

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Trevy Burgess

The Princess and the Hoodlum

By Trevy Burgess

Proofread by: Ricki Armitage

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The Local Boss

Every neighborhood has its boss

Luke strolled down the alley, patrolling his territory. Off in the distance a woman screamed. Charging ahead, he found the woman surrounded by three half-drunk hoodlums.

“Well little lady, this is your lucky day,” one of the men said in a slurred voice. “Today we shall show you what it means to be a woman.”

“Hey assholes,” Luke challenged as he adjusted his armored gloves. “This is my territory. Leave now before I hurt you.”

“Bruiser, perhaps we should do as he says,” the short man said nervously.

“Don’t be ridiculous Stubby,” Bruiser scoffed. “All three of us can take him easily.”

“Besides, we have swords and he doesn’t,” the third man added.

The three surrounded Luke with raised swords.

“Be careful Luke,” the terrified woman warned. “Those men are dangerous.”

Luke didn’t know the woman but she knew him, since he was the neighborhood boss.

“Don’t worry ma’am,” Luke said as he beckoned the three thugs. “I eat scum like these for breakfast.”

The leader charged and swung his sword. Luke blocked with his left metal arm protector and punched him in the gut with his right armored fist. The man staggered and collapsed with a groan.

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Luke blocked a second sword and gave the man a swift kick with his steel-clad work boots. The man flew across the street.

The third man followed the second before he could react.

“Okay you three, leave your swords and money and leave now before I crack some skulls,” Luke commanded and banged his gauntlets together.

The hoodlums did as instructed and ran away in terror.

Luke turned to the woman and said, “Take this money and give it to the orphanage.”

“Yes Luke,” the woman said gratefully. “Thank you for saving me.”

“If we don’t protect ourselves then no one will,” Luke replied. “The king certainly won’t. He’s doesn’t care. The gods don’t care either.”

“You shouldn’t say such things,” the woman pleaded. “Both the king and the gods care.”

“It’s true and you know it,” Luke said angrily. “The guards are scared of this area and haven’t visited in years. As for the gods, they enjoy watching us worms struggle and fight.”

Luke picked up the swords and covered them with his shirt. It was a crime for the lower classes to carry swords in public. That was why he trained with gauntlets and steel-clad boots. He didn’t want to attract unnecessary attention.

The peasant and worker classes could carry knives in public, but the Untouchable class was forbidden from carrying even knives.

Luke left the warehouse district and headed for the shopping district. There he sold the swords to a local blacksmith.

The Local Boss

Upon exiting, Luke spotted a commotion off in the distance. It was the royal carriage going down the main road, heading towards the royal palace.

People moved to the side and knelt down.

Luke couldn't stand the idea of kneeling to someone who just taxed people and did nothing for them but bring misfortune. He ran back into the blacksmith's shop, thereby avoiding the need to kneel.

The carriage passed by and the sixteen-year-old princess stared out of the carriage window, looking bored. Moments later the carriage and escort were gone and the people returned to daily life.

Luke stared at the retreating princess, wondering what it would be like to live like royalty. It didn't matter. He was and would always be trash in the eyes of society.

Luke headed to base. He had to train his people and then send them on patrol before turning in for the night. The life of a neighborhood boss wasn't easy.

The Rescue(s)

Some are destined to be heroes,
whether they want to or not

Luke got up at the crack of dawn and headed for the warehouse. It was time for him to work and earn a living.

The job was backbreaking labor as he moved tons of produce. He didn't need the money since his gambling and monster hunting covered his living expenses. However, his father had ingrained in him that physical labor was essential in order to become strong. He should know since no one was stronger than his dad.

"Luke, I have a delivery for you to make to Madison's place," Merchant Jason called.

"Okay boss," Luke replied and headed out. The trip to Madison's place was uneventful.

On the way back, a carriage zoomed past Luke. It was a royal carriage and it was out of control. Royal guard followed close behind.

Excessive speed over a poorly maintained road caused the draught pole to break, dethatching the horses from the carriage.

The horseless carriage careened down the hill. It shot past the bend in the road and landed in the middle of the Gravel River, currently engorged by the spring runoff.

Luke ignored the commotion since it was none of his business. Besides, the world would be a better place if even one of the royal family got what they deserved.

In moments Luke arrived at the place of the accident. He turned to gawk. The guards stood on the bank and debated what to do. One guard entered the river and was swept away, along with his horse.

The Rescue(s)

"What damn idiots," Luke muttered to himself, knowing that the guards were too stupid to figure out how to rescue the trapped royal. He was about to leave when the stranded driver caught his eye. He didn't deserve to die, even if the trash within did.

A voice inside Luke's head warned, *Are you sure you want to do this? Remember what they did to your family.*

Another voice asked, *What will happen to that man's wife and children without a breadwinner?*

Luke made up his mind. There was too much suffering in the world and he had the power to do something about it.

Luke stopped at an upstream location, grabbed rope and tied it to a tree. He then wrapped the rope around his waist and slowly eased into the swift flow.

The footing was precarious, as the river rammed Luke with tons of water. Tossed around like a piece of driftwood, Luke slowly approached the carriage.

Upon arriving, Luke said to the driver, "Grab on to me."

"Forget about me," the driver cried. "Please save the princess."

Idiot, Luke thought to himself. Undeserved loyalty got on his nerves.

Luke loosened the rope slightly and looked into the carriage. The terrified princess looked back at him.

"Grab my wrist Princess," Luke instructed and reached in with a balled fist. The princess reached for him. He grabbed her wrist and then pulled.

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Unfortunately, the closer to the door the princess came, the stronger the current pushed back. For a moment Luke thought he was going to rip the princess' arm out of its socket as she screamed in pain.

"Use both hands to hold on," Luke commanded as the carriage threatened to break apart. After a moment's hesitation, Annie did as instructed.

Luke was a strong man, capable of bench-pressing 325 pounds. However, the river was stronger. For a moment Luke considered taking the princess out from the other end but discarded that idea. That was too dangerous.

"Can I help?" the driver asked.

"You can pray," Luke replied and continued his struggle with the river.

Finally Luke won and succeeded in extracting the princess. Luke wrapped rope around the princess and eased them both into the flow. Swimming diagonally, they finally arrived at the bank.

"There are blankets in that wagon. The wagon belongs to Merchant Jason," Luke told the guards. "If you'll excuse me, I have to rescue the driver."

"Your top priority is to the princess," a guard said angrily.

"Never mind him. He's just a piece of trash," a second guard objected.

The first guard looked at the crest embedded in Luke's forehead and nodded. He then carried the shivering princess to Jason's wagon.

The Rescue(s)

"I'm leaving a horse for the driver. It's not for you," the second guard scolded and mounted his horse. Moments later the guards left.

"This piece of trash did what you never could," Luke mumbled angrily under his breath.

Luke sighed, knowing anger was as useless as shouting at a rock. He turned to the river and rescued the driver minutes later.

"I think I'm going to catch a cold," the driver muttered, shivering.

"Take the horse and go," Luke commanded. He headed back to Jason's warehouse to report on what happened.

"You're a hero," Jason beamed. His respect for Luke the Untouchable increased.

Luke nodded and walked away, not wishing to argue. However he did blush at being complimented, something he wasn't used to.

That night Luke dreamed of the princess. She looked so cute and vulnerable, so unlike a princess and almost like a human.



The summer solstice festival was one of Annie's favorite times of the year, filled with parades where she could flaunt her natural beauty to the peasants and enjoy their worship her.

The parties were fun too, since she could show off her bespoke dresses and expensive jewelry to her admirers. Flirting with foreign princes was also fun.

Being a princess was the best thing in the world. She only wished she didn't have to deal with annoying people.

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"Damn it Brenda," Annie swore. "Don't you know anything? That top doesn't go with that dress."

"I'm sorry Highness," the lady-in-waiting apologized.

Annie's ten-year-old sister entered her room. "Are you ready Sis? Everyone is waiting for you."

"Just a second Carol," Annie replied. "I'm almost ready."

"Why are you always fussing about your appearance?" Carol asked. "I don't think it's possible for you to get any prettier than you are now."

"I know," Annie admitted. "However I must try. After all, this is a public service to our country."

Ten minutes later Annie was ready and the two sisters headed out to where their brothers and parents waited.

"It's about time," Annie's father John, king of Candarcar grumbled. "Now we can start the parade."

The Royal Family got on the royal float and the parade began. Annie smiled at the crowd as the band played the national anthem. This was one of the few times when the peasants weren't required to kneel. They could enjoy the full glory of the princess at their leisure.

Carol and thirteen-year-old brother Gus waved excitedly at the crowd and threw coins.

The eldest son, nineteen-year-old Philip, was too busy kissing his girlfriend, Princess Jessica to pay attention to the parade. Jessica hailed from the neighboring country of Wateran and was the youngest daughter of the king.

The Rescue(s)

An hour later the parade ended and Annie and Carol stepped down to mingle with the crowd.

A handsome teenage boy dressed like a prince approached. He wore expensive clothes and well-dressed attendants surrounded him. A decorative hat hid the crest embedded in his forehead.

The boy stopped in front of Annie and bowed. "Good afternoon Princess Annie. I am Prince Andrew of Balzac."

Carol looked at the prince and instantly hated him. She hid behind Annie and peeked around her.

Balzac was a country with no dealings with Candarcarr, so Annie only knew the names of the royal family and a little bit about the country and its history. What was a prince of that country doing here? It didn't matter. He was a cute boy from a rich country.

"Pleased to meet you, Prince Andrew," Annie said with her usual radiant smile.

"Will you join me for a little ride Princess?" Andrew asked.

"I'd be glad to," Annie replied.

"Don't go," Carol begged.

"Sorry little one, but your dad gave me his approval," Andrew replied with a smile. "Why don't you enjoy the celebrations?"

Carol made a grumpy face and crossed her arms.

"Please enter, Princess Annie," Andrew said and held the carriage door open.

Carol got an idea and snuck in the back when no one was looking.

"Aren't you coming?" Annie asked as Andrew closed the carriage door.

"I need to do something first," Andrew said. "You go on ahead and I'll catch up."

"Okay," Annie agreed uncertainly as the carriage pulled away.

After awhile Annie regretted coming. It was taking forever to arrive at the destination and the opportunity to look at pretty new dresses and other things was slipping away.

The carriage entered the warehouse district of the capital city. Now Annie got nervous. Everyone considered the warehouse district to be a dangerous place.

The carriage stopped and a bunch of hoodlums opened the carriage.

"Okay Princess, step out. We are taking you on a little voyage," an ugly man with an eye patch said evilly.

"I'll scream," Annie warned.

"Go ahead Princess," a tall man with a shaved head taunted. "This is a holiday, so everyone is at the festival, hoping to get a glimpse of your beautiful face."

The man turned to his friends and said, "Men, isn't it incredible? We can have our way with a beautiful princess, and no one can stop us. Don't bother struggling. I have an anti-surveillance stone and my power level is higher than yours."

Carol got out without anyone seeing her and ran between the buildings. She searched frantically but found no one.



The Rescue(s)

Luke was on his usual patrol when a little girl bumped into him. Out of breath, the girl cried, "Please mister, I need your help. Bad men are kidnapping my sister."

Luke looked at the little girl in surprise and realized he was looking at Princess Carol. What was the royal brat doing in such a bad neighborhood? It was none of his business. His job was to protect his own people, not some snot-nosed princess. He turned away.

"Please mister, save my sister," the tiny princess begged with tearful eyes.

Luke looked the girl in the eye and Carol stopped being a princess and instead became a helpless child needing help. She would cry if something bad happened to her sister.

Moved by the child's plight, Luke said, "Show me the way Princess."

Carol ran back and Luke followed. Luke expected trouble since everyone was at the festival, and this was the perfect time for bad guys to come out of the woodwork. However, he never expected to rescue princesses.

"Where are your guards?" Luke asked. "If you don't mind, I'll carry you."

The exhausted Carol nodded and Luke picked her up and ran. Following Carol's directions, they arrived at the carriage.

They found the princess. The criminals were fondling Annie and slowly undressing her as she screamed in terror.

"Get away from my sister," Carol shouted as they arrived.

Luke put down the child and charged the attackers. "Hey assholes, this is my territory. Get lost if you know what's good for you."

“Who’s that trash?” someone asked.

“That’s Luke,” another replied. “He’s the neighborhood boss. He’s always interfering with our business.”

The criminals faced Luke with knives and swords. One tried to stab Luke. He blocked the sword with the metal of his gauntlet and punched him in the face. There was a cracking sound as the bad guy’s nose broke and he fell like a sack of bricks.

A kick to the head took down a second man.

“Go get some rope,” Luke instructed. “We need to tie these guys up so the guards can take them away.”

Two thugs charged Luke with swords from opposite sides, hoping to skewer him.

The world slowed down as the enemy advanced. Luke felt his senses expanding, taking on more than they ever did before.

Luke stepped back and grabbed the swords of the advancing thugs. He yanked and the thugs skewered each other. They fell and lay moaning on the ground. Their will to fight was gone.

Three down and six to go. The remaining thugs backed away, weary of how fast Luke took down their comrades.

“What are you waiting for men?” the leader goaded as he held the princess hostage.

Five men charged at once. Still in a heightened state of awareness, Luke deflected a sword with his left hand and dashed to the right. He then gave a karate chop to the back of the head of the outermost man and the man collapsed.

The Rescue(s)

Cracking skulls is easy for someone who tosses twenty-pound bags of flour for a living.

Annie screamed as a sword almost stabbed Luke from behind. That would have been bad. Luke's only armor was his gauntlets and steel-clad boots. With catlike maneuverability Luke dodged the sword. He slammed the man's face with the back of his hand and the man went flying.

The fighting continued for minutes when someone threw a knife at Luke. Luke blocked it easily. More knives were thrown but they too were blocked.

"Let's get out of here," a man screamed and ran.

The leader chucked a knife and killed the fleeing man. "No one leaves until we finish the job," he said sternly.

"Easy for you to say," a terrified man muttered. A moment later he was down for the count.

Luke looked around and discovered that the leader and the princess were gone.

"He's getting away with Sis," Carol screamed.

Sure enough, the man was backing away with the princess as a hostage.

Luke was stuck. How could he defeat his opponent without endangering the princess?

Just then the man stepped on a cat. The cat squealed and the man turned around. The princess got free.

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Seizing the opportunity, Luke took a stone from his pocket and whipped it at the man's head. The man staggered back and swore. Luke charged in and knocked the man out.

Luke turned to the other fallen men and discovered that the little princess had tied them up. *Smart girl*, Luke thought.

Luke examined the boss and found an anti-surveillance stone in an inner pocket. He put the stone back into its satchel and then went to the other men. Only one other had a stone. That wasn't surprising since anti-surveillance stones were restricted.

Governments didn't like just anyone having anti-surveillance stones, since they blocked all magical surveillance and communication.

Luke returned to the stressed-out princess and said, "Princess, the stones have been neutralized. You may call your guards. Here is the stone. I ask that you tell them they only had one stone."

"How come?" Carol asked cheerfully as she tied up the last man.

Luke looked at the little princess. She reminded him of the children at the orphanage. She had the same innocence. "I need this stone to help me protect the peace of this area from bad people. Comfort your sister. I think she needs a hug."

Carol walked up to her sister sitting on a crate. She turned to Luke and asked, "Are you a prince?"

"No dear," Luke said with a laugh. "Thank you for the compliment. I normally take the money of those who cause trouble in the neighborhood and give it to the orphanage. I sell the swords and give the money to the orphanage as well. Please ask the guards to do that since I can't do it under these circumstances."

The Rescue(s)

Annie just nodded. The events of the day stressed her out more than the dunk in the raging river. She couldn't use magic on both occasions, since magic use required a calm mind.

"Can you contact your guards?" Luke asked.

"I'll do it," Carol offered.

The two sisters sat together and talked while Luke guarded the thugs. After almost ten minutes, guards finally arrived.

"My presence is no longer needed. If you'll excuse me," Luke said and ran off.



The guards arrested the men and took them away. The captain approached and bowed. "I'm terribly sorry for not guarding you properly, Highness."

"That nice man asked us to take the bad guys' money and give it to the neighborhood orphanage," Carol said. "He also wants you to sell their weapons and do the same with the money, and here is the anti-surveillance stone."

"As you wish Highness," the officer said.

"Captain, except for this one, they're all alive," a guard announced.

"Their leader killed that one when he tried to run away," Annie explained.

"That's good," the captain said sternly. "Now they can face the – be punished."

"Just who was that man who rescued us?" Annie asked.

"That's the current neighborhood boss," the captain explained as he helped the princesses into the carriage. "He took over from the previous boss almost two years ago. He's not someone you need to worry about Highness."

They drove off. After awhile Annie commented, "That was the same man that saved me before."

"He was?" Carol asked in surprise. "Why didn't you say something?"

"It's not important," Annie replied with a shrug. "He did his job and got paid. Besides, he's an untouchable."

Changing the subject, Annie grumbled, "I can't believe that scum did such perverted things to me. I hope they rot in hell. And look at my pretty dress. It's ruined."

Carol was happy her big sister was back to normal. "You have other dresses for the evening," she reminded her.

"That's true, but I liked this dress," Annie admitted sadly. "Now it has to be burned."

They talked about unimportant things until they entered the palace.

"Annie," Queen Jane of Candarcar screamed and hugged her daughter. "I was so worried about you."

"I'm okay mum," Annie assured. "Carol rescued me by finding someone who could kick their asses."

"Young lady, just how did you get into that situation?" John asked worriedly.

"I met someone claiming to be Prince Andrew of Balzac. He invited me into his carriage and they took me to the docks," Annie explained. "I can't believe the world is filled with such perverted people. I guess that's why they're called commoners," Annie added in disgust. "I hope you punish them."

"Don't worry dear," John assured, frowning. "They will get what they deserve. Carol, how come you were there?"

"I was worried about Sis and so I snuck on," Carol replied.

"Good work Carol," John said with a smile. He then said, "That incident with the carriage when it went into the river wasn't an accident. It was a failed kidnapping attempt. The carriage was sabotaged. Unknowns are targeting you. From now on, I will be increasing security, including a wizard watch."

"What about anti-surveillance stones?" Annie asked.

"Thanks for reminding me," John said. "Major Jensen, make a thorough sweep of the palace and town. I want a zero-tolerance policy on the illegal use of anti-surveillance stones."

"Wait a minute," Annie said hastily. "Can't we have exceptions?"

"Can't we let that nice man have a stone?" Carol asked.

"No dear," John said. "The gods will get angry. We need to take that stone back."

"Please daddy. We promised," Carol pleaded.

"I'm sorry but you have no idea how dangerous those stones are. In the wrong hands, they could threaten our country," John lectured.

"May I go when you retrieve it?" Annie asked, feeling guilty.

The king considered for a moment and then nodded. "Very well, you may go. Major Jenson, please ensure Annie's safety."

"As you wish, Majesty. Please follow me Highness," Jensen said. Annie and Carol followed Jenson out of the throne room.



Annie and her sister approached the orphanage, along with an army for an escort. Finding Luke was a simple matter using location magic. They stopped in front of the building and Annie overheard Luke scolding a little girl.

"Don't act like a princess," Luke scolded. "No one will like you if you do."

"How rude," Annie muttered indignantly as she stepped in. The orphanage kids and caretakers sat at table. Luke stood with his back towards her.

"Remember kids," Luke continued. "The gods don't care. The king doesn't care."

"Princess Annie," a boy pointed.

"She doesn't care either," Luke agreed. "Therefore, the only people we can count on are our family and friends."

"No," the boy corrected. "I mean she's behind you."

Luke spun around and found the princess glaring at him. If looks could kill, he would be rotting in his grave. Burly guards surrounded her.

Luke hastily dropped to the floor.

"Hand over the stone," a big-shot guard commanded.

Luke glared at the princess as he handed over the stone. "Oh thank you, oh gracious princess for reliving me of this burden. You are so trustworthy and gracious."

"You are under arrest for the illegal possession of an anti-surveillance stone," the guard declared, unaware that Luke had insulted the princess.

Annie bristled at the sarcastic reply, but knew he was right. She had agreed to let him have the stone and not tell anyone. "Leave him Major Jensen and let's go," Annie commanded.

"I'm sorry Highness but I have to arrest this man," Jensen argued. "He's a criminal."

"How would you like to transfer to the Braden outpost, along with your younger brother? I hear they are looking for good men," Annie said angrily.

The Braden outpost was at the south end of the Candarc archipelago and was overrun with monsters. Being there was like a prison sentence.

"Yes ma'am," Jensen said hastily and bowed. "Let's go men."

Annie felt Luke's disapproval as she left. She entered the carriage and kicked the opposite bench. "Damn that man," she swore. "How dare he treat me like the bad guy? I'm a princess."

"I think you like him," Carol said with a giggle.

"No I don't," Annie denied. "How could anyone like such an idiot? He has no respect for the gods or royalty." *Or me.*

"But he's so cute," Carol continued.

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“Who cares if he’s cute,” Annie replied. “Can we please talk about something else? How are your studies coming on?”

“They are okay,” Carol replied. “I’m having problems learning the divine language and it’s boring learning about countries I’ll never visit.”

“The divine language is essential for learning magic and you need to know about all countries because you’re a princess,” Annie lectured. “Don’t worry. Leadership training is fun.”

“Maybe for you,” Carol pointed out. “You like bossing people around.”

“I do not,” Annie said angrily.

Carol giggled. It was fun teasing her sister.

They arrived at the palace.

“Come on Carol, we need to dress for the ball,” Annie said.

“Okay Sis,” Carol replied and followed.

At the ball Annie indulged in socializing with the elite of the world. Dealing with cultured people was so much better than dealing with the lower classes.

“Hi Prince Jacob, isn’t it a beautiful day?” Annie greeted a visiting prince. She noted his slight blush and eye movements and knew she had him hooked. It was so easy to manipulate men – most men.

“Yes Princess Annie,” Jacob replied as they headed for the veranda.

Below, the band played as the elite danced and socialized.

The Rescue(s)

There was a disturbance below as guards caught a woman and took her away. Annie's heart skipped a beat. Why were bad guys targeting her? Why would anyone want to harm her?

Trying to take her mind off her troubles, Annie asked, "Shall we dance?" She guided the prince to the dance floor and took the lead.

After the dance, other suitors came and danced with her, as the audience admired her grace.

"Is it true that you've been targeted by an unknown enemy?" Lord Bacon asked.

"Of course not," Annie replied sweetly. "I'm just being pursued by overly-aggressive suitors. After all, no one can resist my charms."

"You're absolutely right Princess," Bacon admitted. "You are the most beautiful princess I ever saw."

"Would you take me on your yacht?" Annie asked sweetly.

The yacht in question had princely opulence and rivaled military attack craft in terms of speed and maneuverability.

"Of course," Bacon eagerly agreed. "As a matter of fact I can give it to you if you marry me."

Annie considered. She was destined to live in the lap of luxury for the rest of her life, and so didn't need his wealth. She needed more and she deserved more than just a baron. Only the handsome prince of a great nation would be good enough for her.

"I'll think about it," Annie offered and batted large blue eyes at him. Using him was fun and going sailing in the clouds would be even more fun.

"Shall we go now?" Bacon asked.

They headed for the palace gates but were blocked by guards. A female guard said, "I'm sorry Highness. His Majesty gave us explicit instructions to prevent you from leaving the palace."

"Tch." Annie clicked her tongue in annoyance. Daddy was such a party-pooper. She turned around and headed back.

She arrived just in time to be scolded by her father. "Dear, you know it's not safe for you. Your life is in danger."

"But you allowed Carol and me to go to the warehouse district," Annie complained.

"You were accompanied by 200 of my elite guard and three wizards," John pointed out. "I can't do that every time you want a trip."

"Yes daddy, I know, but all I do is study and sleep," Annie grumbled. "Why do I have to know so much stuff? It's not as if I'm going to be king."

"Dear," Annie's father said gently. "We must all play the role the gods give us. If something happens to you, not just your mother and I would worry, but the whole country as well. You don't want your baby sister to cry, do you?"

"I know daddy," Annie relented. "Okay dad, I'll stay in."

"That's a good girl," her father said and kissed her on her forehead.



"Damn, my head is going to explode," Annie exclaimed as she stood on her balcony and looked at the twin moons.

The Rescue(s)

She had been cooped up in the royal apartments for weeks and was going crazy. Studying was tedious and helping her dad make boring decisions was even more tedious. Unfortunately her dad had no leads on her assailants.

The only good news was that no kidnapping attempts were made since the summer solstice.

Without warning Annie felt dizzy and the lights went out.

Annie woke to find herself inside a carriage. She was terrified. Why were people after her? She never did anything to anyone. Of course, this wasn't personal. It was political.

"My dad is going to kick your assets when he catches you," Annie threatened.

"No he won't, Princess," Thug #1 denied.

"I really think we should avoid the docks, Bill," Thug #2 suggested. "Luke's grip on the area has expanded, ever since he rescued the princess from drowning."

"Do you really think that piece of trash can hurt us? Need I remind you that we are of the warrior class?" Bill asked.

"Very soon you'll be of the criminal class," Annie threatened. "If you don't end up dead, that is," she added.

"Can I slap her?" Thug #2 asked.

"No, you may not," Bill commanded. "She is not to be harmed."

They entered the docks and stopped near a small fishing boat.

The area was deserted, except for a sole worker loading a cart with sacks of potatoes. There was something about how the worker moved that caught Annie's attention. Despite his bulk, his

movements were graceful and catlike. Where had she seen that before?

“Okay Princess, get aboard,” Bill commanded.

“I suppose they are hunting you now,” Annie taunted. “I wonder what they’ll do to you when they catch you. I hear the Drenchdin mines are lovely this time of the year.”

“Why are you trying to provoke us?” Bill asked.

“I’m not,” Annie insisted. “I’m trying to get you to run away before it’s too late for you.”

“Don’t worry about me Princess,” Bill assured.

“You should be worried,” Annie countered. “Once you go to the mines, you’ll never be with a woman ever again. Then again, with your face, you’re probably still a virgin.”

“You really are a bitch,” Bill accused.

“No, she’s a princess,” the lone worker corrected and knocked Bill’s lights out. “Princess, we really shouldn’t be meeting like this,” Luke said by way of greeting.

Bill’s companions attacked Luke, but they were no match.

“That was incredible,” Luke said in wonder. “My fighting skills seem to have improved.”

“You’re an untouchable,” Annie accused, pointing at Luke’s crest. “Why are you working at the docks?”

Ignoring Annie’s rudeness, Luke replied, “Would you believe I threatened the warehouse owner? I threatened to burn down his warehouse if he didn’t hire me. I also threatened to go after his family if he reported me to the guards.”

“How could you do that?” Annie asked, shocked.

“It was easy. I just put a knife to his throat and described his family in fine detail. It’s surprising how intimidating that can be,” Luke explained as he handed the anti-surveillance stones to Annie. They were now in their protective bags, which nullified their power.

Luke realized Annie wasn’t talking about the mechanics of the act but rather the morality of threatening people above his station. He added patiently, “I’m nothing but a street thug, Princess. That’s what trash does. I’ll leave the moment the guard arrives.”

“But you take care of the people here,” Annie argued.

Luke looked at her curiously. That was an unexpected statement. Not knowing how to respond, he said, “The guards have arrived. See you around.”

Luke hid and waited for the guards to take the princess and the kidnappers away. Moments later Luke went back to his work.



Two days passed.

Luke filled a cart with grain and headed to the warehouse exit. As he stepped out, he found himself surrounded by guards.

“Arrest that man,” the captain commanded.

Luke turned in panic and ran back into the warehouse. A moment later he felt as if he was walking through molasses. His movements became sluggish and eventually he couldn’t move.

“Luke, I arrest you in the name of the king,” the captain said and soldiers tied him up.

Merchant Jason did nothing but stare.

“Okay Luke, get into the carriage,” the captain commanded and the carriage headed out.

Luke’s guts were in knots as they approached the palace. Why was he being arrested? Were they upset that he bad-mouthed the king? Was it because of the anti-surveillance stone?

They arrived at the servant’s quarters and the captain said, “Clean him up and give him something decent to wear. His Majesty wants to meet him.”

“Yes Captain,” a serving girl replied and guided Luke to an inner room.

Now Luke was confused. Why did the king want to see him? It was true that he rescued the princess, but why would the king care? After all, he only did what people expected of him.

The ladies began undressing Luke and he objected, “I can bathe, you know.”

A motherly-looking woman frowned at him and scolded, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Feeling embarrassed, Luke waited while the ladies scrubbed him clean.

Bath complete, they dressed him in clothes one step above that of the servants. Looking presentable, they led him to the captain.

“I can’t believe the king wants to see you,” the captain sneered and led the way. All he could see was the mark on Luke’s head that said, “Trash.”

Luke stared like an idiot at the wall painting and treasures as they walked through several corridors. As they moved forward, the

crests on the foreheads of everyone told him that he was heading to an area only the elite tread.

They entered a private study filled with books and other treasures. Luke stared in wonder at the books. He had never seen so many books in his entire life.

“Do you read?” someone asked.

Luke glanced back and found the king staring at him. His entourage surrounded him. In panic, Luke spun around and dropped to the floor.

“Dismissed,” John instructed his subordinates.

“But Majesty, that’s...,” someone higher than a captain began.

The king cut him off. “Dismissed,” he repeated, this time with the voice of command.

Luke didn’t see anything since he could only see the floor. However he felt the air change as the entourage hastily retreated. Anyone who could do that deserved to be feared. This sort of social power was beyond anything Luke had ever seen. His thin veneer of confidence shattered.

“Do you read?” John asked kindly.

