”

“Such as it is,” he said, nodding sagely. Then the three walked away, leaving me to my own thoughts.

An hour later I was marched out of my cell and taken to an open glade within the wood. This space had obviously been used as a ceremonial center for many years. Covered areas had been built for spectators as well as individuals involved in whatever ordinance was being performed. The awnings were made of wood,

but they were covered with many layers of vines, while here and there trees grew up through them. Most of the seats were intricately carved of stone and had been worn very smooth by extended use. I was led to a spot on one side, where Iidreiiior waited. On the other side of the glade, stood his twin.

A few minutes after I arrived, a whole crowd of elves began filing into the open forest area. There must have been about two hundred of them. Though I carefully watched for her, Jholiera was nowhere to be seen. At last King Jholhard appeared and took his place in a stone chair raised only slightly higher than the others.

“What is the charge?” asked the king without any preamble.

“The prisoner is charged with the abduction of a princess of the royal blood,” said Iidreiiion.

“How does he plead?”

“Guilty,” said Iidreiiior.

“What? Wait.”

“After having weighed all the important details,” said the king, placing far too much emphasis on the word important for my liking. “The prisoner is hereby found guilty as charged.”

“What? Wait.”

“Recommended sentence?”

“Death,” said Iidreiiion.

“Agreed,” said Iidreiiior.

“What? Wait. What kind of trial is this?” I demanded accusingly, my back straight, but without my arm being outstretched, as it was still tied to the other arm.

“It is a show trial,” said the king. “It is called a show trial because it is only for show. There is no real justice involved.”

“I know what a show trial is,” said I. “I’ve been in enough of them.”

The two hundred or so elves in attendance watched mutely as I was dragged back to the cell in the cave and left there once again. All in all, it was hardly worth being dragged to the glade in the first place. They could just as easily have told me I was guilty and condemned to death right there. Sitting down, I leaned against the wall of the cave and winced as my back came into contact with the stone. After a few minutes the king appeared outside the bars.

“Why bother with a show trial that lasts three minutes?” I wondered.

“As I said, it is for show,” he said.

“But why? I never kidnapped your daughter. I was helping her come home.”

“Yes I know. It’s her punishment. She needs to learn that she can’t run off. There are consequences. Your trial and your execution tomorrow morning will remind her of that fact.”

“You’re going to execute an innocent man to make a point to your daughter?”

“It’s not as though you were an elf,” he said. “You’re only human.”

Chapter Nineteen: Wherein I make an escape, a plot element that I normally wouldn’t reveal, but you know that I am alive anyway because I am telling you the story.

I was given another bowl of the delicious mush, which I ate, this time with more difficulty because my back really ached when I bent over to eat like a dog. I certainly didn’t sleep though. Oh you can be sure of that. I didn’t sleep. Knowing that you are going on trial in one hour is not nearly the cure for sleepiness that knowing you are to be executed in the morning is.

“Eaglethorpe,” a voice called.

I turned to see Jholiera bathed in the light of the setting sun as it diffused through the trees. She was no longer dressed as a boy. She had on a leather dress cut in an elven style with a leaf motif carved into it. It left her shoulders bare and though her form was slight, there was no longer any question that she was a young woman. She had golden jewelry on her arms and a delicate golden crown

on her head.

“Eaglethorpe, how are you?”

“I’ve a pretty nasty stab wound in my back, and my arms are aching from them being tied behind me. I think I skinned my knee when I was trying to eat from a bowl like a dog, but there’s no way to check. Oh yes, and they are going to kill me in a few hours. Other than that, I’m fine.”

“Come here, close to the bars.”

I did as directed and she reached through the bars and cut the bands that were holding my wrists together. My muscles cried out as blood rushed back into them, and a shooting pain went from my back straight into my heart.

“I think I shall die before they have a chance to kill me,” said I. “Serves them right.”

“Don’t say that. I’m going to get you out of here.”

“How?”

“I’ll be back after midnight. In the meantime, try to get some rest.”

“You have no idea, girl,” said I, as she went off into the trees.

Remarkably I did sleep this time. I must have. I don’t remember falling asleep or even sitting down. But when I was awakened by small pebbles hitting against my face, I found myself sitting against the wall of the cave.