Unable to say anything but the truth, Luke squeaked, “My grandmother taught me.”

“You saved my daughter’s life,” John noted. “Not just once but three times. You never asked for anything for your personal gain and you never got a reward or recognition. I can give you anything in my power that is reasonable. What do you want?”

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Images of mountains of treasure, beautiful girls, and a first-class education came to mind. He could live in the lap of luxury for the rest of his life. He could even help his community in ways not possible before.

In the end Luke remembered his upbringing and the lessons the streets, his family, friends and even his enemies taught him. Unearned power is false power. You must attain heights by your own inner power or you will come crashing down. This was a trap.

“Nothing, Majesty,” Luke replied. “I didn’t rescue your daughter because she was a princess. In fact, I never did anything that I wouldn’t have done for anyone else. I’m just trash and deserve nothing.”

For a moment there was silence and then Luke blurted out, “I’d hate to play poker with you.”

The king laughed. “I like you,” John said and touched Luke’s crest. “You have a keen intellect and a sense of humor that is rather rare in this world. I elevate you to that of warrior. Raise your head and look at me. Go ahead.”

Hesitantly, Luke got up into a sitting position on the floor and looked at the king. John walked to a mirror and said, “Come here please.”

Luke did as instructed and looked into the mirror. On his forehead was the mark of the level-one warrior.

In the hierarchy of society the ruling family was at the top. Following that were the clerics who catered to the wishes of the gods. Anyone from any social class could become a cleric, provided the god in question accepted them.

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Then came the nobles with their own hierarchy. After that were the professional classes.

Included in the professional classes were the warrior class, the merchant class, the scribe class, the wizard class, and the artisan class.

Most members of the warrior class became soldiers and guards.

Below them were the peasant and worker classes and finally the untouchables.

The untouchable class included ex-convicts, those who committed treason and the children of fallen nobles.

Finally were the secret classes. They included members of the thieves' guild and the assassins' guild.

"Luke, you're smart enough to know that my daughter is being targeted by unknown people," John said.

"Yes Majesty," Luke replied absentmindedly. He was too busy staring at his new crest. It gave him a euphoric feeling. He was no longer trash.

However Luke felt a sense of loss. His relationship with his community would never be the same. He could no longer do his old job and would need a new one as a soldier or guard. How would that change him and could he still protect his community? Was the new crest a blessing or a curse?

John smiled and said, "I've completely changed your world, haven't I? You don't know how to handle it, do you?"

"Yes Majesty," Luke agreed.

“Luke, my daughter was kidnapped from her room, despite being protected by the most powerful of spells and without triggering the magic detectors. How can you protect someone under these circumstances?”

A thought popped into Luke’s head. It was an inside job.

Returning to his senses, Luke dropped to the ground and said, “I wouldn’t know about these things, Majesty.” He didn’t want to get involved in the matter and just wanted to return home.

“Luke, you’re a warrior now,” John scolded. “Warriors don’t prostrate before anyone, but kneel on one knee and bow their heads when necessary.”

“Yes Majesty,” Luke said and reluctantly raised to a kneeling position.

“Luke, you’re an intelligent boy,” John said sternly. “The gods chose you for a reason. Don’t disappoint them.”

A chill ran down Luke’s spine as his heart beat a mile a minute. “My mother once told me, ‘Hide pearls among swine.’”

“Wasn’t that ‘Like casting pearls before swine?’” John asked with a smile. “Please follow me.”

Luke followed the king into the royal apartments. Although richly furnished and luxurious, Luke found the place comfortable and relaxing. Now this was how a person should live.

They entered the royal den. The family lounged, seemingly waiting for them. A purebred royal setter walked up to Luke and sniffed him. Satisfied, the dog returned to his dog bed.

“Did he passed the test?” Jane asked.

"Yes dear," John replied.

What test? Luke wondered.

"Thank you for saving my sister," the little princess said and hugged Luke. "Carry me."

Luke looked uneasily at the king and queen. They seemed unbothered by their daughter's behavior.

"Princess Carol, you shouldn't hug complete strangers," Luke scolded. "The world is filled with grownups that hurt children, instead of protecting them."

"Do you speak from personal experience dear?" Jane asked.

"Yes Majesty," Luke replied. "Bad men raped my big sister when she was twelve. I've been trying to make sure that doesn't happen to the other kids in my neighborhood, but it wasn't easy, considering my former status."

"With your current status, you may protect your neighborhood more easily," John assured. "Please sit down."

Luke did as instructed and Carol jumped onto his lap. She looked him in the eyes and asked, "So are you going to marry my sister?"

Despite himself, Luke burst out laughing. He couldn't stop as all his tension spilled out. Everyone in the room laughed as well. The king however wasn't laughing, but instead had a glazed faraway look. What was that about?

Carol placed her hands on her hips and said angrily, "That's not funny."

Luke finally calmed down and said, "I'm sorry Princess, but marrying your sister is impossible. I only obtained my warrior crest

because I saved your sister three times and because your father has given me an imperial order to protect her.

“There’s only one way for a commoner to marry a princess. He needs to become a national hero and obtain the highest award a king can bestow upon a warrior.”

Carol turned to her dad and commanded, “Then declare him a national hero. He did save Sis three times.”

“I’m sorry dear but that’s impossible,” John said. “Only the gods may decide who has earned that honor. They made the rules about marriage and they control destiny.”

“Doesn’t my opinion count?” Annie asked indignantly.

“No,” Carol said firmly.

Luke rubbed Carol’s head, carefully avoiding her tiara. “Thank you for wanting to be my baby sister. If you want, I can become your pretend big brother. I promise to protect your big sister from the bad guys.”

“Annie, we have decided that the best way to protect you is for you to go into hiding until the enemy is found,” John explained.

“Where will I be going?” Annie asked.

The king looked at Luke, expecting an answer.

Luke looked around the room at the king’s most trusted people and saw countless possible traitors. Not sure what else to do, Luke answered, “Your father wants you to stay with me and pretend to be a commoner. As the saying goes, ‘Hide pearls among swine.’”

“No way,” Annie exclaimed in shock.

Carol just giggled.

"That's impossible," Annie argued. "Everyone will recognize me on sight."

"Not if we use a crest obfuscator," John said and opened his hand. "These decals will allow you to hide your social status and take on an equal or lower social status, except cleric."

"Meaning what, Majesty?" Jensen asked.

The king frowned at the major and said, "Luke, tell him."

"As the king said, Princess Annie will be able to take on any social status, except that of a monarch or a cleric. For me, I can pretend to be a member of the professional classes, the worker class, and the untouchable class, in addition to my current class," Luke explained.

"For our purposes, the princess will pretend to be a worker and I'll pretend to be a worker as well." Luke paused and then said, "Wait a minute. People will wonder why I'm a worker now. Damn! I'll need to return to my old social status, so that no one will know anything has changed."

"I don't want to be a peasant," Annie complained. "They have no fashion sense, they smell, and they work."

Luke looked disapprovingly at Annie and chided, "This country was built on the backs of us commoners. Sorry for being poor."

"I think it'll be amusing to see you – I mean good for you to work like a peasant," Philip said with a smirk. "You could afford to lose a few pounds."

Annie threw a pillow at him.

Gus asked, "When will you be back, Sis?" He cuddled with her.

"Tomorrow," Annie said and hugged him back.

"We don't know how long Annie will have to be away Gus," John said.

John placed a decal on Annie's crest and spoke in the divine language. All Luke could understand was his and Annie's names. The decal glowed for a moment and then disappeared. John did the same for Luke.

"To use it, tap your and Annie's crest and mention the social class you want to emulate. Remember, it won't work for classes beyond your station."

"Majesty, we'll need peasant clothes for the Princess," Luke suggested.

"Dear, can you please handle that?" John asked.

"Okay love," Jane replied. "Annie, come let's get some clothes for you."

"Do I have to?" Annie complained. "Can't I just be a commoner who chooses not to wear trashy clothes?"

"No dear," Jane said sternly. "Let's go."

"I guess we can leave in ten minutes," Luke said as Annie reluctantly got up.

Carol giggled and said, "You don't know women. Wait for me," she called and followed her mother and sister.

"I better change back to my old clothes for the trip back," Luke said and got up.

Jensen took Luke to another part of the palace where Luke changed to his regular clothes. The major then took Luke to a

secret room and said, "The palace is filled with secret rooms known only to those most trusted by His Majesty. I trust that you won't betray that trust."

Luke felt like smacking the man but refrained. Instead he said, "Believe what you want. Do whatever you need to. Where's the washroom?"

For almost three hours Luke waited for the princess. That gave him plenty of time to think of the predicament he was in. He hated the royal family, but he also feared them like nothing else. As a result, he couldn't just say 'No'. Also, it was hard to go against a lifetime of indoctrination. When the king commands you to do something, you did it.

Not happy with the situation, Luke planned how best he could carry out the order to protect a bratty princess the entire country loved.

Finally, the royal family arrived. The princess wore peasant clothes, but she walked and looked like a princess.

Luke looked at her and frowned in disapproval.

"Now what's the matter?" Annie said angrily. "Isn't it bad enough that I have to disgrace myself? Now you think I'm ugly."

"That's not the problem," Luke objected.

"And just what is the problem, may I ask?" Annie retorted.

"Your problem is you look too pretty, and you're a little too skinny," Luke commented.

Slenderness was the hallmark of the elite, since they never toiled, and because they had magic to ensure physical beauty. Stockiness, on the other hand was the hallmark of the hardworking peasant.

Annie blushed and asked, "And that is bad why?"

He was about to answer but changed his mind. He didn't want the mother to worry about the real danger. Beautiful women tended to get raped if they weren't careful. Instead he said, "You also have way too much luggage. No peasant can afford to own so much high quality clothes."

Annie rolled her eyes and muttered, "No wonder there's so much discontent in the world."

"Luke is right," John said. "You have to get rid of most of it."

"Remember, peasant clothes are simple, practical, and durable," Luke said and helped repack while Annie grumbled.

"How can I live like that? There's no style to any of these clothes," Annie complained.

"This set of clothes is what you will use when in public," Luke said. "No, that silk dress can't be worn in public, or that woolly thing, except when visiting the shrines of the gods. Actually these are enough clothes to last two months before you consider washing," Luke said.

"And that's why you stink," Annie complained.

"I admit hauling tons of produce can work up a sweat," Luke agreed.

"I don't want to sweat," Annie cried, shocked.

"Where will she sleep? What will she be doing?" Annie's mother asked worriedly.

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Instantly on guard, Luke said, "I have relatives – she will be staying with. They have a small farm outside the city. Majesty, I would like to speak with you in private."

"Of course," John said. "Please follow me."

They returned to the study and only Luke and John entered.

"You may speak," John said.

"Majesty, I have friends in the assassins' guild. I know a great deal about their line of work," Luke began.

"Have you killed before?" John asked.

"Yes Majesty," Luke replied, knowing there was no point lying. "Have you considered that one of your most trusted advisors might be a traitor?"

The king nodded. He opened a safe and took out a stone. "This magic stone will disguise anyone who uses it. My wizards are blocking all magical tracking within twenty miles of the palace. As long as you're not followed, you should be safe." He gave instructions on how to use the stone.

"My assassin friends told me about these things," Luke commented. They also told him how much of a target users made themselves into with them. Your enemy may not recognize you on sight, but by using a detection stone, they could spot any area a disguise stone was in operation. "Okay Majesty, I'm ready to go."

They returned to where the others were and John handed Luke a bag of money. "This is for your expenses."

"Thank you Majesty," Luke said and pocketed the money. "It's time to leave."

"Before you go, here is a speaking stone," John said. "Contact me when necessary." John then explained how to use the stone.

Luke waited while the family said a tearful farewell.

"Remember to listen to what Luke says," Annie's father admonished. "It's for your own protection."

Annie entered the carriage and the family dog tried to follow. "No Rover," Annie said. "Stay with mum."

Luke and the major entered the carriage and they drove down the secret tunnel under the palace.

"Are you sure Annie will be safe in such a dangerous place?" Annie's mother asked fearfully as she watched her baby leave.

"Luke saved Annie three times. If that's not a message from the gods, I don't know what is. Also, Carol accepted him fully. That's saying a lot."

Annie's mother felt slight relief as she said, "You're right. Carol is very selective of whom she likes."



Back on the wagon, Luke tapped Annie's crest and said, "Peasant." Her crest transformed into that of a peasant. He tapped his own crest and said, "Untouchable."

The wagon exited the tunnel far from the palace. The entrance closed the moment they exited.

Luke gave instructions on where to go. Eventually they arrived at their destination. The wagon drove off.

“Okay princess, it’s time to go,” Luke said and turned on the disguise stone. However he didn’t give it to Annie but kept it in his pocket.

They entered the farm and Luke greeted the residents. He had to tell them who he was, because of the stone’s effect. He gave the disguise stone to one of his assassin friends and said, “Can you please keep this disguise stone for me for safe-keeping? I have a job to do that’s dangerous. Make sure it stays on.”

“Of course Luke,” the women said with a smile.

“Thanks Susan, I owe you one,” Luke said and handed the king’s money to her.

Susan kissed Luke sensually on the lips and whispered, “I would ask you to stay and play a bit, but you already have a playmate.”

Annie’s face turned red but she said nothing.

“See you later,” Luke said and headed out the back door with Annie in tow.

“Aren’t we staying here?” Annie asked.

“No,” Luke replied. “That was just to throw your enemies off the trail. Don’t worry about Susan. She can take care of herself. She’s a professional.”

They headed for the warehouse district. Ten minutes into the walk, Annie complained, “How much longer? I’m tired.”

“We still have several miles to travel,” Luke replied. “Riding by horse is a luxury here.”

Almost an hour and a great deal of whining later, they arrived at an orphanage at the outskirts of the warehouse district.

"Welcome to your new home Princess – I mean Annie," Luke said.

A thought entered Luke's head. Maybe he should have marked Annie as an untouchable. No one ever talked about them and society tried to pretend they didn't exist. Luke touched Annie's crest and said, "Untouchable." The crest changed.

A quick tour of the grounds found the house mother. The house mother was a plump woman with a gentle face. Her crest indicated that she was a cleric for the god Kindschutz, the child protector god.

"Mother Gertrude, I need to ask you a favor," Luke said.

"Of course Luke, anything for you," Gertrude assured with a smile.

"This is Princess – I mean, this is Annie," Luke began. "Because of various circumstances, she needs a place to stay."

"Of course dear," Gertrude said. "I'll be glad to let her stay here. Of course she will have to work."

"Unfortunately she has no practical skills," Luke confessed.

"What do you mean, I have no practical skills?" Annie said angrily. "Who do you think you're talking to?"

"Someone who's as useless as a princess," Luke replied a-matter-of-factly.

"How dare you say that princesses are useless," Annie exclaimed angrily. "Don't you have any respect for royalty?"

"None," Luke replied. "Mother Gertrude, Annie does have one skill you might find useful. She can teach the children reading, writing and other administrative skills useful to merchants who want to

hire. For everything else, you'll need to teach her. She only needs room and board."

"Those are useful skills," Gertrude said and Annie beamed in satisfaction.

"Thank you Mother Gertrude," Luke smiled. "Where should I put Annie's belongings?"

"That's a lot of clothes. Please follow me," Gertrude said and they followed her to a room with several beds. "That will be your bed. You can store your belongings in that cupboard."

Luke put Annie's stuff on the bed.

"Come, you can help with the cooking," Gertrude said.

"Mother Gertrude, Annie can't cook or clean or do anything normal women can do," Luke warned. "You'll need to teach her. I hope you don't mind."

"Don't worry dear," Gertrude replied. "I'll whip her into shape in no time."

Luke hugged the woman and said, "Thanks Mother Gertrude, you're the best." He let go and added, "Do you have a list of chores you want me to do?"

"Yes dear," Gertrude replied. "The roof is leaking and the fence in the back needs to be fixed. It got damaged by wild animals or something last night."

"I'll work on the roof first, and then train the children," Luke said. "Tomorrow morning I'll work on the fence with the boys. Well princess, have fun."

Luke went outside and climbed to the roof. The cause of the leak was quickly found. A storm had knocked down a branch and damaged the roof. It was an easy fix, and so he didn't need to call in additional workers.

While working, Luke wondered how he got tangled up with royalty. He had hoped to spend the rest of his life not having to deal with them or even see them, except at a distance. No doubt this was divine punishment for scorning the gods.

On the bright side, he was no longer an untouchable. That would make life easier for him, when his babysitting job was over.

Roof repaired, Luke returned indoors and called the children together. It was time for his usual training session.

While training, Annie entered and asked in surprise, "You're teaching the girls to fight? Why do you use so much profanity?"

"It's a harsh world, especially for women," Luke explained. "They need to protect themselves from bad people. Also, language is a weapon that these kids need to protect themselves against."

"How can a woman take on a big man like you?" Annie asked in surprise.

"That's easy," Luke replied. "Men don't expect women to fight. You can kick a man in the nuts, twist his ears, or poke his eyes. Then there are everyday tools you can use to defend yourself. The object isn't to beat up the guy, but to get away long enough to get help from the neighborhood patrol or the guards."

"What's the neighborhood patrol?" Annie asked.

"Me and my people," Luke replied. "We are trying to expand the area, but I'm having trouble finding good lieutenants to help us."

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"I'm going to attack you and do perverted things to you. You try to defend yourself and escape."

Luke grabbed Annie by the arm and said, "I'm doing perverted things to you. What will you do?"

"I'll scream, 'Guards'," Annie replied.

"That's good," Luke nodded. "Unfortunately, we're here. Guards have been known to stay away from this area."

Luke hugged Annie close to him and said, "Now what?"

The kids offered advice. "Knee him in the nuts." "Bite him." "Step on his foot."

"Do as they say," Luke said. "As you can see, I'm well padded, so I won't get hurt, unless you poke me in the eyes. The greatest protection is to always be in a group, and at night, stay away from dark places."

Annie kned him and Luke let go, pretending to be hurt. Doubled over, he spewed forth profanity aimed at her.

"Run," the children screamed.

Annie hesitated a moment and then retreated. Luke's foul language and harsh tone of voice shocked her.

"That's good Annie but you need practice," Luke complimented. "Let's try it again."

Luke advanced on Annie. A moment later he was on the floor with Annie's elbow on his neck. "Holy crap," he exclaimed. "Where did you learn that? I've never seen that before."

Annie smiled at Luke in triumph and said, "I guess I'm not as useless as you think I am."

Luke only said, "Can you please teach me?"

"Okay kids, wash up," Gertrude called. "It's time to eat."

Luke put his protective clothes away and washed up. He then went back and sat with the children and staff for dinner. Annie sat next to him.

The house mother led the prayer to the god of children, patron of the orphanage.

As usual, the table was noisy and kids grabbed whatever they wanted. "Can you please pass...can you please pass...can you please pass?" Annie began but no one listened.

"You need to grab what you need before it's gone," Luke advised as he stuffed his face.

Annie looked at his plate and discovered it was full. When did he do that?

"Luke is right," Gertrude agreed. "You need to grab."

"Never mind," Luke said. "Today I'll grab for her."

"That's too much food," Annie complained. "I'll get fat."

"What's wrong with being fat? You're way too skinny, like a princess. Don't worry dear, you'll burn it off tomorrow," Gertrude assured. "Today I went easy on you, but tomorrow the real thing comes."

"That was a delicious meal Mother Gertrude," Luke said.

"Will you tell us a story Luke?" a six-year-old girl asked. The other kids asked as well.

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“Okay kids,” Luke promised. “I’ll be back before bedtime. Now I have a meeting with the neighborhood patrol.”

Annie watched as Luke bowed to everyone and left. She then turned to the house mother and asked, “I’ve never met anyone like Luke. Can you tell me about him?”

“About three years ago he showed up,” Gertrude began. “Like all untouchables, he was shunned. He then joined the local gang named the Kalians and did things all gang members do. About two years ago he took over as neighborhood boss.

“Then Merchant Jason gave him a job and that surprised everyone. No self-respecting merchant would do that.

“After that he began helping out those in need without anyone asking. Under his command the gang became the neighborhood patrol. Through his hard work the neighborhood has become much safer than anyone could believe possible.”

“How come no one heard of him?” Annie asked. “My father always said to stay away from here because it’s too dangerous.”

“That’s because the changes have been recent,” Gertrude confided. “Also, as you know, no one talks about the untouchables.”

“Have you ever asked about his past?” Annie asked. “Who is he? Where did he come from?”

“No dear,” Gertrude said gently. “I’m sure he has his reasons and I think we should respect them. In the same way we will not enquire about you or your past.”

“Why does he hate royalty?” Annie asked. “Was he part of the last uprising?”

"That's impossible dear," Gertrude denied. "He wasn't born when that happened. Of course his parents could have been part of it.

"As you know, nine years ago there was a big raid when the king personally went and saw to it that all the ringleaders and their families were killed.

"I bet it would traumatize anyone, especially an eight-year-old boy, to see their entire family getting slaughtered while the king stood and watched..."

Gertrude stopped speaking as Annie's face went white in horror at the news.

"Oh dear I shouldn't have said that," Gertrude said worriedly.

"What do you mean he slaughtered everyone?" Annie asked in a shaken voice.

"Are you sure you want to know?" Gertrude asked gently.

Annie nodded.

"That's precisely what happened," Gertrude said with a sigh. "Rumor has it that the former king had a vendetta against the ringleaders for killing his wife."

Annie knew about how her grandmother died. She just didn't know what her grandfather did after that.

"After years of searching, the final rebels were discovered," Gertrude continued. To prevent future revolts and get revenge for his wife, the previous king personally saw to it that everyone was killed."

Images of squirting blood and people screaming filled Annie's head. She saw herself huddled in terror in a corner as her sister

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and two brothers were cut down. The pain in Annie's heart overwhelmed her and she fainted.

Annie woke up in bed. The worried house mother sat beside her.

"Are you okay dear?" Gertrude asked as she held Annie's hand.

Annie nodded and said, "I didn't know that was the kind of man my gra...King Gloman was." She always believed her grandfather was a good person and now she knew the truth. Now she understood why Luke hated the royal family and she couldn't blame him.

"Will you be okay by yourself?" Gertrude asked worriedly. "There is work I must do."

Annie nodded and Gertrude left.

In time Luke returned and entered the room. "Are you okay?" he enquired.

"Why did you save me if you hated the royal family?" Annie asked.

"What brought this about?" Luke asked. "Aren't you a princess? Don't you expect the world to bow at your command?" Luke didn't mean to be sarcastic, but it came out.

"Please, I'm being serious," Annie begged.

"Do you really want to know the truth?" Luke asked with a raised eyebrow.

Annie hesitated a moment and then nodded.

"Very well," Luke sighed.

"The time at the river I wasn't rescuing you. I was rescuing the driver. I couldn't allow his family to lose their breadwinner. I made

a vow to myself that I would do everything in my power to make sure no child would ever cry, if I could help it. You just got lucky.

“The second time at the docks, I couldn’t say no to a crying child begging me to protect her big sister.

“The third time – Years ago I decided to protect everyone needing help in my territory. I had to save you since you were standing in front of me and because I didn’t want little Carol to cry. And yes, I did consider letting them take you.”

“What about now?” Annie asked.

“When the guards came for me, I tried to run,” Luke explained. “They used a spell stone on me and easily captured me. The king then asked me some weird questions which I was compelled to answer. He was so powerful that I couldn’t resist his will.

“He then changed my crest and took me to you. There your baby sister used her sisterly charms to get me to promise to protect you. That Carol is quite the manipulator.

“There you have it. I’m doing it because the king can hunt me down anywhere I go and because I don’t want to make your baby sister cry. Protecting you is my only course of action.

“Now let’s go. I promised the kids I would tell them a story.”

Luke walked out of the room and Annie followed after a few moments.

Stepping out of the room, Annie found Luke surrounded by the children. A little girl sat on his lap.

Luke told the story of a man who travelled from moon to moon, the Labyrinth of Desolation, and the forest of no return, searching for his lost love, eventually finding her in a doll he always carried.

Tonight he told of one of the adventures the man undertook on the moon Libra.

After the kids went to bed, Annie asked, "Where did you learn that story?"

"I made it up, just like my mother did when I was a child," Luke said. "She thought me how to tell stories."

"Just who are you Luke?" Annie asked.

"I'm just a nobody princess," Luke declared. "You better go to sleep. Tomorrow is going to be challenging for you."

"Where are you sleeping?" Annie asked.

"In the storage shed down the hall," Luke pointed. "There is spare bedding there for me to use. Goodnight princess."

Annie watched Luke enter the indicated room. Turning around, she headed for bed. This was going to be the first night she ever spent away from palace guards and wizards who always protected her. She suddenly felt alone in a hostile world.

Lying in bed Annie wondered about her safety. How could an unknown street thug protect her when the best wizards and soldiers couldn't? Why did her father entrust her protection to him? Why did he trust that man so much?

Second, why was Carol so affectionate towards Luke, a complete stranger?

Annie thought of her Grandfather. How could she ever be with someone as horrible as him? Unable to sleep, Annie pondered the future.

A Peasant's Life

In this world, there is one universal law.

You need to be strong to protect what is important to you.

Luke woke with a feeling of something soft pressed against him. He opened his eyes and discovered Annie's sleeping form.

Luke watched as Annie got groggily up and discovered that she was only wearing a low-cut, transparent nightdress and panties. He could see everything. He felt a nosebleed¹ as he stared at her perfect body.

Finally fully awake, Annie turned and stared in surprise at Luke. She then looked down at herself. A moment later she freaked out.

"You damn pervert," she screamed and rammed her elbow into his gut with her entire weight. A moment later she ran out of the room.

"Damn princess," Luke swore angrily as he rubbed his sore stomach. Her accusation that he was a pervert hurt his feelings. *How dare she call me a pervert when she was the one who entered my room? I'm the one doing you the favor by protecting you.*

Luke quickly dressed and left. The first stop was a nearby restaurant. He didn't want to see *that* face right now. Still angry, Luke headed for the warehouse. There he attempted to work off his anger by moving produce. The work was over before he realized.

Having finished both yesterday's and today's work, Luke went on his patrol. Unfortunately, he found no one to beat up.

¹ In Japanese anime, a nosebleed is symbolic of when a guy is thinking perverted thoughts.

A Peasant's Life

Luke wandered around, wondering why he was so mad at the princess. She was just a stupid princess and this was just a babysitting job. Eventually she would leave and his life would return to normal.

Emotions finally under control, Luke returned to the orphanage.

Upon arriving, Luke found the princess in the orphanage's two-acre farm, getting scolded by Gertrude. She looked stressed out. No doubt this was her first time doing manual labor, or being scolded. Luke felt sorry for her. His grandmother told him how difficult it was for aristocrats when they fell from grace. Even though this was temporary for Annie, it was still painful.

Anger quenched, Luke repaired the fence with the help of the children and worked on some other projects on a list Gertrude always had for him.

Evening came and Luke ate out. It was time for his usual visit to the casino.

Luke headed out. After running for almost seven miles, Luke approached Lake Stevenson.

The running was no big deal. It was common for the Untouchable class and the poor to run wherever they needed to go. The poor couldn't afford horses and the untouchables couldn't use them without permission. As a result, Luke had been running since he was a child.

Lake Stevenson was over a mile in diameter and had an island in the center. A criminal organization, the Black Ravens, ran a casino there. The government tried multiple times to shut down the operation, but to no avail.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Following the pattern his uncle thought him, Luke stripped naked and put his clothes away. He then jumped into the lake and swam to the island. Weekly bath finished, Luke pulled out a set of expensive clothes he bought the previous year.

Luke adjusted his clothes, placed a mask on his face, and approached the bouncer.

The bouncer looked at Luke and stuck his hand out. He paid the entrance fee and stepped into a hall filled with mask-wearing guests.

In the casino, anonymity was essential, since the patrons ranged from nobles to untouchables. The only requirement for being here was gambling money.

Luke stepped in and looked around. He recognized people in the room by how they moved and how they spoke. It was true that magical camouflage prevented visual recognition and magical snooping. That didn't prevent the power of observation from operating, something most people didn't understand.

Luke remembered the first time his uncle took him here. It was the day of his sixth birthday and his mother was furious when she found out. That didn't stop him from gambling.

Gambling held an excitement that went beyond winning and losing. In gambling, you are competing with others on a level playing field, something impossible in real life.

It was time to play. Luke stepped up to a poker table and put down chips.

In poker, the idea is to read your opponent and tell if they have a good hand or a bad hand. The masks prevented people from reading facial expressions. That also made things easier.

Fooled into a false sense of security, people tended to let their guards down. Looking carefully, Luke spotted a slight slouch, indicating a bad hand. Another player's heart rate increased. At the beginning of the game, that meant a good hand, since betting wasn't finalized.

Luke glanced at his hand and realized that he had lousy cards. He imagined Annie's naked body and immediately his heart rate rose. Acting with confidence, Luke made his bet.

Time passed and he won the round, despite having a lousy initial hand. After playing several more games, Luke reached his winning quota and headed back to the orphanage.

At the orphanage, Annie greeted Luke with a worried look. "Where have you been?" she demanded.

"I thought Mother Gertrude would have told you. I went to work and then went gambling at Black Wings Casino," Luke said and handed Gertrude a bag of money.

"Thanks dear," Gertrude said. "I'll leave you two alone."

Annie was shocked. "How could you go to such a bad place? Do you have any idea how many bad people are there?"

Luke took a breath and spoke patiently, like he would to a child. "In this world there is one universal law. You need to be strong to protect what's important to you. I believe suffering exists in this world *precisely* because people are weak. This is what I teach the children and the people of our neighborhood. This is what I will try to teach you."

"I am strong," Annie said defiantly.

"Then why didn't you escape from those men, even though you were taught how to fight?" Luke asked with a sideways glance.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Annie didn't have an answer to that.

"Starting tomorrow, I'm going to turn you into an ass-kicking machine," Luke said firmly. He sat down on a couch and said, "Oh man I'm pooped."

Annie sat with Luke and stared at the fireplace. She was both physically and emotionally drained.

After five minutes, Annie whimpered, "You think I'm useless, don't you, just like a princess? Mother Gertrude thinks that. She's always shouting at me and telling me I'm doing wrong."

"She cares for you," Luke assured. "She's trying to do what I'm trying to do, and that's to make you strong. I'm certain she has guessed your true identity. She'll protect you since you're still a child."

"If I'm a child, then so are you," Annie argued.

"I suppose so," Luke acknowledged. "However in four months I'll turn eighteen."

"And in twelve months I'll turn eighteen," Annie responded.

"That's right, your birthday is on July 23, isn't it? That's four days from now," Luke admitted. Everyone knew that since it was the talk of the town. "I wonder how – your dad will handle that. You may not be able to celebrate with them."

"I know," Annie said sadly. "I hate those stupid people. I wish they would just go away."

Not knowing how to comfort her, Luke just stared into the fire. "Your dad has all the resources of a great country at his command. He will find the troublemakers and then you can celebrate a

belated birthday with your family. It's time to go to bed. Tomorrow is going to be even more tiring than today."

Annie nodded but didn't move. Luke got up and went to his room.



Luke woke to find a warm body pressed against him. His hand was holding something soft and pleasant.

"Stop fondling my ass you damn pervert," Annie screamed and slapped Luke's face. A moment later she was out the door.

"Damn princess," Luke grumbled as he got up.

Luke entered the main room. The house mother saw the slap mark on his face and asked, "What happened to your face?"

"Annie entered my bed last night, and then slapped me for being a pervert," Luke replied angrily. "Tonight I'm going to sleep in the barn."

Luke went to breakfast and found Annie there. She acted as if nothing happened and greeted him with a friendly, "Good morning."

Feeling annoyed at her behavior, Luke finished eating and headed out.

While working, Susan visited Luke. She took him to a private area and whispered, "Luke, some people visited me looking for Princess Annie."

"Sorry for the trouble," Luke apologized. "As you have guessed, unknown people have been targeting the princess. The king asked me to protect her since I have already rescued her three times."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Susan nodded and said, "A trusted person is involved. You did right by coming to me. I'll disguise myself and act as a decoy."

"Thanks Susan, I owe you," Luke said.

"Let me have your virginity and I'll call it even," Susan purred and fondled him. "I'd love to play with your huge sword."

"You know what I think about unwanted pregnancies," Luke scolded. He removed Susan's hand from his junk, but immediately regretted his decision. The girl was hot.

"Party pooper," Susan pouted and kissed Luke on the nose. A moment later she was gone.

That evening Luke got a visit from a dozen burly men. "Okay Luke, where did you hide her?"

"Hide who?" Luke asked.

"Don't play dumb," the leader snarled. "Where's the princess?"

Luke adjusted the gauntlets he never went anywhere without and asked, "Why do you want to beat up poor defenseless me? I don't have any money."

"Why don't we use magic to subdue him?" a man with a scar across his face asked.

"That's impossible," the leader scolded. "The royal wizards are on the lookout for any unusual use of magic. They'll be here in seconds if we did that. We need to subdue him using force and then force him to tell us where the princess is."

"Why can't we use a truth stone on him?" a man with bloodshot eyes asked.

"That's impossible," the leader repeated. "Despite his crest, he is of the warrior class. The stones won't work on a warrior, when it concerns the contract between a warrior and his master. Mars, the patron god of warriors will not allow it. No, we need to extract the information the old-fashion way."

The leader's comment startled Luke. He never expected that one of the gods would protect him. It also proved that security was compromised. No one should have known he was of the warrior class.

Banter over; the criminals attacked Luke with swords and knives. Backing up to a wall, Luke fought as best he could, with all the street-fighting techniques he knew. "Don't you feel ashamed of yourselves, ganging up on an untrained vagrant? Where's the honor in that?"

"Don't listen to him men," the leader warned. "That man is dangerous."

A sword cut Luke's cheek as it grazed his face. Remembering the move Annie made on him, Luke ducked down and swept his foot. He followed that with a roundhouse kick that slammed the man into his buddies. Luke continued his verbal assault.

There was a brief commotion and Luke took advantage of it. He took out several stones from his pocket and whipped them at the faces of the attackers. Following that were several karate-chops to the head. Two attackers went down for the count.

The others retreated to a safe distance.

"Don't you think attacking ten to one is a little bit cowardly?" Luke asked. That comment caught some of them off guard. He used that break to whip stones at the thugs. Some weren't stones. A

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cayenne pepper bomb hit a thug in his eyes, causing him to scream and retreat.

"Fighting like that is unbecoming of a warrior, don't you think?" the leader asked.

"That's not true," Luke denied. "I am a street fighter and everything goes in street fights."

Luke had mirrors embedded in the base of his gloves. He used that to blind one man with the sun. He then stabbed him with another thug's sword when the blinded man's guard was down.

"Here I am with no formal training at all, being attacked ten-to-one by elite warriors. I'm sure your masters are crying," Luke mourned.

"Don't listen to him men. He has professional training," the leader warned. He then turned to Luke and said, "Luke, you're a strong warrior. Why don't you join us? Our master will take good care of you."

Luke was about to say he didn't need a master, but changed his mind. If they discovered that the king wasn't his master, they would use a truth stone on him and Mars wouldn't shield him.

"Thanks but no thanks," Luke replied. "Any warrior who changes allegiance so easily is just trash."

"That's too bad," the leader said. A moment later the group attacked again.

Gauging the movements of his enemies, Luke threw dirt in his opponents' faces and followed that with a roundhouse kick to the temple of one man. Next was a punch to the jaw of another man.

Luke's stomach exploded with pain as a sword ran him through. Fighting panic, Luke moved forward and cracked the man's head with his fist.

With no time to remove the sword, Luke faced the remaining five men. Thankfully the leader wasn't fighting. Instead he just barked orders. "What's the matter with you people? He only became a warrior two days ago. He doesn't even have a sword and he's badly wounded. Take him down."

Luke blinded his next opponent with thrown sand, followed with karate chops. A carefully applied blow to the side of the head can knock anyone out, especially if you're hit with a chunk of metal.

Finally only the leader remained.

The leader looked at his fallen comrades with disgust and said, "You fought well. I'll give you this victory. We'll meet again. By the way, my name is Brad." A moment later he was gone.

Feeling queasy from blood loss, Luke removed the sword protruding from his stomach.

'Please gods, let no one have stones', Luke prayed and touched his speaking stone to his forehead.

'Majesty,' Luke said in his head.

Thankfully it worked and John replied, *'Yes Luke. What's the problem?'*

'A group of men attacked me, trying to find your daughter,' Luke replied, fighting unconsciousness. *'The leader left without finishing the job. Can you locate me? I need assistance.'* A moment later he lost consciousness.



The Princess and the Hoodlum

Luke woke to find himself in a richly furnished room, presumably in the palace. Little Carol held his hand.

“Why do you like me so much?” Luke asked. “You barely know me.”

Carol shrugged and said, “I don’t know.”

“We questioned the men but they knew nothing,” John said by way of greeting.

“Their leader Brad could have taken me, but for some reason let me go,” Luke noted.

“You did an incredible job hiding Annie,” John said in admiration.

Feeling flattered Luke replied, “I gave the disguise stone to an assassin friend. Your enemies paid her a visit, thinking she was Annie.” He was about to continue the explanation, but realized he had said too much.

Luke turned to the queen and said, “Your daughter is safe and sound.”

“You almost died,” John commented. “I can’t believe you fought so many opponents single-handedly.”

Luke got up to a sitting position and discovered that his body felt incredible. He couldn’t feel any of his usual aches and pains. His joints and muscles weren’t hurting and they seemed more flexible.

“That was the toughest battle I ever fought,” Luke confessed. “Fortunately they weren’t used to street fighting. I’ll need to take more precautions from now on, until your daughter is safe,” Luke said as he examined his healed body.

"This is the first time I've been magically healed," Luke commented. "It's incredible."

"All your previous injuries have been healed as well," John said. "Your body was covered in scars and burns and many of your bones never properly set after being broken. You've led quite a colorful life, despite being only seventeen."

"Thank you, Majesty," Luke said gratefully. "My body feels better than I can ever remember. There are no pains in my muscles and joints. I can move my body so easily."

"How come you don't use a sword?" Carol asked.

"That's because the Untouchable class is forbidden from using bladed weapons and I don't need the attention," Luke replied. "As a result, I built special gloves and boots to help me fight. They are just work gloves with pieces of scrap metal sewn on, but they allow me to fight people with swords."

"By the way, where are my boots and gloves?" Luke asked.

"Right there son," John said, pointing at a well-made pair of gauntlets. An equally well-made pair of boots stood on the floor.

"Thank you for that new set of equipment," Luke said. "However I will need to add metal, so I can fight properly."

"I didn't give that to you," John denied. "Mars did."

Noting Luke's confused look, John explained, "I guess you don't know, so I'll tell you. When warriors start training as children, they go to the blacksmith and buy their first sword. Over the course of years they train."

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"When your skills and abilities become sufficient, Mars acknowledges you and changes your sword into what we call a Warrior's Weapon.

"These weapons strengthen and evolve as your skills increase and evolve. Congratulations on becoming a full-fledged warrior."

"Thanks Majesty," Luke said. "I hope you catch the bad guys soon. Annie will be sad if she misses her birthday. I need to go. I'd like to use an anti-surveillance stone, if that's possible."

"I shall give you special permission to use one, since you're acting under my personal authority," John said. "Major Jensen, please bring me the stone that you took from Warrior Luke."

"As you wish Majesty," the major said after a moment's hesitation and left.

Luke placed his speaking stone on his forehead and said in his mind, *'Majesty.'*

John touched his forehead and asked, *'What's the matter Luke?'*

'They knew I was of the warrior class,' Luke said. *'That proves you have a leak.'*

'I was afraid of that,' John said with a sigh. *'Thank you for the info.'*

"If you'll excuse me, I have work to do," John said and left.

"Come on dear, you have studying to do," Jane said.

Luke got up and retrieved his new and improved gauntlets and boots. He returned to the bed and put them on.

"But I want to stay with Luke a little longer," Carol begged.

"What are you studying?" Luke asked.

"Geopolitics," Carol replied.

"I'm glad I'm not a prince. That sounds boring," Luke said with a smile. "Your sister misses you and can't wait to come back home. Do you have a message you want to give to Annie?"

"Tell her I miss her and give her a hug for me," Carol said. "Don't forget a kiss for you," Carol added with a giggle.

"Oh man, these gloves feel amazing," Luke admired. "And these boots too."

"Can I try them on?" Carol asked.

Luke handed the gloves to Carol but they were too big for her. "How can you wear them? They are so big."

"I have big hands," Luke explained. "It's amazing how light and comfortable they are. I don't feel like I'm wearing them."

Carol returned the gloves and Luke put them back on. Despite it being light, he knew they were stronger than steel.

Jensen entered and handed Luke a bag. "Thanks for the stone," Luke said and the major nodded.

"It's time for me to go sweetie," Luke said and gave Carol a hug.

"You're worried about your sister, aren't you?" Carol nodded her head. "I promise to do everything in my power to keep her safe."

Luke got up and bowed to the queen. "Majesty," Luke said and left the room. Jensen followed close behind.

Luke's opinion of the royal family was changing. They seemed just like real people. It was odd though that they were so friendly to him. What could that mean?

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While walking Jensen demanded, "Just what exactly is your relationship with the royal family?"

"What do you mean?" Luke asked innocently, reading jealousy on the man's face.

"Aside from her parents and siblings, a few relatives and select people, Princess Carol doesn't associate with anyone," the major declared. "Yet she treats you like a long-lost uncle."

"Maybe I *am* her long-lost uncle," Luke said with a smile.

"Ha," Jensen retorted. "I've saved Princess Annie's life multiple times, as well as the lives of the other family members. She still doesn't like me."

Luke looked Jensen in the eye and accused, "Maybe because you're trying to kidnap the princess."

Jensen reacted strongly to the accusation. If this was poker, he would be holding a lousy hand. That drove a chill down Luke's back.

"Just joking," Luke said hastily with an embarrassed smile.

"You shouldn't joke about such things," Jensen said angrily.

"You're right," Luke admitted and bowed. "I'm sorry."

"Where is the princess staying? I need to know since it's obvious you can't protect her by yourself," Jensen demanded.

"You're right," Luke said, realizing the truth. He knew that he couldn't protect the princess. The only reason he survived was because the leader spared him. The next time he would not be so lucky. (The best way to fool others is to fool yourself first.)

"She's staying at the warehouse I work at. That's the best place, since she's close to me at all times. When do you think you'll catch the criminals? Are you coming with me?"

After saying that, Luke realized the warehouse was a lousy place to keep someone hidden. It was too obvious. *Where was the safest place to hide someone*, Luke wondered? It was at the casino. It even had hotel rooms, perfect for a princess. It was too late to say that.

"I can't," Jensen said. "I have an appointment with the king. We have a lead on two suspects," Jensen continued. "If all goes well, her Highness will return in time to celebrate her seventeenth birthday."

Luke smiled and said in genuine gratitude, "That's great news. She'll be happy. Then I'll be able to return to my former life. If you'll excuse me," Luke said and turned to go.

"What do you plan on doing with the stone?" Jensen asked.

"I'm going to use it to hide the princess of course," Luke replied. "By the way, I plan on moving the princess to a safer location. See you later." Luke dashed off before Jensen could say anything.

As Luke ran, he admired how comfortable his boots were. They seemed like extensions of his body. While running, he tried to figure out what to do.

Luke took several detours and ran through forested areas and rundown buildings. He then went to a local brothel and hired a girl to come with him. He made sure she had a cloak to hide her face.

They then went to the warehouse and Luke snuck her in. Next, they visited Jason. For his diversion scheme to work, Luke needed to tell the merchant.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

“Boss,” Luke called. “There is the possibility that bad guys might come here. Please don’t try to fight and tell them that I’m at the Draven Cliffs. I’m sorry I’m causing you trouble.”

“What’s this about?” Jason asked.

“People are trying to kidnap Princess Annie and the king has charged me with protecting her,” Luke replied.

“Why would the king trust you?” Jason asked, confused. That was a reasonable question. No one in their right mind would trust an untouchable.

Luke hesitated a moment and decided to tell the truth. It was impossible to lie believably, and still fool Jason into believing that the princess was with him. Besides, his enemies already knew his true rank. He changed his crest.

“Because the king has elevated me to the rank of warrior,” Luke said, feeling unexpected pride. Until now he hadn’t thought of what he had gained. “The king has commanded me to keep her safe.”

“Congratulations Luke. That’s amazing,” Jason said excitedly, shaking Luke’s hand. “That indeed is an honor.”

Feeling intense pride, Luke said, “Thanks.” It felt good being respected.

“Unfortunately, by order of the king, I have to keep that a secret for now. Please don’t tell anyone.” He turned his crest back to Untouchable.

“How did you change your crest?” Jason asked.

“That’s a spell the king gave to me for this mission,” Luke said. “I’ll remove the disguise when the king commands me.”

"If it's for the princess," the merchant said solemnly. "Is that Princess Annie?"

"Thanks boss," Luke replied. "Remember, don't fight. By the way, I need to borrow the wagon. Come Princess, let's go."

Luke took the wagon and he and the girl drove leisurely to Lake Stevenson. At the lake, they got on a boat and arrived at the island.

They went to a secluded area and Luke said, "Okay Lola, here's some money for your trouble. Remember, none of this happened. Have fun here and leave as soon as possible."

Lola nodded.

"Give me the cloak and have fun," Luke said and took the cloak.

The whole island was an anti-surveillance zone, which was good for Luke. However, finding someone with the cloak could give the whole thing away. Luke went to another part of the island and dumped the cloak under a pile of trash.

Deed done, Luke headed for the caves of Draven Cliffs. The area was dangerous since monsters lurked in the caves.

Luke liked visiting in order to hone his fighting skills. Sometimes he got useful items. This time he climbed the cliff and placed the anti-surveillance stone in a crevice.

The spell to activate the stone was simple. Susan taught him how to use them years ago. The problem with using the stones was that they were magically draining, which was the main reason why people rarely used personal stones. Instead they used fixed stones that drew their power directly from the ley lines of the earth.

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Luke set the range to ten feet. Personal experience experimenting with Susan's stone showed he could sustain the spell for around five hours before being drained. That was when he was fourteen. Now it should last a day at least before automatically deactivating.

Decoy in place, Luke went to his favorite restaurant and ate. After lunch, Luke returned to the warehouse to put the wagon away and resumed working.

Eventually Luke returned to the orphanage and trained the children on self-defense. Of course, the kids wanted to see Luke's new gloves and boots and try them on. For some reason they seemed more affectionate towards him than usual, showering him with extra hugs and kisses.

Luke let them play with his equipment and went to Annie. "Okay Annie, let's train. I want to see your fighting technique."

Annie looked at Luke strangely but said nothing.

The fighting technique involved circular attacks and blocks that were completely different from Luke's regular straight-forward attacks. Although appearing weak, they were nevertheless very effective against Luke's attacks.

"Oh man, I love those techniques," Luke marveled as he fought.

"Where did you learn to fight?" Annie asked.

"I learnt street fighting on the streets and elsewhere," Luke replied. "At first I just focused on punching and blocking. Then one day thugs held my hands behind me and tried to beat me up. I had no choice but to use my feet to defend myself. It was so effective that I've been using them since."

"You're a fast learner," Annie marveled.

"Thanks," Luke replied. "If I can master these moves, I'll be better able to protect everyone, and help them protect themselves."

"Can we have a break now? I'm exhausted," Annie asked.

"You thought me a lot," Luke said as he reviewed what Annie taught him. "I'll practice the moves tomorrow."

"Remember, your acting skills are your best protection since they can't use magic to locate you, thanks to your dad. Sorry I couldn't give you proper training today. Too many things came up."

They sat on the couch in front of the fireplace and Annie stared at him.

"What's the matter? Why do you keep staring at me?" Luke asked.

"It's your face," Annie replied, pointing.

"I know it's ugly, but the kids like it," Luke said with a shrug.

"No, it's beautiful," Annie denied. "What happened?"

"Beautiful?" Luke asked in surprise, and then he remembered. "I had a run-in with the bad guys. Your dad healed all my wounds."

"I guess this is what I look like when people don't use my face as a punching bag," Luke laughed. "I like the fact that my nose is no longer broken and I can breathe more easily."

"You were attacked?" Annie asked in horror.

Luke nodded. "I spoke to Major Jensen. He's a suspicious person."

"No, he's not," Annie disagreed adamantly. "He's one of our greatest supporters. Everyone trusts him."

"Everyone but your sister," Luke noted. "I laid a trap for him to see if he's trustworthy. We'll find out tomorrow. You better go to

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sleep. A peasant's life is very tiring. Also remember to eat or you'll waste away to nothing."

Luke got up and headed for his room. A moment later he changed his mind. He didn't want to find the princess in his bed again. Instead he grabbed bedding and went out to a tree fort built for the kids. That would protect him from the princess.



Luke woke with the sun. His hand was pressed against something soft and squishy. He recognized that feeling. Opening his eyes, he discovered he was once again fondling Annie.

Luke hastily removed his hand, got up and backed to the door. That was a mistake. From that angle, he had the perfect view of Annie's body. Her nightdress had ridden up, exposing her panties and bellybutton – except she had no panties on.

A stream of blood gushed from Luke's nose as he realized that he was looking at something no man had ever seen before.

Annie opened her eyes and looked at him in confusion. A moment later she took in the situation. Confusion turned to anger as she sprang up and gave Luke a roundhouse kick.

"You damn pervert," Annie screamed as Luke went flying over the edge. Anger turned to worry as she realized her punishment was too severe.

Annie ran to the edge of the tree fort, wondering if she had killed Luke with the fall. Below, Luke landed on all fours, catlike, despite falling backwards. That drop was over fourteen feet.

"Damn princess," Luke swore and staggered away. He has his boots and gloves on, where before his feet and hands were bare.

Relief that Luke wasn't dead turned to worry as Annie wondered how she was supposed to get down from the fort. She didn't remember getting up.

Annie wrapped a blanket around herself to cover her modesty. She had washed her delicates last night but didn't put them on since they were still wet. That proved to be a mistake. Fortunately, Luke was a nobody, and so him seeing her naked didn't count. She hoped.

'I didn't do it on purpose. It's not my fault.' The gods chose not to reply.

Putting the matter out of her mind she climbed down the ladder.



Luke walked off in a daze. He had seen plenty of beautiful naked women, but none of them held a candle to Annie. There was no question. Princesses were fundamentally different from other women. Too bad they were such – princesses.

Luke went to his favorite restaurant and ordered breakfast. The super cute waitress came and placed his food in front of him. She bent down, giving him a good look at her melons. Luke had always fantasized about her, but now it was different. She no longer held any appeal.

Feeling annoyed, Luke headed for town. As always, beautiful women were everywhere. Unfortunately, none of them were attractive.

Luke went to the warehouse and spoke to Jason. "Boss, did any suspicious people come yesterday?"

"Yes Luke," Jason replied. "Several men came snooping around."

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"Please tell me, blow by blow, what happened," Luke commanded.

"The men came and looked around. They then asked me if I knew where the princess was. I said, 'I didn't know what they were talking about.' The leader took out a stone and said I was lying. He then said he would kill me if I lied again."

"I told you not to do anything dangerous," Luke scolded. "What happened then?"

"I told them you took the princess and left with her on the wagon. They left after that," the merchant concluded.

"Did you tell them where to go?" Luke asked.

Merchant Jason nodded. "I told them that you said you were going to Draven Cliffs, like you said."

"You did well," Luke said and smiled. "All is going according to plan."

"That's a relief," Jason said with a sigh. "I was afraid I had committed treason."

"I'm going to work for a few hours," Luke said and turned to leave. As an afterthought, to make Jason happy, he added, "Don't worry. You're a good citizen."

As Luke worked, he wondered what his next move would be. All this deception was tiring. He wished he could go back to his normal life.

Eventually Luke made his rounds of the neighborhood and visited various haunts along the way. Finally, Luke arrived at the orphanage, taking every precaution he could to make sure he wasn't followed.

Luke called Annie and said, "I'm going to step up your training and show you how people on the streets fight. First of all, in street fighting you go after all weaknesses.

"Because of who you are, they will attack your sensibilities. They will use crude language and insult your family and your honor. They will try to make you react out of emotion. The trick is not to listen to what they say. The most skilled opponents will mix truth with the lies. In the end, it's just cow cookies. Are you ready?"

Annie nodded. They began fighting.

"Nice melons you have there," Luke said in a lecherous voice and made groping motions with upturned fingers. "Can I...?" Before Luke could finish, Annie screamed and covered herself.

"You lose Annie," Luke said and gently tapped Annie's cheek with his fist. "Now let's try it again."

This time Luke sneered, "Don't you know it's unladylike to fight? I love the big muscles you're growing, very manly." Again, that threw Annie off and she couldn't defend herself.

"Annie, use all weapons at your disposal," Luke instructed. "That includes dirt." He tossed dirt at Annie's face and she staggered back.

"Also use the sun to blind the opponent." Luke used the mirrors on his new gauntlets to blind Annie. "Pay attention and discover their psychological weaknesses and then attack. That's street fighting."

They continued training. Annie's superior techniques were useless against Luke's cheap tricks.

"That's enough for today," Luke said.

"You're turning me into a barbarian," Annie grumbled.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Better a live barbarian than...Come. It's dinner time," Luke said.

After dinner, Luke trained the children before meeting with the neighborhood patrol. Finally, Luke returned and sat with Annie in front of the fireplace.

"Three more days to the big day," Luke said, trying to make conversation.

"I hate this," Annie grumbled. "My muscles are killing me, I have bruises on top of my bruises, and my hair is a mess. I also stink."

"And yet you look more beautiful than you ever did," Luke replied.

"Are you making fun of me?" Annie asked angrily.

"I'm not making fun of you," Luke insisted. "Before you didn't look like a real person, and now you look like a woman. Now you are a woman."

Looking confused, Annie turned to the fireplace and said nothing.

A little boy came up to Luke and asked, "Is it story time yet?"

"Of course," Luke replied. "Romeo is still searching for his one true love." He sat cross-legged on the ground and the boy sat on his lap. The others formed a circle around him.

Annie listened as the hero fought his way through the labyrinth of lost souls.

"Okay kids, it's time for bed," Gertrude announced.

"But the story hasn't ended," a girl complained.

"That story will never end," Gertrude assured. "You'll have to wait for the next time." Grumbling, the kids got goodnight hugs from Luke and went to bed.

"It's amazing how big the world is," Annie commented after everyone left.

Luke nodded. "I always fantasized about travelling the world looking for adventure, perhaps even visiting the moons. Unfortunately, that's not possible since too many people depend on me."

"You mean like me," Annie said and then blushed.

"You'll return to your world soon enough and then forget about me," Luke said. "I'm talking about these children and the people of this town."

"I'll never do that," Annie said adamantly.

"That can't be helped," Luke replied. "You're a princess and I'm just a hoodlum. Come on. It's time go to go to bed."

Luke headed for the storage shed and Annie went to her room. He was about to remove his boots and gloves when he remembered the danger Annie posed to him.

There was no choice. Luke sat on a chair and waited. He woke with a jerk when the door opened. Annie entered and stood there in her nightgown.

Suddenly the mystery resolved itself. Annie was sleepwalking.

Luke gently guided Annie to his bed and said, "Get into bed Annie." She did as instructed and Luke covered her with the blanket.

Within moments she began tossing and turning. A thought entered Luke's head, something the house mother told him about little children. The scent of a parent will always comfort an infant.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Luke removed his sweaty undershirt and placed it next to Annie's head. It worked. Annie calmed down and drifted to sleep.

Luke grabbed blankets and headed for the tree fort.



Luke woke up bright and early. This time there was no princess to slap him around. That didn't make him happy. He missed looking at her in her nightdress. Absentmindedly he wondered how anyone could sleep like that. Wasn't that uncomfortable?

It was time to start the day. Luke put on his boots and gloves and did his morning routine. Next stop was breakfast.

At breakfast, Annie asked, "What was I doing in your room?"

"You like sleepwalking," Luke replied. "I won't be staying here for the next several days. Mother Gertrude, can you please make sure Annie sleeps well? She's not used to sleeping by herself. How is she doing adapting?"

"She's doing well," Gertrude assured. "Give her another week and it will be as if she has been farming and working her entire life."

Annie gave Luke an expression that said, *I don't want to spend the rest of my life farming.*

"That's excellent," Luke said happily. "See you later."

Luke walked out and decided to patrol the area. He had spent too much time at the orphanage. That wasn't good for Annie's protection.

A thought crossed Luke's mind. Would the god of children protect Annie? She was after all under eighteen and living in the house of

the god. If so, then bringing her there was a wiser decision than he deserved credit for.

Luke went to work and did his chores. After loading a boat, he stopped to admire his gloves for the umpteenth time. They were so comfortable, he barely noticed he had them on, but they made his job so much easier.

Finally, Luke went to Black Wings Casino. This time he wasn't there to win but to get intel.

Luke casually listened to the crowds as he mingled. As expected, people snooped around. All was going well. It was time to play.

After filling his winnings quota, Luke went to Draven cliffs. What greeted him gave him a shock.

Lying in front of the caves and in them were the decomposing bodies of over a dozen people. The monsters got them.

As a rule, monsters never leave their territories. As long as you're outside, you're safe. Venture inside and you're dead meat. However, they will pursue a short distance if you engage them.

Luke retrieved the long-since-deactivated anti-surveillance stone and put it back in its bag. Just then his communication stone buzzed. Luke removed the speaking stone from his pocket and placed it on his forehead. It was the king.

'Luke, what's your status?' John asked.

'I set up a trap just after leaving,' Luke said. *'Unfortunately, I messed up on the trap a little.'* Feeling a little flustered as to what to say, Luke said, *'Let me start from the beginning.'*

'Just after I left the queen and Carol...I'm not sure you'll like what I have to say,' Luke said hesitantly.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

'You let me be the judge of that,' John commanded.

Luke's heart skipped a beat. Kings were scary.

Be brave, Luke said to himself. Only the strong can protect what's important to them. Luke focused his energy and centered himself.

'Majesty, I think Major Jensen is involved,' Luke said hesitantly.

'Why do you think that?' John asked. 'He is one of my most trusted advisors.'

Luke had no choice but to proceed. *'The major stopped me in the corridor just after the meeting with you. He was upset that Carol likes me, even though I'm a stranger. I then told him that Carol hates him because he is trying to kidnap Annie.'*

'Majesty, I have been playing poker since I was six. If we were playing poker, I would swear he had a lousy hand. I then pretended I was joking. He got angry at me for joking around and asked me where I was keeping Annie. I told him at the warehouse I was working at. I was hoping to lay a trap for him since I needed evidence. Unfortunately, I suggested a location that was too obvious. I then told him that I was going to move Annie to a safer location.'

'After leaving I set up a trap. Shortly after, thugs came to my boss and demanded to know where the princess was.'

'That's disturbing,' John said.

'Merchant Jason said he didn't know and the leader took out a stone and said he was lying. Finally, my boss told them that I took the princess and drove away in the cart.'

'Where did you take my daughter?' John asked.