“Ow! Stop it,” said I, as one of the small pebbles hit me in the eye.

“Quiet you,” said Jholiera. “I’m almost ready to rescue you. Get over here and wait by the cell door. You have to be ready at a moment’s notice.”

“Why aren’t you rescuing me now?”

“I don’t have the key yet.”

“You don’t have the key?”

“Calm down. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She did return, but it wasn’t in a few minutes. It was quite a bit later. In fact, by the time she did return, I was beginning to fear that the first rays of predawn light might make escape impossible. But when she arrived, Jholiera did have the key. She quickly opened the cell door, and taking me by the hand, led me through a maze of trees. We hurried around massive trunks and over fallen logs, through curtains of trailing vines, until we came to another small glade. Here was my beautiful steed, which is to say Hysteria.

I can tell you I had a hard time saddling my horse due to my injury. But with the elven princess’s help, the deed was soon done. As I prepared to mount, Jholiera stopped me.

“Thank you Eaglethorpe,” she said, and gave me a tender kiss on the cheek.

“You are coming with me, aren’t you?” I asked. “You can’t live with such a horrible father, or marry such a horrible husband.”

“Don’t worry. My father is not so bad. And Iidreiiion probably won’t want to marry me anyway after he finds out what I had to do to get the key away from his cousin. Besides, I’ve had enough adventuring for now. I just want to stay home and be safe.”

With that she gave me an even tenderer kiss on the cheek. I climbed into my saddle and took off through the woods, just as the early dawn was beginning to break. And I never saw the little elven princess again.

Chapter Twenty: Epilog.

Three years after the events in this tale, I was sitting beside the fireplace in the Singing Siren Tavern in the city of Antriador, having just finished telling the tale of Eaglethorpe Buxton and the Elven Princess, when I heard a voice calling out. “Gah! You are the worst storyteller ever!”

It was Jholiera. She was no longer dressed as an orphan boy. Nor was she clad in her leather elven-style princess dress with a leaf motif carved into it, and lots of gold jewelry. She was dressed as a traveling warrior, with armor carefully tailored to her short and feminine form, and a sword on her back that was nearly as large as she was. Her golden hair, now almost reaching her waist, was styled

into dozens of thin braids, each adorned with beads of bone and ivory. She threw her arms around me and pulled me close in a tight embrace, then released me before continuing.

“You are the worst storyteller ever. None of that was right—the pies, the goblins, the elves. None of it happened that way at all. Only that bit in the Inn with Ellwood Cyrene was remotely true. And I most certainly did not kiss you. Not even once.”

“A little romance makes for a better story,” said I.

“I’m surprised you didn’t have me throw myself at you.”

“I had to keep it proper,” said I. “You were dressed as a boy most of the story.”

“Come here, you great fool,” she said, and taking my face in her small hands, she pulled me down to her eye level and kissed me, this time deeply, on the lips, and with great passion. It was such a shock that for a moment I couldn’t speak.

“What are you doing now?” she asked.

“I am pondering a new ending to the story.”

“You’re not thinking of making up an ending where I show up in a tavern dressed as a warrior and, taking your face in my small hands, I pull you down to eye level and kiss you, this time deeply, on the lips, and with great passion, are you?”

“Of course not,” said I. “Perish the thought.”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wesley Allison (seen here with Cissy the Iguana) lives in Henderson, Nevada with his wife Victoria, daughter Rebecca, and his son John. He has taught English and History at B. Mahlon Brown Junior High School for fourteen years. Eaglethorpe Buxton and the Elven Princess is his sixth novel.

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Mike Smith's life was crap, living all alone, years after his wife had died and his children had grown up and moved away. Then he saw the commercial for the Daffodil. Far more than other robots, the Daffodil could become anything and everything he wanted it to be. Mike's life is about to change.

Transported to the mysterious artificial world of Ecos, Earth man Alexander Ashton struggles to understand the society of his new friends the Amatharians. As he does so, he finds himself falling in love with their princess and being thrust into a millennium-long war with their mortal foes the reptilian Zoasians. Princess of Amathar is a sword-swinging novel of high adventure, in the spirit of Edgar Rice Burroughs, spanning a world filled with fantastic alien civilizations, strange creatures, and bold heroes.