Luke smelt a dead rat. *'She's at Black Wings Casino,'* Luke replied. *'By the way, I placed the anti-surveillance stone in a crevice of Draven Cliffs. A dozen people foolishly tried to enter.'*

'Thank you, Luke,' John said. *'I'll investigate Major Jensen.'*

'I hope this is resolved soon. Annie can't wait for that event,' Luke said.

'Yes, that event,' John said.

'Do you want me to say something to your daughter?' Luke asked.

'Just tell her I love her,' John replied.

'Okay Majesty,' Luke replied and broke the connection.

Luke pondered for a moment his conversation with the king. It didn't seem right. Luke placed the speaking stone on his forehead and said, *'Majesty.'*

'Luke, is everything all right?' John asked.

'Majesty, did you just call me?' Luke asked.

'No, I didn't,' John replied.

'Someone claiming to be you contacted me,' Luke said. *'At first, I thought I was speaking to you, but something he said was off.'*

'Did you reveal where my daughter is?' John asked in concern.

'No, I didn't,' Luke replied. *'Are you investigating Major Jensen? I think he's suspicious.'*

'I'll investigate,' John replied. *'In the meantime, please come to the palace. I want one of my mages to investigate your speaking stone, to find out who contacted you.'*

The Princess and the Hoodlum

'I'll be right there Majesty,' Luke replied and put the stone away. Luke turned towards the palace and began running. The five-mile run gave him plenty of time to think. Unfortunately, he couldn't think of anything useful.

Upon arriving at the palace, Luke was greeted by a group of people. One came up to him and said, "Please follow me. The king is waiting for you."

They passed through several corridors and entered the wizards' tower. The room they entered was spacious and filled with dozens of people.

"Luke, please place your speaking stone here," John said, pointing at a stone pedestal. Luke did so and seven wizards chanted in the divine language.

Luke waited, not knowing what they were doing. Finally, the king handed the speaking stone back to Luke and said, "Luke, if all goes well we shall have this wrapped up sometime tomorrow. Please be warned, the attacks on you will intensify.

"As you no doubt have guessed, anyone can contact you pretending to be anyone. However, when you contact someone, you can be certain that is the person you intend to contact. When you get a call from me, reject the call, and then contact me."

Feeling the audience had ended, Luke said, "Yes Majesty." He bowed, turned around and walked out of the room.

The thought that the ordeal was almost over excited Luke. He had to tell Annie. She would be happy.

Luke paused a moment and realized his mistake. The battle of wits hadn't ended. If he went to Annie now, all would be lost.

A Peasant's Life

It was time to lead the hounds astray. Luke headed to the casino. While running through the woods, he spotted a movement to the right. Instinctively he looked in that direction but there was nothing.

Again, there was movement where none should be. There was no question. A professional was trailing him.

Arriving at the lake, Luke got on the ferry and reached the island. There he played poker until he hit his winning quota.

While playing, Luke searched for spies. There were indications that people were watching him. Unfortunately, it was hard to tell, considering everyone was wearing masks. It didn't matter, as long as he kept them busy.

Luke ate lunch and then returned to the poker table. After awhile, he found himself losing. That wasn't surprising. The heightened concentration Luke needed to play poker sapped his energy. In the end Luke decided to watch some of the shows.

The great thing about the island was that you could live indefinitely in luxury, provided you kept winning. Years previously, Luke spent over a month on the island. Eventually he got bored and left. The life of mindless pleasure wasn't for him.

Night came and he went to his room. Being a person raised on the streets, Luke didn't trust the security. It was too easy to bribe people. He himself had done it on occasion.

Luke opened a cupboard and found an upper shelf in it. He was about to climb up when he changed his mind. Turning around, Luke piled clothes under the blanket and made a crude imitation of a body on the bed.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Making his bed in the closet, Luke closed the door and went to sleep.

The next day, Luke woke to find the room undisturbed. Feeling disappointed that his cool tricks weren't needed, Luke had breakfast.

I wonder how Annie is fairing, Luke mused, worrying that her sleepwalking would get her in trouble. It couldn't be helped. His job was to stay away from her for the time being, until the king called him.

Evening came and Luke wondered why the king hadn't called. Maybe it was taking longer to do the necessary tasks than expected.

The next day Luke woke up in the closet and realized why the king wasn't calling. He was on an island covered with an anti-surveillance field, where communication stones wouldn't work.

Luke undressed and jumped into the lake. Wearing only boots and gloves, Luke arrived on the lake shore. He put the speaking stone on his forehead and called the king.

'Luke, thank the gods you're safe,' John said, sounding relieved. *'I was trying to contact you but couldn't.'*

'Sorry Majesty but I was in an anti-surveillance zone.'

'We finally caught all the spies,' John said. *'As you suspected, Major Jensen was a traitor. Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one. I can't believe how many spies we had.'*

'Isn't spies and international intrigue part of regular politics? Don't you have spies in other countries like everyone else?' Luke asked.

'You're right,' John said in surprise. *'How do you know?'*

'I associate with untouchables, being one myself,' Luke explained. 'I'll get Annie and we'll go to the palace as soon as possible.'

'Thanks Luke,' John said and cut the connection.

Feeling apprehensive, Luke went into the woods and headed for the orphanage. Luke arrived an hour and several detours later.

"Annie," Luke called as he greeted her on the farm.

"Luke," Annie replied in relief. "I was so worried. Where did you go?"

"Annie, do you have a speaking stone? Contact your dad," Luke instructed.

Annie did as instructed. A moment later a look of great happiness crossed her face. She gave Luke a hug and said, "I can go home now."

"Grab your stuff and we'll say goodbye to the house mother," Luke said.

"Okay," Annie replied and dashed for the main house. Minutes later she was back, struggling to carry her luggage.

Luke took the bags and they ran to Gertrude. Annie hugged the house mother and said, "Thanks for everything. It's time for me to leave."

"Good luck dear," Gertrude said and returned the hug.

Luke and the princess headed for the castle. As they walked, Luke said, "I'll change your crest when you arrive. I don't think you want people to see you looking like this."

"Oh my gods, I completely forgot," Annie exclaimed.

The Princess and the Hoodlum



The royal palace was built against the cliff side of Mount Grover. A twenty-foot high defense wall surrounded both it and sprawling gardens. Within that area was a sub-area reserved for the royal family.

Beyond the main gate was the heart of the city capital, where the mayor and other wealthy citizens lived. However, rough terrain prevented the city from reaching all the way to the mountainside.

Sometime in the past a rockslide dumped boulders to the right of the town, as seen facing the palace. A house-sized boulder contained a secret entrance.

Annie and Luke stopped in front of the boulder. Luke touched a protrusion as per instructions given to him by the king. A door opened and they stepped in. Moments later the door closed and Luke found himself in a well-lit room. Dust and cobwebs covered everything, indicating no one had used the passage in years.

They took the stairs down, through a musty tunnel and stopped in front of a wall.

Luke touched an engraving and a hidden door opened. They walked up steps and through another hidden door. The door closed behind them.

Beyond the door were the private gardens of the royal family.

“Let me change your crest,” Luke said and touched Annie’s forehead.

Deed done, they stepped through concealing bushes and crossed the garden. Moments later they were on the balcony of Annie’s room.

The family dog greeted them. He was frantic with excitement at seeing the princess.

"Hi Rover. I need a bath, but this is not it," Annie said as she wiped dog slobber from her face.

They climbed steps to Annie's balcony and entered her room. Annie headed for her changing room and Rover followed.

Luke put Annie's luggage in a corner and then contacted the king. Minutes later the royal family entered, along with their entourage.

"The princess is taking a bath," Luke said by way of greeting. Carol hesitated a moment and then dashed into Annie's changing room.

"Thank you for protecting my daughter," Jane said gratefully. She was no longer the queen, but just a grateful mother.

Luke bowed and said, "I'll leave the moment you've reunited with your daughter."

"But I need to properly reward you," John argued.

"No reward is necessary Majesty," Luke said. "I have the stones you gave me. That's reward enough."

"You're truly a loyal subject," John said in gratitude.

That was the first time Luke saw the king making a mistake. Luke clenched his jaw in anger as he held back the urge to punch the king.

John glanced down at Luke's balled fist and said, "I am not my father."

"So you know," Luke replied through gritted teeth.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

“Because of that incident, I was able to go to the gods and force my father to step down. Unfortunately, that was all I could do,” John apologized. “What do you know about your parents?”

Filled with rage, Luke replied, “Only that they were simple farmers. I made a vow to myself to never to let any child cry, if I have the power to do anything about it. I have been accumulating power in order to keep my vow. I hope you consider doing the same.”

Right on queue Carol stepped out of the changing room, followed by Annie.

The family gave Annie a joyous greeting. Carol ran up to Luke and raised her hands. “Carry me,” she commanded.

Luke glanced at the king and John nodded. He then looked at Carol and said, “Sorry princess but I’m all dirty and sweaty.”

“I don’t care,” Carol replied. “Carry me.”

Not knowing what else to do, Luke did as instructed. Carol gave him a great big hug and a kiss and said, “Thank you big brother. You saved my sister.”

“I would never do anything to make my cute little sister cry,” Luke said and hugged her back.

“So did you do any naughty things to Sis?” Carol asked and then giggled.

Luke’s face turned red as he remembered fondling Annie’s ass and seeing her naked body. Carol giggled at his response.

“I didn’t do anything,” Luke said defensively, cursing Annie’s sleepwalking problem.

“Then why are you blushing?” brother Philip asked with a smirk.

Before Luke could answer an attendant entered. "Majesty, General Walters requests an audience with you," he said with a bow.

"Tell the general I'll be there in five minutes," John said. The attendant bowed and left.

Glad for the distraction, Luke said, "I'd better be going. It's time for me to return to my world."

"Are you coming to Sis' birthday party?" Carol asked.

"I can't," Luke objected. "I'm just a nobody."

"Please," Annie begged, adding her voice to Carol's. Their mother added her voice.

"All right," Luke said reluctantly. "Only if it's a small party," Luke added.

"Yay," Carol said and clapped happily.

Luke turned to the king and said, "Will *he* be there?"

"No," John replied. "My dad spends all his time at the winter palace."

He should be spending all his time in the Drenchdin mines, Luke thought. He didn't say that. Instead he said, "All right. I'd better be going. When should I get here?"

"Come anytime," Carol said. "I want to play with you and show you my dollies. My brothers don't play with me and Sis is always too busy."

"Don't you have to do princess stuff?" Luke asked.

"It's okay for tomorrow," Jane said. "She can take a vacation from her studies. Come for lunch."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Luke bowed to the queen and then spoke to the king. "Majesty, Annie showed me a fighting style I have never seen before. Can you please teach it to me?" Luke asked. "I want to teach my people to learn to protect themselves, so they can live in peace."

"Of course Luke," John agreed.

"If you'll excuse me, I have things I need to do," Luke said and lowered Carol to the floor. "I'll be here at noon."

"Make that ten," Carol corrected. "Or eight and we can have breakfast."

"Luke, show me your left hand," John requested. "Do you see those indentations around the rim of your gauntlets and your boots? They are designed to hold magic stones. All warrior weapons have them."

John placed a tiny pink marble in an indentation of the glove. "This pink stone is a healing stone. It's a slow acting continuous spell that you can't rely on in battle. Minor cuts and scrapes will heal in less than a minute. Broken bones and internal injuries can take hours to heal, depending on the severity. Lost limbs can take days."

"Incredible," Luke marveled as he stared at the stone. "I was never permitted to use magical healing before. Can I use it to heal others?"

"Yes, both on yourself and others, but that takes training," John replied. "Also, it can only be used that way while outside of combat. The more peaceful the setting, the faster the results."

"Place your speaking stone in an indentation on your right hand glove."

"I give you the anti-surveillance and disguise stones to use as you see fit, since I trust you. Please be careful with them.

"You may mount your anti-surveillance stone and your disguise. However, their behavior will change and you will no longer be able to remove them, so I don't recommend you doing so for the time being.

"Starting day after tomorrow, I shall have someone give you martial arts training and teach you about magic. You said you can read. Here is a book on all known stones."

Luke took the tiny book and placed it in his pocket. He bowed and said, "Thank you Majesty. See you tomorrow Carol."

Jane watched Luke disappear into the bushes near the privacy wall and said, "He's something else, isn't he?"

John nodded. "I see great things in store for him, as well as great hardships. The gods never give anything for free."

Birthday for the Royal Brat

It's my birthday,
so where's the cake

The secret underground room below the royal garden's privacy wall contained an apartment that hadn't been used in decades. Luke spent an hour cleaning and finally got it livable. He spent the night there.

The next day Luke showered, shaved and dressed in his best clothes. He changed his crest to warrior and exited the hideout. Stepping into the royal gardens he found servants busily preparing for the party.

"Brother Luke," Carol called excitedly and grabbed him by the hand. She guided him up a staircase, into her room, and to an easy chair. "This is Princess Stephaney. Isn't she pretty?" she said as she handed a doll to Luke.

"Hello Princess Stephaney, you're very pretty. Can I marry you?" Luke asked.

"Don't be silly Brother Luke. She's just a dolly," Carol giggled.

Luke had experience playing with the orphanage girls and knew they loved playing house, something all boys hated.

What Luke couldn't understand was why little girls loved pretending to do domestic chores. You only did domestic chores because you had to, not because you enjoyed it.

Within minutes Luke found himself surrounded by a dozen dolls while Carol talked a mile a minute about nothing.

Philip entered and said, "Dude, I can't believe you're playing with dolls."

Birthday for the Royal Brat

"I'm like the uncle for the children at the orphanage," Luke explained defensively. "As a result, the girls force me to play house with them all the time. The house mother said I should do it because it's good for them."

A maid entered and announced, "It's lunch time highnesses."

Carol guided Luke to the dining room, where Luke found the rest of the family.

"Luke bowed to the king and queen and said, "Good afternoon majesties." He turned to Annie and found her staring at him with a strange expression.

"You're dressed well I see," Annie said.

"Happy birthday Princess and you don't have to be so shocked," Luke replied. "I bought this for when I visit the casino. Here's a present for you. It is part of the jewelry I inherited from my grandmother. Carol, this is for you," Luke added.

"It's beautiful," Annie said and put on the necklace.

"Thank you, Brother Luke," Carol said and gave Luke a hug. She too put on her necklace.

"You shouldn't have," their mother objected.

Luke shrugged and said, "It's all good."

"Luke, would you consider taking over the position Major Jensen held?" John asked. "Your warrior level is 56, which is more than enough for the job, as is your experience."

Hesitantly Luke asked, "Will I be spending my time here doing paperwork and ordering people around?"

"That's about it," John admitted.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Thank you for the offer Majesty, but I think I can better serve the country by protecting the warehouse district and the people who live there," Luke said. "Also, the children at the orphanage need me."

John nodded. "That's too bad. I'm always looking for good people."

"So am I," Luke replied with a smile. "I'm finding it difficult to get people who think for themselves, instead of just relying on orders from me."

John laughed. "I have the same problem. I'm glad the warehouse district is in good hands."

They sat down to eat and servants brought food.

"You have good table manners," Jane commented.

"Thank you Majesty," Luke replied. "I practice when I visit the casino. Keeping up appearances is important there. Carol, you need to eat your vegetables, so you can grow up to be big and strong."

"But broccoli tastes disgusting," Carol complained.

"That can't be helped," Luke replied. "Becoming strong takes effort on our part. The gods give nothing for free."

"All right," Carol said sadly and did as she was told. She did however make ugly faces as she ate.

"What casino is that?" Jane asked.

"Black Wings Casino," Luke replied. "I know you're trying to shut it down. Unlike most people I have a spending limit. I also have a winning limit. I stop when I hit my quota."

Birthday for the Royal Brat

"How come?" Gus asked.

"Because playing poker takes a great deal of concentration. You need to tell what kind of hand everyone has despite the fact that everyone wears masks. You also need to make sure no one can read you. You begin losing the moment you get tired. I used those skills to figure out that Major Jensen was a traitor," Luke replied. "I support the orphanage with the winnings."

"Luke, did your grandmother talk about her past?" John asked.

"No Majesty and I never thought of asking," Luke replied.

"Have you eaten food like this before?" John asked.

"Only at the casino," Luke replied. "You can live in luxury as long as you win. This desert is good. I never had this before."

"Annie, it's time to make your appearance," Jane said.

"Okay mother," Annie said and got up.

Carol led Luke to the public balcony and Annie stepped out to greet the crowd. Luke watched from behind the curtains as the family waved to the people. As usual, the square in front of the palace was packed with citizens.

Annie and the others made speeches about nothing and everything. After installing a renewed faith in the monarchy they exited.

"Come on, let's play house," Carol said.

"Okay," Luke replied.

"You're going to play house?" Philip asked and then laughed.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Your priorities change when you lose something of great value," Luke replied.

"Prince Philip, you are the crown prince. What do you value most? What kind of king do you want to become?"

Luke turned to Carol and said, "Let's go play." They headed to Carol's room. Philip just stood, looking confused.

After a few minutes Philip entered Carol's room. He stopped at the door and asked, "By the way, do you like playing house?"

Luke frowned and said, "Of course not. I'm a guy. I prefer fighting, gambling, and womanizing. You're a prince. You should know the meaning of duty. Come and play with your sister."

"Yes, come and play," Carol said and guided Philip in. "Have some tea and cookies."

"You don't seem intimidated by me or the others," Philip observed.

"That's because I've been playing poker since I turned six. I know how to handle these situations. Only your father scares me," Luke replied. "Do you play?"

"Mother doesn't like gambling, which is one reason why she's trying to shut down Black Wings Casino," Philip replied.

"These cookies are delicious Carol. Did you make them?" Luke asked.

"Of course," Carol replied. "Here, have some more," she said and gave Luke more toy cookies.

"Why don't you come with me sometime?" Luke suggested. "You would be surprised how often nobility and royalty visit."

Birthday for the Royal Brat

"How do you know?" Philip asked. "Don't they wear masks and prevent identification using anti-surveillance stones?"

"It's always possible to tell who is who by their mannerisms," Luke replied. "First I'll teach you the basics. It's always important to have a winning and losing limit. Most people don't, which is why casinos are a lucrative business."

Luke turned to Carol and said, "Carol I hear you don't like talking to people outside your family. Why is that?"

"I don't know," Carol shrugged.

Annie entered and Carol forced her to sit down. Moments later Gus entered, attracted by the commotion.

"Have a cookie," Luke said to Gus.

"You want Brother to gamble?" Gus asked.

"Close the door. I can teach you as well," Luke motioned.

"He's too young to gamble," Annie scolded.

"Nonsense," Luke denied. "Even Carol and you can play."

Carol giggled and said, "Me gambling? Mother would have a fit."

"That's why I asked your brother to close the door," Luke replied. "Poker isn't about winning and losing money. It's a battle of wills where you exploit the opponent's weaknesses and prevent others from exploiting your weaknesses. It's a perfect game for each of you, since as royalty you do this every time you meet foreign dignitaries."

"Close the door. Your father will understand – but it's best no one knows you have this skill."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Okay," Gus said and locked the door.

Luke took out a deck of cards and dealt. "Now we'll play with cookies. It gets interesting when the stakes are high. However, you need to be willing to lose everything or you can never win."

Hours later there was a knock at the door.

"Highnesses, the guests have arrived," a servant called.

"Okay," Annie called.

Luke put the cards away and everyone stepped out to greet the guests.

"Do you recognize anyone Luke?" Philip asked.

"Just a moment," Luke replied. "I need to watch how people move. Him over there is a regular at the casino."

"That's impossible," Philip denied. "He's trying to shut down the casino."

"That's probably because he loses all the time," Luke said. "Maybe he's trying to manipulate your mother. I'm sure your dad can handle him."

The king approached and said, "Luke, this is General Walters of my army."

"It's a pleasure to meet you sir," Luke greeted.

"How old are you young warrior?" Walters asked.

"Seventeen, sir," Luke replied.

Impressed, Walters said, "That's incredible. You're only seventeen and you have a warrior level of 56. I only reached that level when I turned twenty-six. Where is your sword?"

Birthday for the Royal Brat

The level 90 general had multiple stones on his impressive looking sword. Thinking back, Luke realized he had seen people with warrior weapons numerous times. However, for some unknown reason, he never fought anyone with one. Luke suspected that was the workings of the gods.

Luke's gloves hung on his belt behind him, hidden from view of the general. It didn't matter since they didn't look like weapons but just high quality work gloves.

"It's in another room sir," Luke replied, remembering leaving it in the secret room. "This is the first time I have been to one of these events and I didn't think it was appropriate to wear swords."

John looked at Luke in surprise and amazement at Luke's ability to lie.

"Don't you know a warrior should always have his weapon with him?" the general scolded.

"Please don't judge him," John said sternly. "You don't know anything about him."

"Yes majesty," the general apologized.

"Doesn't your weapon appear when you need it?" Luke asked.

"It is capable of doing that," Walters acknowledged. "However, it's a matter of pride to have it with you. Who is your master?"

"That's confidential," John declared. "If you'll excuse me, I want Luke to meet other people."

John introduced Luke to several other big wigs, although Luke didn't know why. The VIPs included dukes and duchesses of the country, as well as top brass of the military.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Finally the guests left and Luke was alone with the royal family. "Majesty, was there a reason you were introducing me to all those people?" Luke asked.

"That's because I see great things for you," John said.

"Why was everyone so excited about my warrior level?" Luke asked. "Everyone seemed so impressed."

"I guess you don't know so I'll explain," John said. "Children of the warrior class are trained from small in the art of combat. Slowly as they grow they increase their fighting level. By the time they turn eighteen they are ready to work as professionals. However, they have almost never seen real combat.

"Real life and death battle is the fastest way to gain experience.

"According to the healer, most of your bones have been broken at least once. You had scars on half your internal organs. It's a wonder that you lived so long. How long have you been fighting?"

"I was born with the mark of the untouchable," Luke explained. "People have been using me as a punching bag since I was a child. One of my uncles told me, the only way to survive is to become strong. He thought me to fight and to protect what was important to me. At the age of seven I won a match against a twelve-year-old boy.

"They hated me even more. They couldn't understand why a piece of trash would want to protect himself, instead of just going away and dying...What's the matter? Why are you looking at me like that?" Luke asked, noting the air of pity.

"What happened to your family?" Jane asked.

"They are all gone," Luke replied.

Birthday for the Royal Brat

"I'm sorry," John said, looking guilty.

"There's only one person I truly hate," Luke said. "That was years ago and now I have plenty of family."

"You mean the people at the orphanage?" Annie asked.

"Not just them but everyone in my neighborhood," Luke replied. Luke stared at Philip and added, "I fight to keep them safe and happy."

Jane noticed the look Luke gave to Philip and how Philip reacted and asked Luke, "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing, Majesty," Luke replied. "I'm just trying to – I would like Prince Philip to visit my world, so that he can understand the people he will one day rule."

"That's an excellent idea," John agreed.

"He has to be in disguise so as not to disturb anyone," Luke added.

"Can I go too?" Carol asked.

"It's too dangerous for you dear," Jane objected.

"But Brother Luke will protect me," Carol argued.

"Where would you take her?" John asked.

"To the orphanage," Luke replied. "It's a safe location. No one ever causes trouble there."

"Carol will have fun," Annie added. "Luke likes telling stories to the children."

"We'll think about it," John promised. "Luke, what will you do now? You no longer need to pretend to be an untouchable."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"I obtained most of my physical strength working at the docks," Luke said. "My father always said manual labor is the only thing that will make a man strong. I don't want to give that up."

John nodded. "Remaining as you are is a good decision. Please be careful. The way my daughter is clinging to you makes me feel something bad is going to happen."

"I know," Luke replied as he gave Carol a hug. "Children do that when they are afraid."

"Have you heard anything from the grapevine?" John asked.

Luke paused and then said, "As you have probably guessed, people have approached me seeking help for a new revolt. There is much anger concerning the failed revolt and what happened nine years ago," Luke said. "I admit it was tempting – extremely tempting. However, I know what will happen should a civil war break out. My kids will get hurt or worse, and I refuse to allow that to happen."

"I know," John replied.

"What you may not know is that someone is stirring things up," Luke replied. "The pressure on me to join is increasing. I'm preparing my neighborhood for when fighting begins."

"This is happening in other countries as well," John confided. "No one knows who is behind it or why."

"I'll look into it," Luke promised. "By the way, did you hear about the martial arts competition? The gods will give the winner a stone. There is speculation as to what that stone will be. Everyone is excited."

"The same thing is happening in other countries," John noted.

"Can't we stop it?" Jane asked.

Birthday for the Royal Brat

"That's impossible," Luke replied. "I heard it's already set up at Stonewell mines. They say the whole area is protected by sleeper monsters."

"What are sleeper monsters?" Gus asked.

"Sleeper monsters are regular monsters that have been put into hibernation," John explained. "They wake up and attack when any person not authorized to be in the area approaches."

"Where are the Stonewell mines?" Gus asked.

"They are around two hundred miles north of here in the Jung province," Luke replied. "I've been there once before. The mountains there are very pretty."

"They are also a great source of wealth for our country," John added.

"Majesty, if you're sending in people, I suggest you select warriors who can handle street fighting. There's no way that old fart, General Walters, can handle that," Luke said.

"I know about street fighting," Annie proclaimed. "You taught me."

"I only showed you two percent of the tricks I've seen. This tournament is going to be challenging," Luke replied.

"What exactly is street fighting?" Philip asked.

"General Walters would call it a dishonorable, cowardly way of fighting where everything goes," John replied. "It's not something a knight would do."

"That sounds like fun," Gus said. "Can I go?"

"That will be good experience for them," Luke suggested.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"I don't know," Jane said uncertainly.

"I assure you security will be tight," Luke assured. "It's bad for business if the spectators get hurt."

"Especially the rich ones," John added. "Plenty of people will be gambling to see who will win and lose and who will die. Luke, do you know how to use a sword?"

"I was trained," Luke replied. "However I don't like them, since it's hard to defeat someone without killing them. I prefer subduing people with my fist. Then we can come to an understanding eventually. Also, I don't need the attention."

"I'd better be going."

"Don't forget to give Sis a kiss before you go," Carol said with a giggle.

"No way. He's just a peasant," Annie blurted out. She immediately regretted her words. It was too late.

Luke jerked his head as if slapped and got up. A look of pain crossed his face as he dashed away like a wounded cat. The gloves attached to his belt flapped behind him like a tail.

"That wasn't nice," Annie's mother scolded.

"He has no romantic aspirations for you," her father said sternly.

"He only came because I asked him to," Carol added.

"I know. I'm a real princess," Annie screamed and ran to her room.



Birthday for the Royal Brat

Luke exited the palace, ran through the palace gardens and out the main gates. He then strolled through the capital city, trying to clear his head.

As he walked, people stopped to stare. A woman called out, "Isn't that Luke."

"Yes dear," her companion said. "Why does he have the crest of a warrior?"

Luke realized he had forgotten to change his crest. Now everyone knew he was of the warrior class. It didn't matter, since he already told Merchant Jason. The secret would have been revealed eventually. It was time to make his new status official.

Battle of the Best

If you want to be the best,
you need to break a few heads

Luke stood in front of registration and answered the questions the lady asked. Registration complete, Luke went to the area reserved for competitors.

The previous month was hectic. Luke spent every day training in hand-to-hand combat with the king's elite forces and studying the divine language.

The language was similar to Chinese, where every idea had its own glyph. The language also contained words for things and ideas that were beyond Luke's comprehension.

Fortunately Luke's schedule was open, since Merchant Jason fired him from his job. Upon hearing the princess was safe; Merchant Jason congratulated Luke, said he would be missed and gave him a farewell party. That was expected. It was unnatural for warriors to work as laborers.

On a personal note, Luke intentionally avoided seeing Annie. He didn't want any more abuse.

"Ladies and gentlemen welcome to the martial arts competition where we shall crown the mightiest fighter," the announcer called. "We have well over 347 fighters competing. That's too much, even for the greatest of fight fans.

"Therefore there shall be a free-for-all battle. Anyone who leaves the arena during the match, calls for help or dies gets disqualified. The battle will stop when sixteen warriors remain standing.

"Okay warriors, begin. Let's see some blood flowing and may the best warriors feed on the hearts of their enemies."

Battle of the Best

Amid wild cheering a man swung a sword at Luke's head. Luke ducked under the man's guard and drove his fist into his jaw with an upper cut. Big brawls were the type of fighting Luke was used to.

In a brawl it's best to fight as little as possible. Luke focused only on those who attacked him. Nevertheless it was Luke's fiercest battle.

For the next ten minutes Luke kicked and punched like his life depended on it, at the same time dodging countless attacks. Even so, swords and knives turned him into a pincushion as the fight progressed.

In the background the announcer described the fight in gory detail.

Just as Luke felt as if he was going to die, the referee blew the whistle.

"That's it ladies and gentlemen, we have our sixteen competitors. We shall break for two hours while the healers fix up our warriors. Have a good lunch."

An army of healers entered and two guided Luke to a bed in a resting area.

While Luke rested a group of strangers entered.

"That was a great battle Luke," the man said. "I put all my money on you."

"That battle was scary Big Brother," the little girl said. "I was afraid you were going to die."

"Do I know you?" Luke asked.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Of course you do silly brother," the girl said and giggled. "I'm Carol and that is Sister Annie, Brother Philip and Gus. That's my mummy and daddy."

"You are fully healed," the healer said. "Please rest for at least ten minutes and then have a large meal. Food is essential when recovering from so much damage."

"Yes Healer and thank you," Luke said as the healer left for another patient.

"I knew you could last through the preliminaries, son," John said.

"Thank you Majesty – err, what should I call you now, since you're in disguise?" Luke asked.

"Just call us John and Jane while we are in disguise," John said.

"Okay Mr. John, Uncle John," Luke replied.

"Do you really have to fight like that dear?" Jane asked worriedly.

"I'm sorry Auntie Jane but we all must fight for what is important or the world will become a nightmare," Luke replied. "Besides it would be bad if dangerous people got the prize stone."

"None of my people was able to discover the nature of the prize stone," John said.

"It won't matter if we win," Luke replied.

"I didn't expect so much blood," little Gus said, disturbed.

"People are blood-thirsty," Luke agreed. "They like seeing other people get hurt. That's why they hold these events year-round. Fighters compete for fame and fortune."

"Have you competed before?" Philip asked.

Battle of the Best

"Yes, but only in underground competitions where healing stones are forbidden," Luke replied. "My bosses preferred it that way, since it brought in more revenue."

"You're free to go Warrior Luke," the healer said.

"Thanks Healer," Luke replied and got out of bed.

"Let's go for lunch," John said and they headed out.

While walking, Luke glanced at the disguised Annie. She seemed anxious for some reason, as if wanting to say something. He ignored her since he was still upset by her rejection.

They entered the dining hall and ordered food. Annie ate with her usual dainty manner while Carol was too busy talking to eat. In the background a band played music.

"Do you think you can win?" Gus asked.

"I don't know," Luke replied. "These fights aren't won by pure strength and warrior level. The first time I fought I lost when my opponent played a dirty trick on me. At the time I hated it, but now I know that's just part of street fighting. The one who's craftier always wins."

"That's not nice," Annie said condescendingly.

Luke just shrugged. "That's just the way it is. I will do the same to win."

"You will cheat?" Annie asked, shocked.

"Attention everyone, the next round will begin in ten minutes," the announcer called. "Fighters, please report to the ring manager."

"I better be going," Luke said and got up.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Don't forget a kiss for good luck," Carol said.

"Carol, stop that," Luke scolded. "You know your sister doesn't like me, even if I were a prince – which I'm not." With that Luke stormed away.

Annie watched Luke storm away, not knowing what to do. Luke was a hoodlum with no social graces and didn't know the meaning of honor and nobility. He enjoyed fighting and eating and could never sit still. He was also a pervert who saw her naked. So why was he always on her mind? It didn't matter. There were plenty of princes out there for her.

"Carol, please stop it," Jane scolded. "You're only hurting Luke with your comments."

Carol lowered her head guiltily and cried, "I'm sorry."

"Come on, let's go," Gus called. "The fights are starting."



The family entered the stadium and took their places. The announcer began. "Welcome back ladies and gentlemen. That preliminary match was incredible. I haven't seen so much eye-gouging and back stabbing in all my life, except when I went shopping with my wife and there was a sale."

The announcer continued on with his inane banter as match after match began and ended. Finally it was Luke's turn.

Luke entered the ring along with a woman fighter. The referee called, "Begin."

Luke slowly approached the woman and she called, "Wait, stop. I don't want to fight you. You're so big and strong and I'm so small and weak."

Battle of the Best

Luke hesitated and then said, "You should have thought about that before you entered the ring."

The woman broke down and cried. "But I have no choice. Bad men forced me to do this and if I lose, they will kill my poor little son, who's only three years old."

Just then a child called from the stands. "Please don't hurt my mommy mister. She's the only mommy I have." He started crying.

Someone in the audience shouted, "Boo. Don't be a meanie and hurt the little boy's mother."

"Yes, let her win," another person screamed. Moments later the crowd joined the shouting.

Luke stepped back, looking unsure.

"Please do it for my baby," the woman wailed.

Luke nodded with a look of reluctance.

"He's throwing the match," Philip said in shock.

"I'm sorry," Luke said sincerely and extended his right hand.

"No he's not," Carol assured.

"But how can he hurt a young mother?" Annie asked in distress. "That would be horrible."

Luke answered that question by slugging the woman with his left fist, just as the woman took his right hand. The young mother dropped like a sack of potatoes.

The whistle blew. "The winner is Luke," the referee called.

The room went silent in surprise. They were certain that he had lost.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"I can't believe he hit that mother," Annie said in shock. "He really is a hoodlum."

"The winner by a knockout is Warrior Luke," the announcer called. The audience burst into applause.

Luke touched the woman with his glove and she awoke. He carried her away and spoke softly to her, but Annie couldn't hear their conversation.

"That man lacks honor and is uncouth," Annie said angrily. "That's the man you want me to marry, Carol."

"No dear," John corrected. "That was the correct course of action. We need to secure that stone."

"Is that all you can think about?" Annie's mother asked sternly.

"Sorry dear," the father apologized.

Two more matches took place and then the announcer said, "Wasn't that incredible? The blood, the guts, the dirty tricks – that's what fighting is all about. We now have our eight quarter finalists. The next round will begin in an hour. Please take this time to relax and decide who you'll bet on."

The family wandered around as attendees bet on the next round of fights. Finally the next rounds began without Luke visiting.

In this round Luke faced an older man who was perhaps in his early thirties. Luke carried a potato sack in one hand.

"Do you think Brother Luke can beat him?" Gus asked worriedly.

"Of course he can," Carol assured. "He's the greatest warrior in the world."

Battle of the Best

"That won't be easy," John worried. "Luke's warrior level is only 57, while his opponent is 72. Luke can't fight him head on since his gloves will be sliced to ribbons by the power difference."

"What's in that potato sack?" Gus asked.

"Maybe potatoes," Carol suggested.

"Who knows? Warriors are allowed any weapon they choose," John replied.

The announcer signaled the start of the competition and Luke ran to the edge of the rink.

"You can't defeat me Luke," Jerry the fighter jeered. He didn't attempt to move but just recited how great he was. "I know every form of martial arts, from karate to wrestling to boxing to sword fighting. I can handle any kind of bladed weapon and I've fought in venues throughout the world."

Luke ignored him and took out a smoke bomb from the bag. He lit it and then took out a second one.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Do you think you can hurt me with some parlor tricks? You can only defeat me in one on one combat," Jerry asked, confused. "Everyone knows you hate bladed weapons so you can't defeat me."

Annie watched as the arena filled with smoke. An invisible barrier stopped it from reaching the audience. A moment later the smoke cleared, leaving only a slight haze.

"Ladies and gentlemen, for your viewing pleasure we have rendered the smoke almost transparent," the announcer stated. "However, neither warrior can see anything because of the smoke. How will they fight without sight? What advantage does Warrior

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Luke have? He has no special stones that allow him to see in that smoke. As far as I know he is just as blind as Warrior Jerry.”

Annie watched as Luke crouched like a tiger waiting to pounce. He tossed a stone and Jerry turned away. Just then Luke jumped and landed a roundhouse kick to Jerry’s head. Jerry staggered back but didn’t fall.

“Damn coward,” Jerry screamed. “How dare you fight like that? Don’t you have honor?”

Again Jerry staggered as he got another roundhouse kick to the head.

“Where the hell are you, coward?” Jerry screamed, right before being attacked again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the power difference between warriors Luke and Jerry is fifteen. That means no single blow can take down Warrior Jerry. On the other hand, Warrior Luke will most certainly lose should Warrior Jerry land a definite blow.”

“Luke looks like a cat playing with his victim,” Philip commented.

“He certainly has the grace of a cat,” John agreed.

The others in the audience liked the analogy and the idea spread. Suddenly something amazing happened. It was as if a spirit descended on Luke and enveloped him.

“I don’t believe it,” the announcer called excitedly. “We are all watching a rare phenomenon. The spirit of the cat has descended on Warrior Luke. He now has access to the power, ferocity and grace of the cat. This changes everything.”

Luke pounced and gave Jerry an uppercut to the jaw. That was the last straw. Jerry dropped to the floor, unable to get up.

Battle of the Best

The whistle blew. "The winner is Luke," the referee called.

Servants entered and removed the smoke bombs. Within moments the air cleared.

The audience roared with applause. Normally spectators preferred blood, but the thrill of the hunt ensnared everyone.

"That was amazing," the announcer screamed. "This is what fighting is all about. Anyone can defeat their opponent, but few can hunt them down like a cornered animal. Warrior Luke will be advancing to the semifinals."

"Come on I have to say 'hi' to Brother Luke," Gus said excitedly. He dashed off and the others followed.

Gus spotted Luke, ran up to him and gave him a hug. "That was amazing Brother Luke," Gus said with sparkling eyes. "I didn't know you were so incredible. Do you think when I grow up I can be just like you?"

"Of course Gus," Luke replied. "All you need is the kind of training I went through. On second thought, I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

"How does it feel to have the spirit of the cat?" Philip asked.

"My senses are much keener than before and my body feels surprisingly light and flexible," Luke replied. "Other than that I feel the same."

"You're definitely going to win," Gus said emphatically.

"Sorry Gus but nothing is certain in underground battles," Luke replied. "I used a smoke screen for my previous match to level the battle field. My next opponent won't let me do that. I don't even know who I'll be fighting since the last match hasn't ended."

Right on queue the last match ended. The announcer announced the matchup for the two semifinal matches and called for a half-hour break. The break was to let people bet, as well as for injured fighters to heal. Luke was the only quarter-final winner with no injuries.

"My next opponent, Monty has the spirit of the monkey," Luke commented. "While his fighting level is comparable to mine, he will be tricky to deal with."

"Why did you hit that mother?" Jane scolded.

"Because this is a tournament and my code demanded it," Luke replied. "When fighting you must always fight to win, regardless of circumstances. The winner has the power to choose and to act. The loser doesn't. Losing because you feel sorry for your opponent will always backfire in the end. Yes I've seen people fall to that trap multiple times."

"By the way, I asked the woman and found out that the child and those two people were plants. They were trying to make me let down my guard."

"What if the story was true?" Annie accused.

"That doesn't matter. I would still be obligated to win. However I would have done everything in my power to help her, after I won the match. That is my code," Luke replied.

"Welcome back ladies and gentlemen," the announcer called. "Our next match will be between Warrior Luke against Warrior Monty."

"I better be going," Luke said and left.

"Good luck," Annie called. Luke heard it over the crowd and raised his hand. Annie watched as he entered the arena.

Battle of the Best

Luke's opponent was a wiry man with a nyoibō. The nyoibō had the appearance of a barbell with a six-inch shaft. The shaft was Chinese red and the tennis-ball-sized spheres on the ends were golden.

The referee signaled the start of the match and Monty's nyoibō extended to six feet long. He spun it over his head like a baton.

Luke crouched, waiting for his chance. He was ill-prepared for this battle since he never fought someone with a pole weapon that could change its length without warning.

Monty struck with his nyoibō. Luke barely blocked with his gloves. Nevertheless, his hands felt numb from the blow. His old makeshift gloves would have been destroyed by the attacks, along with his hands.

Monty then jabbed Luke with the nyoibō with a speed that made it look like a blur.

"Oh my gods, Luke is getting pummeled," Annie screamed.

"Ouch, you're hurting me," Carol cried as Annie dug her fingers into Carol's shoulders as they watched.

"Sorry Carol," Annie replied and let go. She then covered her eyes as Luke went flying to the edge of the arena. The sound of cracking bones echoed through the air. "I don't want him to die," she screamed.

"I love the sound of cracking bones, don't you?" the announcer called.

"Damn bloodthirsty announcer," Jane swore like the mother she was.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Down in the arena Luke staggered and fell. He reached into his pockets and pulled out some projectiles. He whipped the projectiles at Monty's face, just as the nyoibō came down on his head.

Monty stopped the attack and then used his nyoibō to block the projectiles. That was a bad move. He should have dodged the attack. The bombs exploded, spraying red liquid everywhere. One bomb got through and hit his face.

Monty screamed in pain. He staggered back and momentarily lowered his guard.

"That was an incredible counter-attack by Warrior Luke," the announcer called excitedly. "Who would have thought of using chili sauce as a weapon? Unfortunately Warrior Luke is too banged up to properly take advantage of the opening."

Luke used the time to regain his balance, but he was wobbly on his feet and could barely stand.

Monty hadn't recovered from being blinded and was swinging his weapon wildly around him. That kept Luke jumping as he dodged the unpredictable weapon.

Having an idea, Luke tossed a pebble to the right. Monty whacked down and shattered the concrete floor. He then swung at the opposite location.

Luke pounced and struck Monty in the side. Monty staggered and then swung his nyoibō around.

This time Luke was ready. He let the weapon strike his stomach and wrapped his arms around it. This caused him to get dragged around in a circle as the nyoibō moved.

Battle of the Best

Luke pummeled Monty's face with his left fist. Not used to close combat fighting, Monty couldn't properly defend himself. Monty shrunk his nyoibō, but that didn't help, since Luke held onto Monty's wrist. It also didn't help that Monty was still partially blinded.

Luke kicked Monty's legs out from under him and pinned him to the ground. Monty struggled but it was useless. He was pinned. Luke then took out a knife and held it to Monty's throat.

The whistle blew. "The winner is Luke," the referee called.

"Sorry about the chili sauce," Luke said as he let go.

"That's okay," Monty replied. "I was expecting more from a street fighter."

Together they staggered off the floor and to the waiting healers.

In the stands Annie fell to the floor. She was weak in the knees from the excitement. She wasn't sure if she could handle the next match.

Luke's last opponent was Slivern. He won all his previous matches using psychological attacks. Slivern was a scary man who would rather rip your heart out than look at you and was the current favorite.

"Well ladies and gentlemen, we have our finalists," the announcer called. "Our final match will be in half an hour. Be sure to use that time to place your bets and go to the washroom. I'm certainly going. That match with Warrior Luke and Warrior Monty was bone-cracking intense. Too bad we didn't see any blood."

"So you do like him," Carol giggled.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"No I don't. I just didn't want to see him die," Annie insisted. "I'm going to powder my nose."

Carol giggled and followed Annie.

After a nervous wait, the final match began.

Luke stepped onto the arena floor and faced his opponent. The man, Slivern, greeted Luke with, "Mark Callahan, prepare to die like the coward that you are."

"Who the hell are you? The greatest cowards call everyone that," Luke retorted.

"Wow, the battle has begun with some trash talk," the announcer called.

For the first time Annie heard Luke's last name. *I heard that name before, but where?* Annie wondered. *Wait a minute. Wasn't his name Luke?*

"Begin," the referee called.

"Do you remember how you ran away nine years ago like a coward?" Slivern asked as he struck with his broad sword.

Luke automatically blocked but Annie could see the words had cut him deep.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know how but Warrior Slivern has a memory stone in his possession and he's using it against Warrior Luke," the announcer called excitedly. "It takes years of training to master that stone. For your viewing pleasure, we shall show you those images side-by-side with the real action."

A giant screen appeared above the fighters.

Battle of the Best

Eight-year-old Luke hid in terror behind bales of grass. In front of him was his family. King Gloman's men had rounded up his family in preparation for execution.

Luke seemed completely helpless and terrified. The scene had paralyzed him.

"Look at that," Slivern said mockingly. "Your family is going to die and you just hide there. What a coward you are."

A guard stabbed his sister. She lay on the floor as life ebbed away.

Luke covered his face and screamed, "Noooo." Slivern took that opening to stab at Luke.

Out of pure instinct Luke lowered a hand and blocked the sword. The sword skidded off the armored glove and grazed Luke's side. Blood squirted as Luke staggered back.

"What? Why are you trying to defend yourself? You know you should have died with your family," Slivern goaded.

"Noooo!" Annie screamed in horror as the ghosts of the past tortured Luke. She had never seen anything so cruel in all her sheltered life.

An uncle fell to the ground as his intestines fell out. He too died in agony.

"There goes another one," Slivern sneered.

Again Slivern attacked the defenseless Luke. Again Luke barely avoided fatal wounds by somehow twisting his body. Within moments he was bleeding from multiple wounds. However the pain in his wounds were nothing compared to the pain in his heart.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Luke struggled desperately to subdue the ghosts of his past and fight his opponent effectively but his brain had shut down. He could do nothing but react. Even then, just barely.

"Stop that," Annie screamed in horror. "This isn't fighting fair you dirty coward. Someone please stop the fight."

Annie's voice carried over the cheering crowd as she ran down to the wall surrounding the arena. She tried to jump over the wall, but an invisible force prevented her. She shouldn't have done that, since it drew the attention of the announcer.

"What do we have here?" the announcer asked. "Sorry little lady but this is what underground fighting is all about. Your boyfriend knew this when he entered the arena."

*King Gloman asked a soldier if he had rounded up everyone.
The soldier said yes. The king questioned the family and they
said that was everyone.*

While that was going on Slivern continued mocking Luke and slicing him to ribbons at the same time.

"He's not my boyfriend," Annie screamed. "Why can't you fight fairly like a real man?"

"You're right," the announcer agreed. "Or at least he won't be in a few minutes from now." The audience laughed.

Gus buried his face in his mother's bosom. From there he whimpered, "How come I know how Brother Luke is feeling?"

With furrowed brow, Father replied, "That's because that man is using his power as a professional announcer to reveal everything in the arena he thinks would entertain the audience."

"Come on Mark, your grandmother is going to die next," Slivern called. "Why are you still cowering there?"

"Stop it please," Annie screamed as tears flowed down her face.

"It's so tragic," the announcer mourned. "Your boyfriend is going to die, never knowing how much you love him." The announcer laughed at the sarcasm.

"Why is the announcer being so cruel?" Jane asked as she cuddled Carol and Gus.

"That's because he's using Annie to entertain the crowd," John replied as he watched his family on a second screen hanging above the arena. Everyone heard that, and so did the announcer.

"Oh well that's the last one to die," Slivern said as he watched Luke. "I commend you on your survival instincts. They are the only reason you're still alive. It doesn't matter. In ten minutes you *will* be joining your family in the afterlife. Don't worry. Death by blood loss isn't your destiny. Instead I will end your life with my sword when you can no longer defend. Cowards such as you should just die," Slivern sneered.

Again Luke barely defended.

"Ow, did you see that?" the announcer asked excitedly. "Warrior Slivern almost chopped off his numnuts. How will Annie make sweet love to him without them? It doesn't matter since this is the end for Warrior Luke."

Carol broke loose from her mother's grasp and joined Annie at the railing. "Luke, the man in front of you is King Gloman in disguise," Carol screamed.

The expression on Luke's face changed. At first he looked like a cowering child whose world was ending. The next moment Luke was filled with murderous rage.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Luke stepped forward and grabbed Slivern's sword with his left hand. Six-inch claws extended from Luke's finger tips as he stabbed his right hand into Slivern's heart. Luke's claws went all the way in and out the other side, slicing Slivern's heart and spinal cord. Blood squirted out, soaking Luke in the process.

Slivern looked at Luke in surprise and then collapsed to the floor.

There was complete silence as the audience stared in astonishment at what happened.

The whistle blew. "On account of death, Luke is the winner," the referee declared.

"That was amazing," the announcer marveled. "I never expected that. I guess Warrior Luke really hates Former King Gloman. Annie, remember to undress Warrior Luke and make sure his numnuts are okay."

Annie was too upset, worried and relieved to hear the announcer.

The organizer stepped onto the stage and congratulated Luke on his victory.

"That was incredible young warrior," the man said. "If it weren't for your little friend's advice you would have died. Here is your reward."

The man gave Luke a tiny white box and continued talking. Eventually he left and healers took Luke away. Luke walked like a dead man. The psychological damage was much greater than the physical.

Annie stood by the railing and watched restlessly. The barrier was gone, now that the match was over. However she couldn't move. She would never think of her grandfather in the same way.

Battle of the Best

The rest of the family stood by Annie as the crowds dispersed.

“Come dear, let’s go see Luke,” Annie’s father said.

Annie nodded and wiped away tears.

When they arrived at the healer’s room, they were informed that Luke was sleeping.

Not knowing what else to do the family sat and waited until a healer chased them out and told them to go eat.

The next morning they got to see Luke. His physical wounds were healed but the doctor said his other wounds would need time.

They entered the room and Carol jumped on the bed and hugged Luke.

“Are you a goddess?” Luke asked Carol.

“Why do you ask? Is it because I’m so cute?” Carol asked with a giggle.

“That’s not what I meant,” Luke replied.

“Are you saying I’m not cute?” Carol asked with a pout.

“That’s not what I meant either,” Luke replied. “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“Are you ready to get snuggly with Annie?” Philip asked.

“Shut up Brother,” Annie scolded as her face turned red.

Luke looked curiously at Annie and then said to the king, “Here’s the stone Uncle John.”

“You keep it. It belongs to you,” John replied. “When the time is right, the box will open and reveal a stone you require.”

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"So what do you think of Annie's confession?" Philip asked.

"I said shut up," Annie screamed.

"What are you talking about? You know she has no feelings for me," Luke replied. He turned to Annie and asked, "Why is your face red?"

"Don't you remember what the announcer said or what Annie said?" Gus asked.

"Gus, in fighting venues, contestants can't hear the announcer, or see the overhead screens," John explained. "According to the rules Zelus, god of competition has defined, contestants are allowed to hear the cheering and booing of the audience. Also, these rules define what contestants may or may not hear when audience members try to speak to them."

"That is correct," Luke agreed. "The only thing I heard was Carol giving me advice. What did Annie say?"

"Annie ran to the...Ugh." Philip grunted in pain as Annie elbowed him.

Trying to change the subject, Annie said, "Slivern called you Mark Callahan. Is that your name?"

Luke nodded.

"You were trying to hide your identity because you were the rebel leader's son," John suggested.

"I'm not the rebel leader's son. My dad was just a farmer," Luke denied. He paused and added, "That would explain why we were attacked. That also explains why Upheaval took me in just after the massacre. However, they never told me."

Not telling fostered a victim mentality in you, making you easier to control, John mused. He didn't say that.

"I bet on you and made a killing," John said, changing the subject. "I'll give the money to the poor."

"Thank you Uncle John," Luke said with a smile.

Carol pressed on the tip of Luke's finger and a half-inch claw popped out. "That's so cool," Carol said excitedly. "Luke is like a real live kitty. Daddy, can I keep him?"

"No dear, he's not a pet," her father objected. "Besides cats are restless creatures who never like staying still."

"By the way, what are numnuts? The announcer said Annie should..." Carol began innocently.

"Carol," Annie screamed.

Luke looked confused. "I never realized that royalty liked talking about such things."

"How are you feeling dear?" Annie's mother asked in concern.

"I'm okay Aunty Jane," Luke replied. "I didn't think I was still affected by what happened nine years ago. I know why the gods allowed me to live. They knew I would be great entertainment for them."

Jane sat down on the bed and gave Luke a hug. Luke closed his eyes and purred as she stroked his face like a child.

Luke got up suddenly with a wide-eyed look. Tears streamed down his face.

"I'm sorry," the queen apologized. "I didn't mean to upset you."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"No, you just surprised me," Luke replied, wiping away tears. "My mother used to do that when I was a baby. I didn't mean to take up so much of your valuable time."

"We are here because we want to be," Jane said gently.

"It's okay Auntie Jane," Luke said with a smile. "You don't need to feel guilty about the past. You and Uncle John are not responsible for what happened. I have a new family to take care of, so it's all good."

"You mean us?" Carol asked.

"Yes I mean you," Luke replied and tapped Carol on the nose. He then tickled her until she giggled. Luke turned to the king and said, "I guess it's time to return."

John nodded. "There's nothing more to do here."

Not Again

How can you rule the world,
if you don't go further than everyone else?

Luke stood by as Philip puked his guts out. Unlike Philip, Luke could handle liquor.

"Tell me again why I need to do this?" Philip asked in a slurred voice.

"I told you before. In this world of deception, intoxication can't be avoided," Luke explained. "Your enemies will use it to control you. Therefore you must master drunkenness. I learnt that the hard way on the streets and in Upheaval. But if you can master it, then you'll have the advantage. Don't worry. You'll master drinking games in no time."

"Master Luke, you're needed at the palace," a guard called.

"Okay," Luke replied. He used his healing stone to heal Philip's drunkenness and then his own.

"It feels good to be sober," Philip said as he stepped into the carriage and deactivated his disguise stone.

"Prince Philip, I didn't know it was you," the guard said apologetically.

"No problem Roger," Philip replied as they drove away.

They entered the royal private suite and Luke found Carol standing in the center of the room. She looked visibly upset. A moment later she ran into Luke's arms.

"What's the matter Carol?" Luke asked as he hugged the child. "Let me guess. Annie is in trouble again. It's as if the gods enjoy putting her in danger just so I can rescue her."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"You might be right," John said as he entered the room. "An hour ago Annie disappeared from her room. We searched everywhere but couldn't find her."

"Please save her," Carol begged.

"Yes, please save her," Gus added tearfully as he entered the room with his mother.

"Why must a nobody such as me need to do these things?" Luke grumbled. "Fine. What must I do?"

"To begin you'll need a tracking stone," John said. "It's a must-have for hunters. You'll need a good night's rest since it's in the lower dungeons."

"Why isn't anything easy?" Luke asked as he anticipated a life-threatening experience. "It's almost midnight. I might as well go to bed. Good night Carol, Gus, Majesties, Philip."

"Aren't the dungeons filled with monsters?" Gus asked.

"All dungeons are filled with monsters," John said. "The further in you go the more powerful the monsters become. At the same time, the treasures the gods give out become that much more valuable. The tracking stone is very valuable, since it can track any elusive prey."

"Can't we send in the army to get the stone?" Gus asked. "Why do we have to place Brother Luke in so much danger?"

"I can't send in the army since everyone would die," John explained. "That is the nature of monsters and dungeons. Only adventurers seeking treasure may tackle dungeons. That is the will of the gods. Also, only Luke will allowed to use the stone once he retrieves it."

"Can I go?" Philip asked.

The king shook his head. "You need a fighting level of at least 55 to tackle it."

Luke frowned and said, "I'm only 59."

"Don't worry," Gus said. "I know you can do it. After all, you're so cool."

"And you're destined to marry Annie," Carol added.

"You should have been born a prince," Philip added.

Luke laughed. "You don't need to flatter me so much. I said I'll do it."

"Luke, it's time for you to go to bed," Jane said firmly. "You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow."

"Yes mother," Luke said. He paused a moment as he realized what he said. His face turned red and he bowed his head in embarrassment. "I'm sorry Majesty. I didn't mean to say that."

The queen gave Luke a motherly hug and said, "I'm happy you feel that way. We all love you. Now go to bed. Mildred, please show Luke the guest room."

Waving good night, Luke followed the maid.

In bed, Luke drifted to sleep, wondering why the Family was treating him like kin. All his life he had known them from afar as a force of nature that everyone bowed to. However, within their living room, they were just like regular people.



The Princess and the Hoodlum

Morning light streamed into the luxurious guest bedroom. Luke bathed and changed into his newly washed clothes. There was no real point in bathing since he was going into the dungeons. However he had no choice since he would be meeting the royal family before entering the dungeons.

Mildred stepped into the room and said, "Master Luke, Her Majesty is expecting you in the dining room."

"Thank you Mildred," Luke replied.

Luke followed the maid into the royal dining room and met the family. Carol ran to him and gave him a hug. She then sat him on a chair next to her.

"Are you okay Luke?" Jane asked. "Aren't you worried about retrieving the stone? I don't know why we need a new stone from the gods, but John insisted."

Luke shook his head. "I'm just not comfortable around royalty. I'm especially not comfortable about how people are treating me."

"How are people treating you?" Jane asked, frowning. "Are people treating you badly?"

"Quite the opposite Majesty," Luke replied. "I'm of the warrior class now. However people are treating me as something higher than my station."

"You'll have to get used to it Luke," John stated. "You're one of my important advisors now and everyone knows it."

"Yes Majesty," Luke replied stiffly.

"You should be proud Luke," John added with a smile. "People would do anything to be in your place."

“Eat Luke,” Jane commanded. “Very few people have successfully retrieved the stone and I want you to be at your best.”

“Yes majesty,” Luke replied and focused on eating.

After breakfast, everyone headed to the back of the palace.

Luke found himself in front of a set of imposing steel doors. Above the entrance was a sign that read, “Dungeon portal. Enter at your peril.”

“Good luck Luke,” John said with a smile.

“Thank you Majesty,” Luke replied nervously. The doors swung open and he stepped in.

Luke found himself in a dark stone corridor heading deep into the mountain. One by one, torches flickered into life as he stepped in. Moments later the doors slammed shut with a resounding thud.

Through eerie silence Luke walked into the bowels of the mountain. Stone faces scowled at him as he proceeded. The passageway branched. Not knowing which way to take, Luke went left.

The tunnel branched again and again. With a feeling of dread Luke realized that he was lost.

According to legend, without a tracking stone, one could be lost forever as your bones turned to dust in the vast catacombs of the underworld.

Continuing his trek, Luke arrived at a large room, the floor of which was littered with bones. The bones assembled themselves into a skeleton army. Each skeleton had a rusty sword and a helmet that had nothing to protect, since their skulls were empty.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Luke extended his claws and pounced. Within moments skeletons disintegrated as Luke shredded them with his talons. Coins and other useful items dropped to the ground as each monster was vanquished.

A monster is not a natural creature, but one created by the gods to challenge adventurers and would-be heroes. As such it was okay to kill them, since they weren't alive and had no feelings.

The gods bestowed treasure for vanquishing monsters, based on the type of monster and strength.

Luke picked up his booty and continued his journey.

Eventually the passage ended in a cave system. Low-level light permeated the area, allowing Luke to navigate.

Cave after cave opened up as passages shrank and expanded. Each new location brought new monsters to fight and more booty to be collected.

"How much further?" Luke asked himself as he stopped by a river. He took a drink and worked on healing his wounds. Healing stones were incredible. Unfortunately users couldn't use them while in active combat.

Thirst quenched, Luke scrambled over a ridge and almost had a heart attack.

Facing Luke was a vast cavern over two thousand feet in diameter. In the center was an ancient step pyramid. The top of the pyramid held the altar and a shining green light. That was not what frightened Luke.

What frightened Luke was the army of monsters surrounding the pyramid.

A Foreign Country

A foreign country is just like home –
if you live there

“Luke, Luke, where are you?” Annie mumbled in her sleep as she tossed restlessly about.

“Wake up princess. You’re having a nightmare,” a woman called.

Annie opened her eyes and found an elderly woman looking worriedly at her.

“Highness, let me help you change,” the woman continued. “Prince Henry is looking forward to meeting you. In time you will learn to love him.”

Henry? I thought Andrew was trying to kidnap me. If that’s true, then daddy won’t know where I am. Annie pushed that unpleasant thought to the back of her head.

“No I won’t,” Annie said in annoyance as she got out of bed. “Henry is an idiot.”

Unable to refute Annie’s statement, the woman said, “My name is Hilda. I will be your servant from now on.”

“Where are we?” Annie asked and then realized she knew the answer. She must be in Burla, capital of Grenden.

“We are in Burla,” Hilda replied.

Fully dressed, Hilda escorted Annie to the dining-room where her hosts greeted her.

“Welcome Princess Annie to my humble abode,” King Zenbil of Grenden said with a smile. “I hope you had a pleasant sleep.”

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Hi Annie," Henry greeted. "Isn't it great? We can now get married."

"Let me think about that," Annie said. She then exclaimed, "No!"

"But why not?" Henry asked in seeming surprise.

"Three reasons," Annie replied. "First, you're an idiot. Second, you're a coward weakling. Third, I refuse to marry a kidnapper."

"Young lady, if you think you're going to get rescued by your prince, you can forget it," Zenbil said gently.

"My prince?" Annie asked in confusion.

"Don't play dumb," Zenbil said. "We heard you calling for Luke in your sleep."

"It's rude to listen to princesses while they sleep," Annie said angrily, covering up the fact that she had no idea what they were talking about. She didn't remember calling out to anyone in her sleep, least of all to Luke.

"Wizard Jessie, do you know the prince she called?" Zenbil asked and sat down to table.

Annie sat down as well and ate with the others. She had no desire to eat with her captors. However she knew going with the flow was the best strategy at the time.

"No majesty," the wizard replied. "According to my research, there are currently five single princes with the name of Luke. One is 87, one is 54, one is 32, one is 19, and the last is 4. Luke of Hensing is the best candidate."

A Foreign Country

Annie had gone out with Prince Luke on several occasions since he was a handsome prince from a wealthy country. However she had no interest in him since he seemed to lack a certain something.

"It doesn't matter," Zenbil replied. "There's no way they'll track us since we are in my palace. Besides, everyone will think that Prince Andrew of Balzac kidnapped you."

"They'll be wasting their time trying to hunt you down in the wrong country while my son is marrying you. By the time they find out, it will be too late."

"But why?" Annie asked.

"Don't you think you're worth marrying?" Queen Gracie of Grenden asked.

"Of course I do," Annie replied. "That doesn't explain why you kidnapped me."

"We didn't kidnap you dear," Gracie replied. "We just invited you to our humble kingdom so that you could better get to know your fiancée."

"The wedding will be held the day after you turn eighteen," Zenbil declared.

"Don't I get a say as to whom I marry?" Annie asked indignantly.

"You're my destined honey," Henry said with a smile. He then added, "Please pass the honey, honey."

"Would you like some bees with that honey?" Annie asked sweetly.

"Now, now kids, play nice," Gracie scolded.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Thoughts of Luke popped into Annie's head. She wondered what he was doing. It didn't matter. Even he, with his knack for rescuing her, was no match for the security built into the royal palaces of all countries.



Back in the caverns Luke pondered his dilemma. There was a near hundred percent chance he would die. Either he would be killed by monsters or he would spend the rest of his life wandering the desolate labyrinth under the mountain.

For a moment Luke considered opening the box containing the mystery stone. That would save him the trouble of getting a tracking stone the hard way. He quickly discarded the idea. He knew gods and knew that taking a shortcut now meant certain doom in the future. The fact that he was sent here meant that the mystery stone was needed later.

Discarding the thought of an easy quest, Luke approached the main chamber. He whipped a stone at the nearest monster and struck it in the head. It ignored him.

Cursing, Luke stepped closer. All at once a dozen monsters charged. Luke turned tail and ran.

Safely away from the entrance, Luke turned and faced his prey. He extended the claws on his toes and gave the nearest bearley-bear a kick to the stomach. It disintegrated, leaving behind a magic bag. That was good news since he was running out of space to hold his loot.

Magic bags were amazing things. They could hold huge quantities of items without being bulky or gaining weight. However, there were limitations on their use.

A Foreign Country

First, they had 100 pockets to contain items.

Second, each pocket could only contain one type of item. These items could stack to 100.

Third, it had to be an item that you could carry for at least an hour. That meant you couldn't put a house into it, unless you were Hercules. With Luke's strength, he could carry items weighing over 340 pounds on his back for the required hour.

Last, bags couldn't be bought or given away, since they would disintegrate. They had to be earned in dungeons and by deeds of valor.

For liquids, you could store 100 gallons. For bulk items such as flour, you could store your weight limit.

There were some exceptions. Jewels could be stored together as a bulk item. Bronze, silver and gold were also considered bulk items, as were coins.

Finally there were multi-bags. These could hold 100 regular magic bags. There were also mega-bags that stored 100 multi-bags, but Luke never had the luck of finding one.

Before the dust settled another monster took the bearley-bear's place. Again Luke attacked, this time with a hand swipe. By the time he finished, Luke was bruised and battered. He then went to the entrance and lured out the next batch of monsters.



"Majesty, Master Luke has successfully retrieved the tracking stone and will soon arrive at the dungeon entrance," a servant reported.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Thank you Bernard," John said in genuine relief. He was so worried about Luke that he couldn't concentrate on work. Luke had been gone for just under 32 hours. That was faster than the king expected.

The royal family arrived at the dungeon entrance, just in time to see the doors swing open.

Luke staggered out, completely exhausted. His clothes were in tatters and covered in blood. Carol and Gus greeted him by giving him a hug.

"I was so worried about you," Little Gus said.

"I see you have increased your level to 62. That's three levels in under 32 hours. That's impressive," John admired.

"Thanks Majesty," Luke replied as the two kids guided Luke to their private quarters. "That dungeon kicked my ass."

In the living room Luke tossed several bags onto the table and then collapsed in a comfy chair.

"That's the gold and jewels I collected from the dungeon," Luke said as he cuddled the kids. "Please give them to the needy."

"Now you can find Sis, can't you?" Gus asked.

"Gus, your dad doesn't need me to find Annie," Luke said tiredly. He was too physically, magically and emotionally drained to chase after that tiresome girl. "He has already summoned many adventurers. Your sister will be found."

"How do you know I summoned many adventurers?" John asked.

"Because that's what bosses do," Luke replied. "After Gloman, after the incident...While at Upheaval, the boss would many times

send me out as a watcher, to make sure other members of the guild did what they were told.

“Occasionally other watchers would slip up and give their presence away to me. I always pretended I didn’t see them. That was one reason why I left. I couldn’t stand the backstabbing and the brutality. Also, too many civilians were getting hurt and not just soldiers and government officials.”

“Didn’t they try to kill you?” John asked.

“Dozens of times,” Luke admitted. “Getting away from them, together with my assassin training taught me everything I know about street fighting and the art of stealth.”

“That’s too much life experience for someone so young,” John sympathized. “Please believe me when I say you’re my only hope for finding my daughter.”

“Please,” both Gus and Carol pleaded in unison.

Luke looked down at two tiny upturned faces and couldn’t say ‘no’.

“All right,” Luke sighed. “I’ll look for her.”

“Yay,” both kids cheered happily. Mother, father and elder brother looked equally relieved.

Luke touched the tracking stone on his gauntlet, closed his eyes, and focused on the image of Annie. Thoughts of the girl flooded his brain.

He remembered how helpless she looked when stuck in the river. He remembered how useless she was when doing domestic chores and how upset she would get for being forced to do chores that were beneath her station.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Sometimes Annie would get sad at night when she missed her family. At other times she showed a great deal of gentleness as she tended the orphans, even when they were being naughty or threw tantrums.

At the castle she loved flirting with the nobles and princes that visited but never gave her heart to anyone. She seemed like a child with too many toys, none of which satisfied her.

Annie's eyes were a fascinating shade of blue that seemed to change with her mood. They would turn stormy when she was angry or brilliant when happy or like the endless sky when she was peaceful.

Luke remembered how she looked when he woke up in the tree fort and saw her lying there in just her nightdress. Her nightdress had ridden up, exposing her belly button. He remembered clearly that she wasn't wearing panties or bra.

Luke's body went rigid and convulsed as if he was hit in the gut by a powerful blow.

"Your nose is bleeding," Gus said anxiously.

"That's because he's thinking perverted thoughts about Annie," Philip said with a chuckle.

Luke immediately got up and stepped away from the kids. He then walked around, trying to get the image of the naked princess out of his head. "The princess is in Burla, capital city of Grenden. She's in the palace."

The king nodded solemnly. Just then a maid entered and announced that dinner was ready for Luke.

"Luke, go have dinner," John commanded and Luke followed the maid out. "And then go to sleep."

A Foreign Country

John waited for Luke to exit and then said, "I can't believe King Zenbil kidnapped Annie. I was certain that the Balzac kingdom was behind it. Now that we have a location, we can make preparations."

"Dad, didn't you know before?" Gus asked.

"According to Major Jensen and the other traitors we questioned, the Balzac kingdom was behind the kidnapping attempts," John said. "However I wanted to make certain. I didn't want an unnecessary war."

"But why Luke?" Philip asked.

"The security around a country's capital palace is so strong that only people with a special bond can break the barrier. Only Luke, with his bond with Annie could find her. That was why it was necessary for him to retrieve a tracking stone. Don't tell him. By divine decree that's something he has to find out on his own."



Luke got up bright and early next morning and Mildred greeted him cheerfully with a "Good morning Master Luke."

"Good morning Mildred," Luke greeted with a yawn. He stretched and got out of bed.

"Your bath is ready," Mildred said and helped him undress. He didn't object to her undressing him since that was her job and it would upset her if he made a fuss.

Stepping out of the washroom Luke found new clothes for him on the bed. The design had Chinese influences with loose pants and vest. The reds and golds were rather attractive and stately.

"I can't wear that," Luke exclaimed, feeling embarrassed.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"I'm sorry Master Luke but that is what His Majesty gave for you to wear," Mildred said.

Luke reluctantly let Mildred dress him, and then admired himself in the mirror. He then noticed that on his back was the image of Byakko, the guardian deity of the west. The crouching white tiger stared defiantly at the world with its pale blue eyes.

Luke's gloves and boots changed their appearance and blended with his new clothes to make a seamless image.

Mildred looked admiringly at Luke and said, "The royal family is waiting in the dining room."

Feeling self-conscious, Luke followed Mildred. In the dining-room Gus and Carol greeted Luke with a hug.

"Majesty, I don't need new clothes," Luke said shyly.

"But you look so cool in those clothes," Gus insisted as he guided Luke to the table.

"Luke, there is no need to be embarrassed," John assured. "By your deeds of valor, you have earned the right to wear the image of Byakko."

Each profession had its own set of guardian deities. Wearing the image of one of the deities was forbidden to all except by permission of the king or the gods. It was the highest honor someone of the professional class could receive.

"There is a more important reason why I gave you that regalia. You will be part of the expedition to rescue my daughter," John said. "Philip will lead the expedition of course, since he is a prince. However, your knowledge and experience is essential in this endeavor. Please give him your full support."

A Foreign Country

"Of course Majesty," Luke said and bowed.

"You have all of today to make whatever preparations you need," John concluded. "The ship will leave tomorrow morning."

"Eat dear before the food gets cold," the mother said.

"What are your plans?" John asked.

"I have to tell my people that I will be away for an unknown period of time," Luke said.

"Can we come too?" the kids asked.

"You have studying to do," their mother said sternly. That evoked a few grumbles.

"I'll be spending most of the day meeting adults and making sure everything is okay," Luke explained. "In the evening I can take you to the orphanage and we can play with the other kids."

"Do you mind if I come along?" Jane asked. "I'm curious about the orphanage."

"Of course Majesty," Luke said. "It's too bad they'll never know that royalty is visiting them." Luke paused and then added, "I wonder if the gods do the same."

"Of course they do," John said knowingly. "They care very much for us."

Luke wasn't sure about that but he let it slide, since he didn't want to argue.



After breakfast, Luke went to the secret room and changed back to his regular clothes. He then went to the royal stables and

The Princess and the Hoodlum

borrowed a horse. Normally he preferred running. However, time was of the essence.

Luke met the nearest member of the neighborhood patrol. He explained that he needed to leave the area for an unknown period of time. He then went to several other members to inform them of his absence. That took him all afternoon. That was necessary since a patrol meeting wasn't scheduled for that night.

Rounds completed, Luke returned to the palace. There he found the mother, Carol and Gus waiting for him. They put on disguise stones and Luke drove them to the orphanage in a modest-looking carriage. Carol and Gus had been there before, but it was the first time for their mother.

At the orphanage Luke greeted Gertrude and said, "Mother Gertrude, this is Aunt Jane, Annie's, Carol's and Gus' mother."

"Oh my," Gertrude said in surprise, instantly seeing past the disguise. "Interesting people keep visiting me all the time."

"Mother Gertrude, I need to be away for an extended period and will not be able to make my regular rounds," Luke continued. "I informed members of the neighborhood patrol. By the way, I made friends with General Walters of the Imperial Army. If there's an emergency please contact him and hand this item to him as proof that you know me."

"When did you do that?" Jane asked.

"Last week," Luke replied. "I gave him a list of my most trusted people." He turned and said, "Mother Gertrude, Aunt Jane is interested in understanding how this place runs."

"It would be my pleasure," Gertrude said.

A Foreign Country

Luke went to the main hall and called out, "Okay kids it's play time."

The kids entered and Luke had to explain that he would be away for an extended period of time. That made everyone sad.

Jane watched as Luke roughed-housed with the children. "The children love him don't they?"

"Yes Mrs. Jane," Gertrude agreed. "He's both a big brother and father to them. The god Kindschutz has given Luke his blessing to work with children, although Luke doesn't know that. I asked Kindschutz if Luke could become his cleric but Kindschutz said that was impossible. I asked why and he said that Luke had a destiny that couldn't be revealed at this time."

"When did you find out about Annie?" Jane asked.

"Only after it was revealed that Luke was hiding the princess," Gertrude said. "Thinking back I should have recognized her. Luke kept calling her 'Princess'. Also, her attitude and lack of domestic skills were red flags.

"However, at the time, it was inconceivable. Why would a princess pretend to be an untouchable and come live with me. Also, Luke's hatred of the royal family is legendary. No offense.

"Now he dines with royalty. Amazing.

"Majesty, I mean Mrs. Jane, what did you want to know about the orphanage?"

A New Journey

Travel the world

Fight monsters

Have fun

Luke stood by the king as the merchant ship *Cumulus* docked. The ship sat atop a cloud slightly larger than itself. The sails fluttered in the wind as crew loaded supplies.

Several people got off the ship and approached them. Luke recognized one. It was Monty the monkey-boy.

Monty stopped in front of Luke and looked at him curiously. Feeling self-conscious, Luke stepped behind the king.

The group got down on one knee and greeted John. Captain Jonathan of the *Cumulus* just bowed since he was a noble.

"All is in readiness Majesty," Jonathan said.

"Luke, stop hiding behind me," John said sternly. "You are now an elite warrior. Act like it."

"Yes majesty," Luke said timidly.

"Don't be a scaredy-cat," Gus said and giggled. Luke frowned at him but said nothing. He however did step away from the king.

"Bye mum, dad," Philip said and gave his mother a hug. The kids hugged their brother and then ran to Luke.

"Don't worry kids," Luke said as he hugged them. "I'll do everything in my power to rescue Annie."

"You promise?" Gus asked.

"Of course," Luke nodded.

Carol placed a cat collar around Luke's neck. It made a small *click* as it snapped in place.

Feeling self-conscious, Luke said, "I guess I'm now part of the royal family, alongside Rover. Isn't that great Rover?"

"Roof," the dog barked excitedly.

Monty laughed and soon everyone joined in. Luke's face went red with embarrassment.

"Carol, Luke isn't a cat," Jane scolded.

"But he looks so cute with that collar," Carol complained.

"I don't know about looking cute, but I do know that having a bell around Luke's neck is not a good idea, especially when on a secret mission," John explained.

"All right," Carol sighed and reluctantly dethatched the bell. She then said, "You can put it back on when you return with Sis."

Everyone laughed.

Luke gave the two children a last second hug, turned around and boarded.

Clouds formed ahead of the ship, making a road that led into the sky. The sails billowed and the ship sailed away from the palace.

Luke waved to the kids as the palace diminished into the distance.

"You weren't an elite warrior when we fought, were you?" Monty asked.

"No," Luke replied. "The king promoted me yesterday because of this mission. I'm the same guy you fought. Please don't treat me differently. Do you know when we'll arrive?"

"Don't know," Monty replied. "Come, I'll show you to your room."

"That's strange," Luke frowned. "I can't remove this collar."

"Course not," Monty laughed. "Only your master can do that."

They entered a tiny cabin with two bunk beds housing four people. Luke looked at himself in his gauntlet mirror. The collar was seamless and went perfectly with his clothes. There was no way to remove it. He also noticed dimples around the collar, just like the ones on his gloves and boots. The collar could hold magic stones.

Wondering where Carol got the collar, Luke changed into his normal clothes. Just like his gloves and boots, the collar changed its appearance to match the rest of his clothes.

"Those clothes are a little too pretentious for me," Luke explained. "I'll change back when we are about to land."

Looking more at ease with Luke, Monty asked, "Are you good at climbing? The crow's nest is the funnest place on the ship."

"Okay," Luke replied and followed Monty.

Monty scampered up the rope ladder, followed closely by Luke. The view from the top was magnificent. Luke could see everything. Ahead, the cloud trail led, while behind it the trail dissipated.

Luke tried to find his home town but it was already far away.

"I see you're not afraid of heights," Monty noted.

"Why would I be?" Luke asked. It then struck him and he added angrily, "Hey, I'm no scaredy-cat."

Monty just laughed and then ran on the rigging. Luke chased him and they fought on the mast.

"I hadn't realized that cats were good at climbing," Monty said as he attacked with his nyoibō.

"What are you talking about?" Luke asked as he blocked with his glove. "Cats climb all the time. They love sitting on roof-tops and in trees and walking on fences. They just get skittish when others look down on them. That's why they prefer the high ground."

Below, the crew watched as two high-ranking fighters battled. Laughing and joking, they bounded high above the deck.



"Highness, are you sure we can trust the fate of Princess Annie to those two? I don't think they realize the magnitude of the situation," Jonathan asked in concern.

"Captain, the king, queen and I have complete faith in Luke," Philip assured. "He proved himself multiple times while protecting Annie when no one else could."

"But Luke is a street fighter," Jonathan complained. "Oaths and promises aren't binding for them."

"Nevertheless, I have complete faith in him as a person of integrity." He raised his voice and called, "Warriors Luke, Monty, kindly come down here. There are things we need to discuss."

"Yes Philip?" Luke asked on arriving, slightly out of breath.

"How dare you call the prince by his first name?" Jonathan said angrily.

"Calm yourself Captain," Philip commanded. "I gave him permission to do so. Captain, according to General Walters, you can read a person's true character just by fighting them."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Turning to Luke, Philip said, "Luke, why did you choose Monty for the mission?"

"I chose him because he seemed like someone who would protect my back in times of danger," Luke said. "Also, he has an untamed spirit. I didn't want a Yes Man who would blindly follow instructions. He's the only person I knew who fit the bill."

"When there's untamed spirits and alcohol to be had, Monty is your man," Monty said with a grin.

"Are you sure about this?" Jonathan asked.

"You must trust the gods, Captain," Philip said with certainty. "Luke, Monty, please follow us to the captain's office."

The two followed and entered a room overflowing with books and navigation charts. Books were piled on the furniture, floor and tables. The captain cleared a table and opened a chart.

"This is Grenden," Philip said. "For the last five years it has been waging wars with its neighbors. It has already conquered two neighboring countries. It is only a matter of time before it conquers the other countries of the Ice Continent. We believe it's trying to take over the world."

"That's horrible," Luke said in shock. "Can't you do anything about it?"

Philip just shook his head. "That is outside our jurisdiction. Sad to say but we are neither the biggest nor strongest country in the world."

"You mean we're just a small nameless island nation," Monty translated.

"That's your country you're insulting," Jonathan said angrily.

"I think our country is perfect as it is," Luke declared. "We have all we need and we don't have to worry about other countries invading us."

"Luke is right," Philip agreed. "Captain, please continue."

"Yes Highness," Jonathan relented. "The safest way to reach our destination is through the country of Frigidia. It's a vast, cold, icy, sparsely settled country at the north pole – here."

Jonathan sighed and added, "I don't know why they allowed the crown prince to come. It's too dangerous. Even though our route will avoid any fighting, the northern wastelands are still incredibly dangerous."

"My dad thinks this will be good experience for me and I want to help rescue my sister," Philip objected.

"Perhaps you might gain a guardian spirit before the trip is over," Luke suggested.

"How do people obtain guardian spirits? I obtained mine when I was six, so I don't remember," Monty asked.

"First, people need to recognize you as having the qualities of the specified animal in question," Jonathan explained. "Second, there needs to be an important event to bring out that spirit."

"For me, ever since I was a child people viewed me as having the spirit of a seagull, since I was always drawn to them. My friends dared me to jump off a cliff when I was ten. So I did. The spirit of the seagull descended on me in midair and I flew."

"So what kind of animal best represents the prince?" Monty asked.

"I don't know. Nothing jumps out at me. Something with the power of flight and graceful," Luke suggested.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"I always felt that the prince is graceful like a swan," Jonathan said.

"What's a swan?" Monty asked Luke.

"Don't know," Luke shrugged.

"I have a picture," Jonathan said. He reached into the stacks of books and pulled out a picture book. In it were pictures of swans.

"That's way too girly," Monty frowned.

Jonathan's face turned red and he said, "No it's not."

The conversation was interrupted when a sailor enter in panic. "Captain, harpies are approaching."

Jonathan raised his sword hilt to his lips and spoke into it like it was a microphone. His voice echoed through the ship. "Red alert. Harpies are attacking. Archers at ready. Attack the enemy when they come within range. Guards, take your places. Non-combatants, secure the hatches and retreat for protection."

Luke charged out, followed by the others. The monsters appeared far in the distance.

"I wonder why we are being attacked," Jonathan commented as he stood by Luke. "We are in international air."

Within moments the first harpies came within range and archers fired. Most of the arrows missed as the harpies performed acrobatic aerial maneuvers that seemed designed to mock the archers. The harpies cackled as the arrows whizzed past them, making a horrendous noise, even at a distance.

Harpies have the appearance of 200-year-old women with warts, missing teeth and oily, scraggly hair. Their bat wings had tears and holes in them, making it a wonder that they could fly. The whole

package was wrapped up in a slimy covering of grime and sewer sludge.

"I think that the feminine form is the most beautiful thing in the world, regardless of how old they are," Luke commented. "However that's just gross."

"At least they should wear pants," Monty agreed.

"What do you expect?" Jonathan asked. "They are monsters after all."

The first harpy arrived and pooped on a sailor's head. Others spat green goo that smelled like rotten fish. A sailor screamed as it burned his flesh.

Luke took out a stone and whipped it at the nearest harpy. It hit the harpy in the eye. With a shriek, it plunged at Luke. Luke swiped at the harpy, but it easily dodged. However it did fart in his direction.

Gagging, Luke staggered back and cursed. He couldn't believe it was possible for such a disgusting monster to exist. On impulse, Luke pulled out a bar of soap and whipped it at the harpy.

The soap hit the harpy in the head and instantly dissolved into a frothy lather. The harpy screamed as the lather ate at its flesh. A moment later the harpy disintegrated, leaving behind the fresh scent of soap. A silver coin dropped to the deck.

Luke paused a moment in surprise. He didn't expect that tactic to work. Fortunately he had plenty of soap. Even though two bars of soap were more than enough, he always kept his soap bag full because he hated wasting space and soap was always useful.

With 95 bars of soap available Luke attacked with his newly discovered weapon.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Unfortunately the harpies were agile in the air. The harpy could always dodge, unless it was within six feet of you. Another problem was the harpies were sensitive to danger and only came close if you exposed yourself to attack.

Luke leaned on the railing and showed his back to a harpy. It ignored him. Another harpy spat at him, forcing him to dodge. The first harpy used that opening and dive-bombed him. It was so fast that he had almost no time to turn.

The harpy breathed into Luke's face just as he rammed the soap into her stomach. A second harpy dive-bombed him and then a third.

After that the harpies stayed away. Luke suspected their aversion to him was because he was covered with the strong smell of soap. That didn't stop him from helping out crew members who were in danger.

Half an hour later and with only three bars of soap remaining, the last harpy was vanquished. People with healing stones treated the injured.

The captain and crew crowded around Luke. "Where did you learn that harpies could be defeated with soap?" Jonathan asked in wonder.

"I did it on impulse," Luke replied with a shrug. "Those creatures were begging for a bath."

"What do you expect from a cat?" Philip laughed.



Annie was a prisoner and she knew it. Her captors pretended that she was a guest but eyes always followed her.

A New Journey

Shortly after arriving Zenbil said, “My dear, you are perfectly safe within the palace grounds. However, for your own safety, please don’t leave the palace. Remember, everyone in the palace is here to serve you.”

For a proud creature, being watched by people who didn’t worship her was unpleasant. Pretending she didn’t care, Annie proudly walked down the hallway like a flame eagle surveying its territory.

The flame eagle was a rare predator bird with brilliant red and gold feathers. Resident of the Fire Continent, it forced lesser predators to hunt for it. Said to be one of the most beautiful of birds, it was used to symbolize the royal family of the fire nation of Blaze.

“Did you hear, the attack on Prince Philip’s ship failed?” a guard whispered.

Annie paused by a painting and pretended to admire it. She was curious about the conversation.

“Seriously?” another guard asked in surprise. “Harpies are the most dangerous creatures with their corrosive spit and vicious attacks.”

“Not to mention their body odor,” a third guard laughed.

“One of Prince Philip’s people, a boy with a cat spirit used soap to defeat them,” another guard said. Everyone laughed.

Annie had an image of Luke tossing bars of soap at the carrion-eating creatures and felt like doing a jig. Luke was coming to rescue her.

“Didn’t we send other monsters after them?” a woman asked.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"The flock of terror birds and the hellion beasts were also defeated," a guard said. "Again, the cat boy and a monkey boy took out more than their fair share."

"Enough gossiping," the captain of the guard commanded. "Get back to work. This castle won't defend itself you know."

Disappointed that the conversation was cut short, Annie headed for the library. As usual old people filled the place. Feeling self-conscious, Annie looked for books that would reveal useful information about the city and castle. She knew Luke considered her to be useless, and so she was determined to prove him wrong.

"It's so good to see young people taking an interest in learning," a gray-haired librarian praised.

"Yes Elder," Annie agreed cheerfully. "Without learning, we cannot hope to rule wisely."

"Well said," the man praised. "I just wish Prince Henry was more like you. He isn't the sharpest sword in the armory. With you as the next queen, I know this country will prosper."

There's no way in hell I'm going to marry that ass, Annie thought. Especially when there are superior princes out there.

"Is there anything in particular you're looking for Highness?" the librarian asked.

"I would like to know the history of this palace," Annie requested.

"I would be glad to tell you," the man said joyfully.

For the next two hours Annie was bored silly with pointless tales of the past and inane gossip. The man was a font of useless information.

Lunch came and Annie was forced to listen to the drivel of the royal family. Fortunately people viewed her as being harmless. As a result, she began amassing a wealth of information on the strength and ambitions of the country.

What she learnt was shocking. They were planning on conquering the world. What was more, there was talk of a prophesy that would guarantee their success.



The *Cumulus* proceeded inland at a rapid clip. They stopped briefly at the border as a patrol examined their papers. That done, they headed north. That was another two-day trip.

Luke didn't have time to get bored because of the frequent monster attacks. He also kept busy helping the crew, much to the surprise of everyone. Warriors never work.

As they crossed the Arctic Circle, Luke noticed strange lights in the sky.

"That's the goddess Aurora's veil," Jonathan explained when Luke asked. "Some people think it's an evil omen. I believe it's the gods' way of saying 'hi'."

"It's very pretty," Philip said as he gazed at the spectacle with Luke.

"I wonder if Annie is okay," Luke murmured.

Philip looked at Luke curiously but said nothing. Monty just crouched on the railing and picked his nose.

"No time to relax boys," Jonathan said. "It seems we have more company."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"I hadn't realized that air travel was so exciting," Luke commented.

The captain laughed. "Believe me son, we almost never get this much excitement, and thank the gods for that."

White bird-like creatures the size of elephants arrived, and with it a snowstorm.

The wind picked up as snow pounded the ship. Within moments snow covered everything. That was bad since it made walking precarious.

Luke was fine since he had excellent balance and because he had claws on his fingers and toes. The crew wasn't doing so well.

Just then the snow wrens attacked. As always, Luke used the ship's rigging as a launching pad to attack the monsters.

Two hours later, the exhausted Luke sat down in a pile of snow and rested.

"What are you doing Luke? You're going to freeze your assets off," Monty scolded, shivering. He was bundled in a winter jacket, but that wasn't enough for him.

"Monty is right," Jonathan said. "Put this coat on before you freeze."

"I'm not feeling cold," Luke objected. Nevertheless, he put on the coat and followed the others into the cabin. There he was given hot chocolate.

"If the blizzard gets worse, we'll be forced to ascend to the lower heavens," Jonathan said to Philip. "That's not a place for humans to be, since it's bitter cold and very hard to breath."

"Can't we land?" Philip asked.

"Impossible," Jonathan replied. "In these conditions we'll smash into the ground and get destroyed. Rigging crew, prepare to ascend."

"I'll help," Luke offered and stepped towards the door.

"No Luke," Jonathan commanded. "It's too dangerous for a greenhorn like you in these conditions. You'll need much more training before you can sail rough skies."

"Yes sir," Luke said in a disappointed voice.

"Don't worry lad, I'll work you to the bone when the storm clears," Jonathan promised. He then barked out orders as the crew hustled.

Nothing seemed to happen for the next ten minutes. However Luke did feel an unpleasant pressure on his ears. He clicked his ears to equalize pressure.

The ship popped out from the clouds and Luke found himself staring at an alien landscape of white hills, valleys, pillars and anvils stretching for as far as the eye could see.

It was freezing cold but Luke didn't care. The clouds were too pretty to ignore. He stepped onto the deck and surveyed the world. Above, Luke could see faint stars, even though the sun hadn't set.

"Don't just stand there," Jonathan called. "You wanted to help, didn't you?"

"What should I do Captain?" Luke asked. Responding to commands, he helped trim the sails.

Later at dinner Jonathan asked, "Luke, are you always so energetic? You exhausted my men trying to keep up with you."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"No," Luke replied. "I'm just a little jumpy about what's happening. I don't understand why the Grenden kingdom is so obsessed with kidnapping the princess. I mean what's so special about her?"

"Hey, that's my sister you're talking about," Philip said angrily. He then added, "I thought you liked her."

"Like the proud flame eagle, she's considered one of the most beautiful princesses in the world," Jonathan commented with a frown. "She's also smart, charming, and loved by everyone."

"That's not the point," Luke said defensively.

Luke paused to collect his thoughts and asked, "Why would a kingdom currently at war suddenly kidnap a princess and then frame another country for the crime? There has to be a political reason, and not just because the crown prince has a crush on her. I fear Candarcar might be dragged into war."

"You're right," Jonathan said. "The king is very concerned about the situation. You have a good sense of what's happening."

Flattered, Luke only nodded.

"Admit it Luke, you're worried about Annie, aren't you?" Philip asked. "Isn't that why you're so jumpy?"

Luke nodded. "I feel responsible for her and I don't want Carol and Gus to cry. However I don't think they will hurt her, and she can't get married until she turns eighteen. That's plenty of time to rescue her. Only..."

"Only?" Philip asked.

"I'll tell you in private," Luke said. He didn't want to mention Annie's sleepwalking in front of strangers, and more importantly, the spies aboard the ship.

Before Philip could respond, a sailor entered and said, "Captain, some of the crew is feeling sick."

The captain lifted his sword hilt to his lips and made an announcement. "Attention everyone, altitude sickness is a real danger here. You can only do half the work you normally do. I don't want people dying on me. Remember to take plenty of breaks."

"I can help," Luke offered. "For some reason, that doesn't seem to be affecting me as much as everyone else."

"That's probably because you like climbing Mount Grover," Philip suggested.

"Mount Grover?" Monty asked. "Isn't it snow-capped year-long? Why would any sane person go to such a freezing hell?"

"Fighting Yetis and Ice Wolves in blizzard conditions really sharpen your fighting skills," Luke replied. "The climb gives you an amazing workout and the sun rises are amazing at the summit."



"Mum, dad, that princess is driving me crazy," Annie overheard Henry complaining to his parents. "I have two sisters and plenty of girl cousins. I know that princesses are bratty creatures that expect everyone to worship them. However she's in a whole different league than any princess I ever met."

Hiding in an adjacent room, Annie listened to them with growing excitement. Her plan was working perfectly. There was no princess in the world that could out-princess her, especially when she put her mind into it. It was only a matter of time before Henry gave up and let her go.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"You have to be patient son," Zenbil said gently. "The value of a princess is revealed in how high-maintenance they are. Your mother is a perfect example."

"Hey, I'm not high-maintenance," Gracie said angrily.

"Of course not dear," Zenbil agreed. "You're the most beautiful queen in the world." He turned to Henry and said, "Henry, remember the prophecy. To ensure that we become the future rulers of the world, it is imperative that you marry the princess."

What prophecy? Annie wondered. The idea of a prophecy surrounding her didn't surprise her. That was expected since she was a princess. What surprised her was that her parents never mentioned it. Perhaps they didn't know.

"Majesty," Jessie said on entering the chamber. "We have prevented Prince Philip's ship from entering Iceran."

Iceran was the country north of Grenden, Annie remembered. *Why are they taking so long? It's been almost two weeks. I'm going to kick Luke's butt when I see him for making me wait,* Annie grumbled.

"Good work Wizard Jessie," Zenbil said. "Where are they now?"

"They entered Hensing last night and are now meeting with King Derrick and Queen Alicia," Jessie continued.

"So they *are* trying to get Prince Luke's help," Zenbil murmured. "We need to eliminate that prince immediately. I will not tolerate interference when we are so close to world domination," he declared.

"Yes majesty," Jessie said. "We shall dispatch assassins immediately."

Hearing that, Annie felt guilty for the prince. For a moment she considered telling them that the boy she was calling in her sleep wasn't a prince but just a common warrior.

Don't be stupid Annie, Annie scolded herself. No one will believe that. Even I don't believe that.

Annie continued listening. Unfortunately she heard no new information. It was time to research the new prophecy she just discovered.



Luke ran over the snow-covered ground with a monkey on his back. He had no choice. According to Monty, monkeys were tropical creatures that couldn't tolerate the cold.

That didn't make sense to Luke. After all, Luke didn't seem to have any of the cat's weaknesses. For instance he didn't spend all day sleeping. He did have the cat's restlessness, but he wasn't sure if that was a weakness.

"Why do we have to travel through this freezing hell when we had a nice warm ship to sail on?" Monty grumbled. "Also, why couldn't we use horses?"

Luke ignored his passenger's complaints. Monty knew the answer. Instead he said, "I have to put you down. Your weight is causing me to sink too far down, even with my snowshoes. You can get back up after we cross this snowfield."

After arriving at the Iceran border, the party tried in vain to cross. Luke tried crossing by himself and succeeded. Further experimentation revealed that the border patrol only attacked when Philip tried to cross.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

As a result, they decided to divide their forces. Luke and Monty would head south while the rest would go to the friendly country of Hensing for help.

Prince Luke was a friend and had the spirit of a weasel. If anyone could find a way to cross the border undetected, it was him.

“Look Luke, we finally arrived at a town,” Monty exclaimed. “I can’t wait to sit in front of a warm fire.”

“And I’m getting hungry,” Luke agreed.

The town was little more than a collection of houses on the barren tundra. No one was around when they entered.

“This is the second deserted town,” Luke muttered. “I wonder where everyone went.”

“Maybe the monsters ate them,” Monty suggested. “Let’s just get warm.”

“Don’t be silly,” Luke replied as he picked the lock of a house. “Monsters only lurk in abandoned places. This is a border town. I’m sure it was affected by the war.”

Monty headed to the fireplace and started the fire. Luke prepared dinner.

“I wonder what a war is like,” Monty pondered.

“Probably like a turf battle, only bigger and with more blood,” Luke replied.

“I suppose,” Monty agreed as he warmed his ass by the fire.

“Dinner is ready,” Luke said as he brought in the food.

A New Journey

They ate for a few minutes and then Monty said, "You're an incredible cook. One day you'll make an excellent wife."

"Shut up or I'll roast you for breakfast," Luke replied.

"That doesn't sound like a bad idea," Monty said. "At least I'll be warm."

"And crispy," Luke agreed. "You're washing the dishes."

Grumbling, Monty did as instructed.

Dishes done, Monty found Luke reading a large tome.

"What are you reading?" Monty asked and sat by Luke.

"Big Book of Monsters," Luke replied.

"So what's the most perverted monster in the world?" Monty asked.

Luke checked the table of contents and found a chapter dedicated to perverted monsters.

"Here's one," Luke said and began reading.

Tentacle monster, plant type, found mostly in swamps.

Considered the most perverted of monsters, tentacle monsters sexually harass the women they catch. They do this by slowly dissolving their clothes and fondling their bodies.

An image showed multiple pink slimy tentacles emerging from a swamp.

Tentacle monster slime is considered valuable, since it has a cleansing effect on feminine skin. It also has adult-related uses. As such, tentacle monsters are sometimes cultivated.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Tentacle monsters are weak against fire, acid and poison. A man kiss will paralyze a tentacle for up to a minute, while a kiss from a manly woman will dissolve it.

"What the hell is a man kiss? That sounds gross," Monty grimaced.

Luke flipped to another section and read.

A man kiss is a kiss from a man. Certain monsters can be killed or paralyzed by them. A manly woman can have this effect as well.

"Yikes," Monty exclaimed as he looked at a picture of a muscular woman with mannish features and a big crooked nose.

Luke flipped back, and continued reading.

Warning: Pretty boys are targeted as well.

"I'm glad I'm not a pretty boy," Luke commented with a laugh.

Monty tried to comment but discovered he couldn't move. Moments later both fainted.



Luke opened his eyes and found himself sitting in a well-furnished room, along with at least twenty other people. The room was gently lurching and swaying as if on the back of a giant creature such as an earth turtle. There was no question. Luke and the others were captured without warning.

The slowly awakening people murmured amongst themselves, wondering where they were.

"Welcome new recruits to the Grenden army," an overweight sergeant shouted. "Obey orders, do well and you'll get promoted. Do badly and you'll be harpy food."

If they were kidnapped from the house, that meant the army had kidnapped everyone from the town. No wonder the town was deserted.

“What happened to all the women and children?” Luke demanded.

“What do you mean?” one man asked.

“They took everyone from the towns in the area,” Luke explained. “All our family members were taken away in the night, just like us.”

“You’re quite right young warrior,” the sergeant said. “The lives of your loved ones depend on you being good soldiers.”

“No way,” someone screamed in horror.

“Where are they?” another warrior demanded.

“Here they are,” a wizard standing next to the sergeant said. A screen appeared showing the town people who couldn’t fight in a war.

“Don’t worry,” the wizard assured. “We will put them to work too, to ensure that the great Grenden Empire takes its rightful place as masters of the world.”

“We aren’t cruel people,” the sergeant said. “All who swear loyalty to Emperor Zenbil will be reunited with their families.”

“Each of you is a high-level warrior,” the wizard continued. “Prove your worth and you’ll get a commission in the army. There’s no limit to what you can accomplish in the world to come.”

“We shall arrive at the training camp in two days,” the sergeant said.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"You have that time to think about how bright your future will be as officers in the army," the wizard finished. Moments later the two left the room.

Talking amongst the prisoners increased while Luke stood and watched. A man took out his sword and hit the wall with full force. An energy field became visible at the point of impact. Ripples passed through the field like ripples in a pond before disappearing. The force of the attack knocked the man on his ass.

Luke touched his forehead and Monty did the same. *'Monty, I'm a hoodlum and so my word means nothing. Can you swear loyalty like I can?'*

'No', Monty replied.

'That's too bad', Luke said, disappointed. *'We need to figure out something before they force you to take a binding oath.'*

'There is a way,' Monty said. *'I can swear with my fingers crossed. That should cover me.'*

'Let's hope you can do that without them seeing you,' Luke said.

'On the bright side, we no longer have to worry about travelling through this frozen hell,' Monty added cheerfully.

'That's one way to look at being captured by the enemy,' Luke said with a smile.

The disembodied voice of the wizard spoke. "As level 55 plus warriors, you are important to us, since you'll be helping bring about a miracle of justice to the world. As such I would like to show you how we treat important people.

"Please enter and have something to eat."

A New Journey

The doors opened and beautiful women entered. The women guided the men to a dining room.

"I could learn to like this," Monty said as a large-breasted woman kissed him on the cheek.

A girl that reminded Luke of Annie guided Luke to a seat. He too got a kiss. Food was served and wine flowed.

Luke sniffed the food and wine and touched his healing stone with them. The stone remained pink, indicating the food was safe. Luke ate.

"What's the matter Luke? Aren't you having fun?" Monty asked as he fondled the woman currently sitting on his lap. The woman fed him.

"Loads of fun," Luke said as he ate. All his instincts told him that they were both in trouble. The enemy was somehow brainwashing them onto become tools. He knew he had to act, but mind and body became sluggish.



Luke listened to the unseen voice telling him how great the Grenden Empire was and how lucky he was to serve.

Thoughts of duty vanished as Luke was overcome with sexual desire. He wanted that woman next to him. Nothing else mattered.

"Come my lord," the woman said and guided him to a vacant bedroom. She made him sit on a large bed and then sat on his lap.

In a dream, Luke gently fondled the woman.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Annie would have slapped him if he had fondled her like that. Luke paused as he realized what he was doing.

“What’s the matter my lord? Am I not enough for you?”

A second woman entered. She too reminded Luke of Annie, but in a crude, perverted way. Both women administered to Luke.

Again Luke’s senses blurred. All he wanted to do was make wild passionate love to both women at the same time.

Slowly, mechanically, he began undressing them as they did the same to him.

The second woman touched Luke’s collar and screamed as if burnt.

Did I hurt Annie? Luke wondered. The thought disappeared.

“You don’t need to worry about anything my lord,” the first woman said as she removed the last of Luke’s clothes.

Deep down, Luke knew what was happening was wrong, but he couldn’t fight.

“Just relax and let me suck – oh my, aren’t you a big boy?” the second woman exclaimed.

Again Luke looked at the face that resembled Annie. Something was wrong.

“I’m sorry girls but I don’t want you to get preg...mmmm,” Luke began but the first woman prevented him from speaking by sitting on him.

Luke’s collar felt hot around his neck. He remembered little Carol. He remembered Annie and his promise.

"You're a hoodlum," the first woman said. "Promises aren't binding to you."

That was true. As an oath breaker, promises had no binding power. It was expected that he would break promises. His only purpose in living was revenge against the evil Gloman who destroyed his life. What more was there in life than food, sex, fighting and revenge?

"That's right, my lord. Put it inside me and all your troubles will disappear," the second woman purred. She slowly lowered herself onto Luke. The woman that resembled Annie was doing something Annie would never do.

Luke jerked sideways and screamed, "I belong to someone else."

A wave of energy blasted forth from Luke's collar and knocked both women off him. Regaining his composure, Luke realized with horror just how close he was to being enslaved by the unknown magic.



Luke quickly dressed and looked at the two knocked out women. He was no longer interested in them.

It was then that Luke heard a soft melodious sound filling the room. He followed the sound down several corridors. In one room was a mermaid-like creature. The siren sat in a pool of water and sang its song of enslavement.

Without hesitation Luke chopped its head off with his razor-sharp claws. The monster turned to dust, leaving behind a ring.

Running down the corridor Luke found the room with Monty and entered. The naked monkey-boy was staring at Luke in confusion.

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“What happened? What happened to my harem of wives?” Monty asked.

“Never mind that,” Luke said. “Cover up your disgusting monkey butt. We’ve got to go. The guards will be here soon.”

Looking annoyed, Monty dressed while Luke waited restlessly.

“Let’s go,” Luke said and headed out with Monty following behind. On board, there was confusion everywhere. Apparently the new recruits weren’t the only ones being controlled by the siren.

“Did you free us from that horrible siren?” the wizard asked. “How was that possible? Did you have an oath that protected you?”

“No oath protected me,” Luke denied. “I don’t know why I could break free.”

“Well we are free now,” the wizard said.

“I suggest you take this transport and leave the country before they discover the siren was killed,” Luke said. “Monty and I need to go to the capital.”

“We have horses you may use,” the wizard offered. “Good luck on your mission.”

Waving goodbye Luke and Monty headed out.

An hour into the ride, Monty said, “You’re such a party pooper. I was having so much fun.”



“Thank you for your report Prince Philip,” the king of Hensing said. “Please enjoy my hospitality while I discuss matters with my advisors.”

A New Journey

Philip and Jonathan bowed, turned around and walked out of the room. They had done everything they could. All that was remaining was to await the verdict and hope it was good news.

"Please follow me," a servant said. "We have rooms prepared for you two."

The rooms were standard palace royal guest rooms. With nothing better to do, Philip took out his sword and stepped onto the balcony. Jonathan did the same.

In a serious fight the captain would win, but this was just for Philip to blow off some steam.

Hours passed as Philip became drenched with sweat from exertion. Finally Prince Luke entered.

"Hi Philip," Prince Luke said. "Sorry I couldn't come sooner. I had business elsewhere. I can't believe they captured Annie. I was hoping our two families would allow us to marry. Do you think your father will accept me if I rescue her?"

"I wouldn't know," Philip replied. "We can worry about that later when you rescue her and she is eternally grateful to you."

"That sounds like a plan," Prince Luke said with a smile. "If you'll excuse me, future brother-in-law, I will talk to my parents to see if we can rescue my sweet princess."

My stupid sister flirts with too many guys, Philip thought to himself as he watched the prince leave. Aloud he asked, "How are the repairs on the ship going?"

"The shipyard manager said repairs will be complete in two days," Jonathan replied. "He also said he was surprised we made it to port considering the damage."

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Philip nodded. "Who would have thought they were expecting us at that desolate place. Luke was correct. We had spies on board."

"Cats have keen senses," Jonathan agreed.

Below, a cat sat on a path. It hissed at a passer-by and then ran off.

"I'm not sure I would like to live the life of a cat. It seems too stressful," Philip said. "I would rather have wings to fly."

"Like a swan," Jonathan agreed.

"Captain, the foreman wants to talk to you about some repair work," a sailor informed him as he entered.

"If you'll excuse me Highness," Jonathan said and left the balcony.

With nothing to do, Philip took out a book and studied.

The Rescue

Rule #1: A princess is always in need of rescue

Annie woke up and felt a man lying next to her. Her first thought was that it was Luke. She lay in bed and pretended to sleep, all the while enjoying his presence.

Finally Annie decided she couldn't pretend to be sleeping forever. She opened her eyes and got a shock of her life. It wasn't Luke but Henry.

Shock turned to anger and disgust. How dare that pervert enter her bed? Joining thoughts to action, Annie rammed her elbow into Henry's stomach.

Henry screamed in pain and fainted.

Cursing her sleep-walking tendencies, Annie returned to her room.

Thinking back, odd things kept happening whenever she went to sleep. Several days ago, she woke to find a female guard carrying her. When questioned, the guard said she was taking her to a more comfortable room. That was obvious bull.

Then there was the time when she woke to find shadowy figures in her room. They were gone when she turned on the light.

Feeling groggy, as if someone had drugged her, Annie went back to bed.

At dawn Annie got up and dressed. While walking through the corridor she noticed that people were staring at her. Wondering what the matter was, she went to the dining room and had breakfast.

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“I can’t believe the princess elbow-slammed Prince Henry,” a maid whispered. “The healer said he had massive internal injuries and almost died.”

Another maid muttered, “Everyone says she’s like a flame eagle – beautiful, proud, and incredibly dangerous. I wonder if it’s possible for any man to tame her.”

The news both shocked and disgusted Annie. She couldn’t believe anyone could die from such a small love tap.

Annie remembered when she elbow-slammed Luke. His only reaction was that he got angry at her, despite being hit with twice the force. Now that was a real man.

Feeling bummed out that she would never meet a worthy suitor, Annie headed for the library.

For the next week Annie slept undisturbed in her room. Apparently fear for Henry’s life prevented shifty behavior from the castle personal.

That didn’t help Annie’s mood. She had already deciphered the prophecy and had memorized the layout of the palace, and the timings of the guards. She even figured out how to unlock the secret passageways of the palace. Her only task now was to wait for the rescue, and train to keep herself occupied.



Another night arrived in the detestable castle. Annie hated being cooped up like a caged parrot. She stood on her balcony and stared at the starry firmament, wishing she could soar away like an eagle.

The Rescue

Having nothing else to do, Annie went to bed and closed her eyes, wondering what else she could do to make it easier for when Luke came to rescue her.

Annie felt someone touch her shoulder and whisper, "Annie."

"Eek," Annie screamed in fright and punched the shadowy figure in the nose.

"Ouch," the shadow cried and stepped back. "I think you made my face uglier than it usually is."

"Luke, is that you?" Annie asked, recognizing the voice.

"Yes Annie, broken nose and all."

Feeling overwhelmed with relief and happiness, Annie jumped out of bed and gave Luke a big hug. A moment later she began slamming her fists against Luke's chest. "What took you so long, you big jerk?" Annie cried as tears flowed.

"Sorry princess, the commute was horrible," Luke replied as he wiped away tears.

Luke waited until Annie calmed down and then said, "I'm glad you're sensibly attired."

"I had no choice," Annie grumbled. "I'm in enemy territory, surrounded by perverts."

"I'll wait outside while you get ready." He stepped away from the princess and out onto the balcony.

Annie changed into her travel clothes and joined Luke. "I spent my time here getting familiar with the castle layout, grounds and secret passages. I'm also familiar with the surrounding area and have a map of the area."

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"That's excellent," Luke praised. "That will make escape easier. I left a travel companion with our horses in the woods to the north and snuck in. I'm surprised how lax the security is."

Feeling useful, Annie said, "That's because an honored guest can invite people she trusts into the palace without raising the alarm. It's good that you didn't bring your companion or the alarm would have sounded. The alarm will sound the moment I leave the palace grounds."

"That'll be a problem," Luke considered.

"You're level 65 I see," Annie noted. "That's good, because all the strong people were sent to the front. The highest level wizard in residence is level 59."

"Seriously?" Luke asked in astonishment. "I can't believe they would do something so foolish. That makes escape much simpler. I'll turn on my anti-surveillance stone just before we leave the palace grounds. Here's the disguise stone your dad gave me."

"I'll also change your crest, just to be safe."

"Change it to warrior," Annie suggested. "Three anonymous warriors travelling together should be less suspicious." Luke did as instructed.

Luke followed Annie as they went through a secret passage. Minutes later they emerged in the woods. Carrying Annie, Luke ran at top speed through the snowy darkness.

Half an hour later they arrived at Monty's location.

"Monty, this is Princess Annie," Luke said. "I changed her crest to that of warrior and made her anonymous using the stones the king gave me."

The Rescue

"Pleased to meet you Princess," Monty said with a bow.

"I know you," Annie said. "I saw you at the underground fight."

"I was cool, wasn't I?" Monty grinned.

Annie ran up a hill and looked at the sky. She slowly raised her hands up and said, "I'm free."

The spirit of the flame eagle descended on Annie as they watched. The time spent in captivity and her newfound freedom had summoned Annie's guardian spirit.

"Annie, get down here before you're spotted," Luke called in panic as he physically carried her into the woods. He put her down and said, "I see you obtained the spirit of the flame eagle."

"Your father told me you would probably receive that spirit after being released from captivity. As a result he gave me a boat."

Flying boats and ships can only be operated by people who have guardian spirits with the power of flight, or wizards with a wind stone.

Luke released a 350 pound boat from his magic bag. It materialized in front of them. It was an eighteen feet long boat with a tiny cabin.

"That's an expensive-looking boat," Monty commented as he freed the horses.

"Can't be helped," Luke agreed. "Annie is a princess and this was the only boat that fit my weight limit. Get aboard. We need to leave immediately."

They got on and Luke said, "Annie, sit here and command it to take off. Try to stay as close to the ground as possible. According to the

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shipyard owner, flying is easy. Just visualize what you want and command it and it will do as you say.”

Looking uncertain, Annie took the seat. For several moments nothing happened. Then the boat jerked into the sky.

“Eek,” Annie screamed and the boat crashed.

“Ouch,” Monty groaned as he landed hard on his butt.

“Calm down Annie. Just go slowly and gently. You can do it,” Luke reassured. “Slowly, gently let the boat rise. Now slowly move it forward.”

With gentle coaching they began their progress. Off in the distance the castle was ablaze with lights.

“I can’t see where we’re going in the dark,” Annie complained.

Thinking fast, Luke leaned on the dashboard and pointed. “I’ll give you directions. I have excellent night vision. Tell me when you need some restoring potion. I’m going to extend the anti-surveillance field to its maximum. That should make pinpointing us harder.”

Luke directed the boat away from the port, hoping to do something to confuse the enemy. The important thing was to get away from the capital as soon as possible.

Twenty miles later, Luke reduced the field size to only around the boat. At that distance it would be difficult to spot something so small.

“We’ll travel another twenty miles inland, then parallel the border and then out to sea,” Luke explained.

The Rescue

“Why are you nervous? We made it out,” Monty asked as he munched on a banana.

“Never underestimate the abilities of the enemy, especially in their domain,” Luke lectured. “By now they should be searching the port town and vicinity. They don’t know we have a boat, but we can’t assume that.”

Two hours into the flight, Annie looked exhausted.

“Sorry we can’t use the cloud path. That would be too visible,” Luke apologized. A thought occurred to him. “Annie, head up into the clouds. With luck it won’t occur to them to search the sky.”

Annie nodded and they zoomed into the sky. As they ascended the air became thin.

“That’s enough Annie,” Luke instructed. “Too high and we won’t be able to breathe. Now we activate the cloud trail to make us look like a giant cloud drifting to sea.”

Deed done, Annie relaxed and yawned.

The night passed and the dawn broke bright. A lone cloud drifted in the sky far above the sea. Three sleepy companions played poker to stay awake.

Finally near evening Luke’s calls to Philip got through. They had crossed the Grenden border and into international waters.

Three hours later the *Cumulus* picked them up.

Looking slightly disappointed, Prince Luke greeted the rescued princess. “I’m glad you’re safe Annie. If those two hadn’t rescued you, I would have. I had plenty of plans for that.”

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Luke told them the details of the rescue. "I don't understand why the rescue was so smooth," he confessed. "Their security was way too lax."

Not wanting to admit calling Luke in her sleep and so leading the enemy astray, Annie shrugged and said, "It must be the will of the gods."

She then said, "They will try again to capture me. I'm central to their ambition."

"What do you mean?" Philip asked.

"Apparently there's a prophecy that says, whoever marries me will rule the world, or something to that effect," Annie explained.

"Seriously?" Philip asked in surprise. "You're going to be the empress of the world?"

"What's so surprising about that?" Annie asked indignantly.

"That doesn't sound like fun," Luke frowned.

"Who cares about that?" Monty said. "I'm going to bed. I haven't slept in two days. Or maybe I should eat, or maybe I should eat in bed?" He wandered off.

"Me too," Annie said. "Flying that boat was exhausting."

"Allow me to take you to your cabin Highness," Jonathan said.

Annie turned to Prince Luke and said, "Please be careful Luke. There's a chance Grenden will target you."

The prince looked at Annie in astonishment and admitted, "There were already two attempts on my life. How did you know?"

The Rescue

Philip looked at Luke and then at the prince with the same name and asked with a sideways smile, "Did you talk in your sleep?"

Annie's face turned red but she didn't say anything.

Luke pointed at the prince and nodded, "So you like him."

"Idiot," Annie said softly and walked away. The captain followed her.

"What did I say?" Luke asked in confusion.

"Who knows?" Prince Luke replied with a shrug. "I don't think anyone can understand how princesses think."



The royal family waited as the *Cumulus* pulled up to the dock. Two children ran up the plank almost before it was set in place.

"We missed you Sis," Gus said tearfully.

"I missed you too, Gus and Carol," Annie said as she held her siblings.

"Majesty, Annie mentioned a prophecy ..." Luke began.

"We know," the king said with an air of finality.

"How come no one told me about it?" Annie said angrily.

"We'll discuss that later," John declared.

"In that case my work here is done," Luke said and bowed. He hated being with royalty. They were always so bossy.

"Thank you for saving our sister," Carol said and both kids gave Luke a hug.

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"My pleasure," Luke assured and hugged the kids back. "It was only possible because, like your dad said, Annie got her guardian spirit just after she escaped."

"Don't forget your bell," Carol said and attached the bell to Luke's collar.

"You're a house cat," Monty laughed.

"Shut up monkey boy," Luke said. "Come. Let's go. I know a bar you'll love."

"You're not staying?" Gus asked sadly.

"I can't," Luke replied. "Your parents and sister need to discuss things that are none of my business. I'll play with you later. I promise."

The two headed to town. Away from the kids Luke turned his collar around so no one would see the bell. He didn't need people making fun of him. Unfortunately he couldn't do anything about the collar, or the bell.

"She likes you," Monty said as they walked down the busy afternoon street.

"I know," Luke replied. "I have a way with children."

"I didn't mean the royal brats," Monty objected. "It doesn't matter, I suppose."

"You're not making sense," Luke said. "I guess that's because you're a monkey boy."

"That's monkey man to you," Monty corrected.

The Rescue

"I stand corrected, monkey *Man*," Luke said and bowed with a flourish. He then pointed and said, "That's my favorite restaurant. It makes the best hamburgers I've ever tasted."

They entered the restaurant and ordered food.

"You should move here," Luke said as he finished his third burger. "It has everything you could want – good monster hunting, good food, cute girls, a nice mountain to climb, good people to protect..."

"Stop," Monty said, raising his hand. "You sold me when you mentioned the cute girls. Besides, I was planning on moving. I had a little disagreement with the neighborhood boss."

"What did you do, fool around with his wife?" Luke asked.

"How did you know?" Monty asked in surprise. "No one understands how much I cherish women," he said mournfully.

"I hope you use protection," Luke replied with a laugh. He then added, "There are too many orphans already."

"You're a virgin, aren't you?" Monty snickered.

"Shut up," Luke grumbled.

"Where do you live?" Monty asked.

"I don't live anywhere," Luke replied. "I sleep in whatever place is convenient."

"You really are a cat," Monty remarked.

"There are plenty of inns you can stay at here," Luke said. "Are you good at poker?"

"Of course," Monty replied. "That's another reason why Bhutto hates me."

"Then you'll like the casino here," Luke replied. "Everyone is anonymous. As long as you don't win too much, no one will notice you. Also, the suites are nice and come with benefits, if you know what I mean."

"Well then, why are we waiting here, when we could be bringing happiness to countless sad and lonely ladies?" Monty asked.



November 17 was a bright and sunny day, excellent for celebrating a birthday.

"Open my present next," a little girl screamed.

The rule of the orphanage was, only make homemade gifts.

"Thank you Samantha, it's beautiful," Luke said as he examined the ceramic cup. It was far from professional but it was an important step in making the girl an artisan.

The other kids brought their presents forward. Each present showcased the skills the children were training on to secure their future.

The last present was a meal prepared by the children training to be cooks. This meal was scheduled for 4:30 PM, since the royal family had invited Luke to celebrate his birthday with them as well.

Before anyone could get up, a ten-year-old boy appeared out of thin air in front of Luke. He was the cutest little boy Luke had ever seen.

The Rescue

“Greetings Luke, I am Kindschutz,” the boy said. “Children are the future. They represent infinite possibilities. Through your deeds you have shown how much you care for them.

“As a symbol of my approval, in the presence of these witnesses, I give you the rulestone called ‘The Future’. It symbolizes your heart’s desire to protect and nurture these children. With all my heart, thank you for your dedication. Happy Birthday.”

The god placed the stone onto Luke’s collar.

“Does this mean you want me to become your cleric?” Luke asked. The thought of taking on that position never crossed his mind.

“No Luke,” the god replied in his little-boy voice. “You have another destiny ahead of you. That is why I didn’t change your crest but gave you a rulestone instead. You’ll need this for what is to come.”

Kindschutz gave Luke a hug. He then went to Gertrude and gave her a hug.

Kindschutz turned to the children and said, “Be good children, study your lessons well and strive to achieve your potential.” He gave the children a big smile. Waving, he disappeared.

For a moment all was silent. Then the room exploded with excitement as everyone congratulated Luke.

“I’m so happy for you,” Gertrude said as she hugged Luke.

“Thank you Mother Gertrude,” Luke said happily. “I can’t believe a god actually took notice of me. It’s also a little frightening.”

“I know what you mean,” Gertrude sympathized. “Trust in the gods. They know you are strong enough to handle the destiny they have placed on you.”

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Not knowing what else to say, Luke said, "Come on everyone. Let's eat."



Luke arrived at the secret underground guard room at around 6:20 PM, where he showered and changed. Ten minutes later he was at the royal suite.

Two children ran to Luke with presents and Gus screamed, "Open my present."

Rover gave Luke a happy birthday bark and demanded to be petted.

"Let him catch his breath you two," their mother scolded. "It's a six-mile run from the orphanage. Have a seat Luke and happy birthday."

Gus' present was a kite while Carol gave Luke a knitted scarf.

"Did you buy these things?" Luke asked with a furrowed brow. "Remember I said only homemade gifts are allowed."

"I made it myself," Carol complained. "Mum can tell you."

"That's right," Gus agreed.

"Are you sure?" Luke asked and put on the scarf. "These look so professional." The two giggled at the compliment. "Doesn't it feel good to create things with your own hands? It will make you strong leaders when you grow up."

"I see you have the 'Future' rulestone," John commented. "I knew you would get it when you turned eighteen."

"Happy birthday Luke," Jane said and gave Luke a motherly hug and kiss on the cheek.

The Rescue

"Happy birthday Luke," Philip said and slapped Luke on the back. He immediately regretted doing that. The slap hurt his hand.

"Happy birthday Luke," Annie said and gave Luke a kiss on the cheek.

"So you do like Luke," Carol said with a giggle.

"No I don't," Annie said defensively as her face turned red.

"Carol, stop teasing your sister," her mother scolded.

"No Aunty Jane, siblings should tease siblings," Luke declared. For a moment he looked like a sad and lonely child who would never again be teased by his siblings.

Before anyone could react, Luke shook himself and said, "I'm the family cat. It's my duty to tickle children." He grabbed Gus and Carol and tickled them until they giggled.

"Uncle John, what exactly is a rulestone? It seems like something a king would have," Luke asked.

"As you know, as a general rule, magic stones may only be used by people of a specific class or classes. For instance only a wizard may use a wind stone. Tracking stones may be used by assassins and hunters. There are exceptions of course, but to get that exception requires special circumstances.

"Also, magic stones require training as you well know. Rulestones don't require training and anyone may have them, regardless of class. They only require the approval of the god.

"Do you know the history of the gods?"

"I know," Gus chimed. "In the beginning all was in a state of Chaos. Then the Chaos self-organized and gave birth to a being referred to

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by the Ancients as a Boltzmann brain. This self-creating being or Oversoul was lonely, and so it created the gods to keep it company.

"The Oversoul then enjoyed the company of its children while never interfering with their activity.

"The gods created the universe and people. Just like their parent, the gods chose to impart their power onto the people. By utilizing the rulestones, we can draw on their power. I can't wait to become eighteen so I can get my first rulestone."

"Luke, you don't have to worry about the rulestone you have," John advised. "You'll use the stone instinctively when necessary. In fact, you might realize you have used some of these powers all your life without realizing."

"Does that mean..." Luke trailed off, not wanting to be presumptuous.

"Yes Luke," John agreed. "You have the potential of obtaining other rulestones. As a word of warning, do not dwell on them. It is best to ignore them and let them operate on their own as they see fit."

"Come let's eat," Gus said. "Then we can have cake."

The dining room was prepared for a king, or in this case, the king's important guest. Luke sat down with the two royal brats by his side. The conversation focused on the usual discussions of castle and city life.

"How's your training going Luke?" Jane asked.

"Learning international politics is tiring, but fun," Luke said. "Although I'm still not sure why I need to know such things."

The Rescue

Finally they returned to the family room.

"Is there a problem, Majesty?" Luke asked. "You seem restless."

"Uncle John," John corrected. "Good observation Luke. The Grenden situation is getting worse. They officially conquered the Ice Continent two weeks ago. With seventeen countries under their control, their ability to wage war has vastly increased.

"With that power they are now waging war on the nations of the Water Continent. Three days ago they attacked the northern side of Candarcar. If nothing is done, our country will be conquered within weeks."

Luke got up from the couch and said in alarm, "That's not good. What can I do against such power?"

"Here's something almost no one knows. When a country fails to conquer another country, they may not try again for one year," John said. "Today is your eighteenth birthday. I would like you to join the army as an officer to help protect our home."

"But I know nothing about war," Luke complained and sat back down.

"You led dozens of people in a gang war when you took over your territory from the previous neighborhood boss," John pointed out. "That's captain level skill. You only lost two people and now everyone respects you."

"But aren't street fighters like me forbidden from joining the military since our word isn't binding?" Luke asked.

"That won't be a problem since I am making an exception for you," John assured. "Luke, I know the reason why you took over as neighborhood boss. I know why you quit Upheaval. I have great respect for you."

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Luke couldn't think of any more excuses. "Very well, Majesty," he relented. "I will bow to your superior wisdom."

"Good boy Luke," John said with a smile. "You will leave tomorrow with General Walters. Don't worry. I'll make sure your people know that you're on a mission."

"What rank will he hold father?" Philip asked.

"Captain, since Luke has already fought an urban war with 56 people under his command and now commands over 120 people in his neighborhood patrol," John said.

That gave Luke a chill, knowing how much the king knew about him.

"I too am a captain, but I don't have that kind of experience," Philip admitted.

In that world Luke lived in, a lieutenant needed a fighting level of at least 30 and a captain needed to be level 40. Elite training since childhood allowed Philip to achieve level 47, thereby qualifying him to be a captain.

"Almost no one your age has that experience. Don't worry Philip, you'll get combat experience soon enough," John assured him.

"Come on kitty," Carol called and patted her lap.

"Go ahead Luke," John nodded. "Carol may not see you in months."

Luke removed his boots and lay down on the couch and placed his head on Carol's lap.

The Rescue

Carol stroked Luke's pure white hair and sang, "I love my little kitty, her coat is so warm, and if I should pet her, she'll sing me her song."

"You do know I'm a boy, don't you?" Luke asked.

Gus just giggled.

Carol ignored the comment and sang again. "I love my little kitty, her coat is so warm, and if I should pet her, she'll sing me her song."

Indulging Carol, Luke closed his eyes and accepted the cat spirit within him. He sang, "Meow, meow, meow, neah, neah, neah, meow, meow, meow."

Luke's body shrank and transformed, along with his clothes and boots. Within moments all that remained was a pure white kitten.

Carol picked up the tiny cat, snuggled her face against the kitten's stomach and said, "Come on little kitten, give mummy a kiss." Luke obliged by licking her nose.

"That tickles," Carol giggled.

"I want to play with him too," Gus begged as he stroked Luke's fur.

"Carol and Gus look so happy," Annie commented and the parents agreed.

Carol sang again. "I love my little kitty, her coat is so warm, and if I should kiss her, she'll sing me her song." This time Gus sang as well.

War

Without war,
how can rulers obtain ultimate power?

Luke stood on the parade grounds of the military base located nine miles away from the palace. He currently wore a new military uniform issued to all soldiers. His gloves, boots and collar matched his uniform. On his shoulders were bars indicating his captain status.

On the parade grounds, thousands of troops stood at attention in perfect rows. Over twenty percent of them had guardian beasts, most of which were dogs.

Watching the soldiers, Luke had the feeling most soldiers were dog people who would eventually get the dog as their guardian beast. Luke hated dogs. They were too in-your-face and too needy.

Luke stood next to the royal family as the king gave the troops an inspirational speech.

“May the gods protect you as you defend your home from invasion,” John said, ending his speech.

“Be careful Philip,” Jane said and gave Philip a hug and kiss.

“Mother, everyone is watching,” Philip complained.

Luke snickered at Philip’s embarrassment.

Jane then gave Luke a hug and kiss too. “People are watching,” the red-faced Luke said, embarrassed. This time it was Philip who laughed.

The kids gave Luke a last-minute hug and watched as he boarded one of several battleships.

"I don't want my little kitty getting hurt," Carol said softly as she watched the battleships leave.

"Aren't you worried about Philip?" the mother asked.

"Brother can take care of himself," Gus said. "He's strong."

"However, Luke is just a little kitten," Carol continued.

"Don't worry kids. Your little kitten is a ferocious tiger," John assured. "He has far greater potential than anyone I have ever met."



Luke and Philip stood at the bow of the ship as it traveled on its cloud trail to its destination.

"We will land in about ten minutes," Walters announced as he approached the two. "Are you okay Captain Luke? You look nervous."

"I have no military training," Luke confessed. "I don't even know what a captain is supposed to do."

"Luke, my dad wouldn't have made you a captain if he didn't believe in you," Philip assured. "Just be your honorable self and everything will be okay."

"That's a problem. I don't know what that word means," Luke confessed.

"Captain Luke, just focus on the battle field, find out where the enemy is and how it is moving and move your forces to intercept," Walters advised. "As a general rule, you will not be personally fighting the enemy. Instead you will just command your troops. Deploy your troops as you see fit. That's all there is to it."

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"No traps or deception allowed," Luke nodded. "This is stupid. How come the strongest warriors are forbidden from fighting?"

"Officers aren't forbidden from fighting," Walters denied. "It's just that they can't effectively command while engaged in direct combat. To indicate your willingness to fight alongside your men, turn your cap upside down."

Luke did as instructed.

"Also, you may be surprised how dirty wars can get," Walters admitted. "It's not always a competition of pure skill and ability. However, that's the only way your troops were trained to fight, so for the time being that's how you'll fight."

"At the war council, let me do the talking and follow what they say. Later we'll discuss things."

"The generals are all old farts who are all stuck in their ways," Philip warned. "You'll go crazy if you listen to them for too long, so try to keep your cool."

"Don't underestimate our knowledge and experience," Walters warned. "We've been fighting wars in different parts of the world for decades."

"If that's true, then we have no chance of winning," Luke declared. "We are facing an army that has already conquered a continent with unbelievable speed, and they know that Annie is here. Crap, if I were them, I would be invading the capital now."

"That's impossible," Walters dismissed. "No one can get in or out without setting off the border alarms."

"Except someone like me who entered and left Grenden under their noses," Luke pointed out. "To win a gang war, you need to be sneakier than your opponent."

"I'm sorry but you're exaggerating," Walters assured. "This isn't a gang war..."

"Philip, please contact your father immediately," Luke commanded. "Advise him to evacuate the royal family immediately. I know an assassin named Susan. Mother Gertrude knows her. She can get the family to a safe place."

Luke contacted Susan and told her the situation.

Philip looked unsure, but then nodded. "Okay I sent the message."

Below them the destination came into view. Luke could see the armies and navies fighting. Soldiers clashed with both close-combat and projectile weapons. Wizards hurled magical attacks back and forth over the heads of the soldiers, while protecting their sides from magical attacks.

Luke nodded. "Let's hope I'm not too late. General, are there any troops remaining at the capital or were they all deployed?"

"Just the palace guard and troops in training," Walters said. "The last of the main troops are with us. Our military isn't that big."

Just then there was an explosion in the back of the ship. Similar explosions could be seen on sister ships, as well as the Candarcars ships docked below.

"Sabotage," Walters exclaimed. A moment later he left to deal with the situation.

"This is a trap," Luke declared. "They were waiting for all troops to leave the capital before attacking. Philip, tell your dad the situation here."

"Yes sir," Philip said. "Done."

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"Did you just call me 'Sir'?" Luke asked in surprise.

"You'll need to get used to that," Philip said. "According to my dad, you are qualified to be a major at least. However he felt it best you got used to the military before getting any promotions."

"Everyone brace for impact," the captain announced. "We are about to crash."

People screamed in terror as the ship plunged to the ground below.

If ever there were a time for a guardian spirit now was it. Philip raised his arms as if he was about to fly and the spirit of the swan descended on him. He placed his hands on the railing and the ship's fall slowed.

The impact on the ground was hard, but not fatal, thanks to Philip.

"All troops, converge on your commanding officers. You will assemble outside in formation," the ship captain barked. "Commanding officers, we will have an emergency meeting in ten minutes."

"It's show time," Philip said and jumped to the ground.

The troops formed in front of the crashed ship in military precision.

Not knowing what to do, Luke followed Philip to a group of congregating officers. Local officers joined. One turned to Luke and shouted, "Captain Luke, why do you have a bell around your neck? Only sissy boys wear bells. Remove it immediately. Also, your gloves and boots are against regulations."

Luke felt the urge to punch the idiot in the nose. Before he could respond, General Walters asked, "What's going on?"

"Sir, this officer is out of uniform," the major reported.

"No he's not, Major Briers," Walters corrected. "Captain Luke, I didn't have time to tell you this before, since you just joined two hours ago. However, the military is very particular about how its uniforms are worn.

"As a rule, you may only wear what the military issues you. The only exception is your warrior weapon. That's why everyone's weapon is different."

Walters turned to Briers and spoke in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "Major Briers, Captain Luke's gloves and boots are his warrior weapons and he is *required* to wear them as per regulations.

"Second, Major Briers, if you'll notice, Captain Luke's collar is a rulestone holder. Also, as per regulations, he is *required* to wear it.

"Do you have any other objections, Major Briers?" Walters asked in a threatening voice.

Like a scolded puppy, Briers yelped, "No sir."

"Good," Walters nodded. "Let's begin our meeting. We have little time to deploy."

For the next twenty minutes the officers discussed strategy. Luke watched without comment, trying to get a feel for the battle.

Finally Walters said, "Captain Luke, this is your area. I'll assign you your platoon in a few minutes."

Luke waited impatiently and finally General Walters led the way. "Captain Luke, these are Sergeants Miller, Jackson, Daniels, and Simon, the leaders of your four squads. They are newly deployed troops. Good luck," Walters said and walked away.

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The sergeants saluted. Luke saluted back.

Luke scanned his troops. Three had the spirit of dogs and the rest seemed destined for that guardian spirit.

“Greetings everyone, I’m Luke,” Luke introduced himself. “As captain, my job is to support you as you fight and ensure your safety.

“Make sure you never get separated from the platoon. The reason is because that will make it harder for me to support you. Above all else, use your judgment. The enemy has one goal, and that is to kill you. Your job is to kill them first.

“Also, mercy is not an option. Does anyone know what this stone is?” Luke asked and pointed at the healing stone on his glove. “By the way, my warrior weapons are my gloves and boots. I don’t have a sword.”

Overeager to please, several soldiers raised their hands. Luke pointed at one. “Sir, that is the healing stone, sir.”

“That is correct Corporal Jones,” Luke said and noticed an invisible tail wagging. Dogs are so easy to please. “What this stone means is that any enemy you fail to kill today will most definitely kill one of your fellow soldiers tomorrow.

“Any questions?”

No one responded.

“Okay troops, follow me.”

Luke led his troops to the designated location and positioned everyone. From behind he watched the fighting, ready to jump in when the situation called for it. At the same time he barked orders.



‘Father, all our ships have been sabotaged,’ Philip called. ‘According to Luke, we fell into a trap.’

‘Thank you Philip,’ John said and cut the connection.

Moments later a soldier barged in. “Majesty, the palace is under attack.”

John remembered discussing with Luke the possibility of an insurrection. Putting the pieces together, he realized that the instigator was the Grenden Empire. The border warning system was useless since the enemy was already here, in the form of thousands of sleeper cells.

“Court is dismissed,” John declared and got off his throne. The throne room quickly emptied.

The king called his wife, *‘Dear, get the children. We have to evacuate you immediately. Meet me in Luke’s room with the children. I’ll meet you there in ten minutes.’*

John called the captain of the guard and barked orders. He then went to the secret guard room Luke always used when staying. He found his family there.

“Jane, kids, we need to evacuate immediately,” John said.

The captain of the guard called. *‘Majesty, spies in the palace have opened the gates. The enemy is flooding in...’* John felt the captain’s death pain and the signal cut off.

“This is bad news everyone,” John said. “The palace has fallen. For the sake of our country we need to go into hiding. Luke just warned me through Philip this would happen, but I

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underestimated his intuition. He said he's sending someone named Susan to guide us."

Just then the door opened and a woman with the spirit of a leopard entered. She knelt before them and presented a token.

"Majesties, I'm Susan," the woman said. "Luke instructed me to get you."



The war council was in pandemonium. The top brass were shouting at the top of their lungs. The palace had been captured and no one knew where the king or his family was. As the only low level officers in the room, Luke and Philip watched from the side.

The sight reminded Luke of a pack of unruly dogs, which wasn't far from the truth. With the exception of Luke and Philip, everyone in the room had the spirit of the dog.

Luke let out a roar that silenced everyone. "The king is safe," Luke stated. "He is in hiding now, working with a local resistance group."

Pandemonium broke out again. The dogs didn't like a cat being there. Luke roared again.

"On my word of honor, the king and the royal family are safe," Walters declared. That calmed everyone down.

The general could make that declaration because he had spoken to Luke and Philip before the meeting, which was why they were in attendance.

The general turned to Luke and asked, "Captain Luke, do you have any anything to say?"

"I am Luke, special advisor to the king," Luke announced to the others in the room. He turned to Walters and asked, "Major Walters, what is our troop deployment?"

"40% of our regular forces are here," Walters replied. "The rest are situated around the perimeter of the archipelago in the event of an unexpected attack."

"Unexpected?" Luke asked, confused. "Why would attacks from other sides be unexpected?"

"I guess you wouldn't know," Walters said. "According to spies there is a prophecy saying, 'When the planets align and the world is sought, those who desire victory shall conquer from the north. To conquer from the east or the west or the south, shall render your ambitions naught.'"

"We had no reason to doubt that."

That is convenient, since the archipelago is aligned north-south, Luke thought.

"What is the enemy's deployment of troops throughout the world? How easy is it for them to deploy new troops here and how long will it take?"

There was an eerie silence in the room.

Walters said timidly, "We don't know. Everything is happening too fast for our intelligence to keep up."

Luke rolled his eyes and began, "According to Uncle John...I mean King John..." Luke was interrupted when the top brass began bickering among themselves.

"Did he say Uncle John?" someone asked.

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Another said, "Her Majesty treated him like her own son in front of everyone."

"Princess Carol and Prince Gus both gave him goodbye hugs," a third commented.

Over the cacophony of voices Admiral Hooters demanded, "What exactly is your relationship with the royal family?"

BANG!

Luke slammed his fist on the table and made a hole in it.

"It doesn't matter what my relationship with the Family is," Luke declared. "This is a war council. People are dying. Our people. We need to find a solution. Now!"

Cowed by the outburst, everyone shut up.

"According to the king, the Grenden Empire finished conquering the Ice Continent and is now waging war on the countries of the Water Continent," Luke said calmly.

"That is correct," Walters agreed. "The north side of every island nation within the Harrington Sea has been targeted without exception with overwhelming force."

"I spoke with the king," Luke said. "He said the seeds of insurrection were being planted in other nations. Did insurrections start everywhere or just here?"

Luke waited while the brass discussed and got intel. Finally the results came in. It was only happening here.

"But why only here?" Major General Boots asked.

"According to the king the heart of Candarcar contains a treasure the enemy wants badly," Luke replied, making up stories. "I think

insurrections in the other countries will start soon, if they haven't already.

"I think it's a good idea to warn them of what happened here, including the fact that the royal family is safe."

"If our sister nations can protect their monarchs, they will last longer," Admiral Hooters added. "That plays to our advantage."

"What exactly is this Heart of Candarcarr?" Colonel Briggs asked.

Everyone looked at Luke for an answer.

That question made Luke realize something. If Annie's destiny was known to everyone, the number of people trying to kidnap her would skyrocket.

"That information is known only to the king," Luke replied. "Besides, I don't think it can help us now. Our first priority is to repel the invaders."

"If we stop the invasion the gods will give us one year of protection," Admiral Hooters said. "Then what?"

"We free our neighbors," Philip said.

"But how do we free ourselves?" Colonel Tepid asked. "They have three times our strength."

"We intimidate them," Luke replied. "Bullies do that all the time, even though they are weaker than those they bully."

"That sounds like something a street thug would do," someone said in disdain.

"Is that honorable?" a major asked.

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"Of course it is," Walters insisted. "Dogs growl to show dominance."

Idiots, Luke thought to himself. *Everything you can think of, they have already thought of before. What we need to do is to cheat.* He didn't say that aloud.

For the next hour the top brass discussed strategy and tactics. Finally the meeting ended.

Luke walked beside Philip as the troops prepared for the night. "Couldn't Annie's prophecy help?" Philip asked.

"She's not marriageable age. Besides, who would she marry?" Luke asked.

"Can we win?" Philip asked.

"We have to," Luke replied. "If Candarcarr falls..." Luke trailed off.

"How was your first day in battle?" Walters asked.

"We were barely deployed when the meeting was called," Luke replied.

"That was a long meeting," the general admitted.

"General, why is it that almost everyone has dog spirits?" Luke asked.

"What's wrong with dog spirits?" the general asked, sounding offended.

"Nothing," Luke said defensively. "I was just expecting more variety."

"Also, in the general public, less than ten percent have spirits. Here almost everyone has," Philip added.

"You may not know this but the dog symbolizes loyalty, obedience and devotion to family, friends and country," Walters explained. "It symbolizes everything the military stands for."

"People with other spirit types enter the military, of course. However they either convert or leave. On the other hand, those who retain their original spirits tend to go far, because it requires strength of character to remain as they are."

"As for the number of people with that spirit – The conditions soldiers face every day isn't easy for them. It requires absolute faith in their comrades and their superior officer. The bonds they build is stronger than family. This conspires to bring out the dog spirit, hence the term military dog."

"Better go to sleep. You two have long days ahead of you."



Over the next two weeks the fighting was sporadic, but the battles were intense. According to Walters, this was natural. No one likes actual combat and soldiers try to avoid it as much as possible. Battles were almost always initiated when the commanding officers forced their troops to attack.

After one of those battles, everything settled down and Luke sat with his troops to eat lunch.

Luke now carried a sword by his side, more for appearance sake than for combat. The fact that he didn't have a visible weapon seemed to freak out the troops. Walters and the top brass gave him special permission. Unfortunately Luke hadn't trained with a sword since leaving Upheaval and was rusty.

"Captain Luke, your leadership skills on the battlefield are exceptional. We've been discussing and we think you're ready for

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a promotion,” Walters said. “Congratulations. You are now Major Luke. You will be in charge of Company 23.”

Everyone cheered for him.

“Congratulations Major Luke,” Philip said with a smile. “I guess I’ll be serving under you.”

“How can I command a prince?” Luke asked in surprise.

“That’s because he’s a captain and you’re a major,” Walters replied and placed bars on Luke’s shoulders. “In the military merit is more important than status.

“A person advances when they prove their leadership skills in battle and when their fighting level gets high enough. Captain Phillip will advance when these conditions are met.

“Major Luke, Major Tom of Company 47 needs assistance guarding this area.” The general pointed at a location on the map. “There is a danger of the enemy breaking through.”

The general assembled the Company and formally introduced Luke to them. Luke introduced himself and explained the situation. He concluded by asking, “Any questions?”

A soldier asked, “Sir, is it true about the Heart of Candarcar?”

Walters frowned and demanded, “What do you know about the Heart of Candarcar?”

“We overheard enemy soldiers talking sir,” the soldier said. “According to them, it is a secret weapon that will activate on high-noon, winter solstice. When activated, it will kill all foreign invaders within our borders and generate a barrier that will prevent new enemy from entering the country for one year.”

"Anything else?" the general asked.

"Yes sir," the soldier replied timidly. "The weapon will misfire if there are no enemies within our borders when it is fired, killing all defending soldiers and leaving the country open to invasion."

"Also, the weapon can't be stopped," another soldier added.

Face white with fear, the general said, "I see." He was gone a moment later.

"Captains, here is the plan," Luke said as he showed a map. "Our area is here. I want to deploy our troops here, here and here. Wizard Fran, what are your powers?"

The wizard listed multiple fire-related spells. He then said, "I can also amplify the effect of magic stones."

"That's perfect. I have a disguise stone," Luke said. "Can you expand it to cover all of Company 23?"

"If I tag everyone," Wizard Fran replied. "The effect will last for around three hours.

"That's perfect. You may borrow this stone for the operation. Please begin preparations," Luke said. He then instructed his captains on what he wanted them to do.

In the war arena speaking stones were useless since both sides used anti-surveillance fields. As a result Luke had to rely on visual signals.

They arrived at their destination. The battle was fierce with the clang of weapons resounding throughout the field and projectiles flying everywhere. The screams of soldiers echoed in Luke's ears.

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Luke spoke to the commanding officer of Company 47. "Major Tom, I'm here to assist you. When I give the signal, surround the enemy and attack."

"That's impossible," Tom objected. "They just got reinforcements."

"It's all good," Luke assured. "Now move your troops. Hurry, we can't wait too long or the operation will fail."

Reacting to Luke's commanding tone and the fact he was favored by the king, Major Tom did as instructed.

When setup was complete, Luke commanded, "Wizard Fran, remove the disguises and order the attack."

One moment, the enemy had twice the number of soldiers. The next moment, its ranks were filled with Candarcas soldiers. Pandemonium broke out as the invaders were attacked by enemies on the inside and out. The plan was a success.

"I've never seen anything like that before in all my years of being a soldier," Tom said, impressed.

"That's street fighting," Luke explained. "It's time to devise another attack."

The fighting finally died down near evening and Luke had a late dinner with Philip.

Just then a dozen soldiers approached, along with Walters.

"Major Luke, please come with me," the general said in a no-nonsense tone.

"What the hell is going on?" Luke demanded. "Why are you treating me like a criminal?"

"You are accused of colluding with the enemy," the general accused. "Come quietly."

"There's no way he'd do that," Philip defended. "He's an honorable man."

"I'm sorry Captain Philip, but the proof is undeniable. We made absolutely certain before accusing him," Walters said. "Take him away."

Within seconds Luke was cuffed.

Philip looked as if he wanted to fight the army single-handedly. Instead he said, "Can I come?"

"I'm sorry Captain, but I can't allow that. Have a good evening," Walters replied and left with the others.

They entered a private tent filled with top brass.

"Major Luke, you were seen giving secrets to the enemy," Hooters accused.

"How do you know it was me? It could have been someone else?" Luke asked.

"You're the only person here with a cat spirit," Sanders pointed out.

"Someone could have used a disguise stone," Luke suggested.

"We considered that possibility," Walters negated. "Our wizards ruled out that possibility. We've been tracking you for several days with this." He pointed at a button on Luke's shirt. "Answer me. Did you talk to the enemy concerning the Heart of Candarcar?"

"I swear on my honor I did not," Luke replied, staring into the general's eyes.

"That's a lie," a wizard said.

"Why did you do it? The king trusted you," Walters asked, visibly hurt.

Luke shrugged. "A conquering king has the power to elevate a person to noble status should the person play a key role in conquering a country."

Walters looked at the wizard and the wizard said, "That is correct."

"I guess we should never have trusted someone with no honor," Walters said in disgust. "Lock him up."



December 19 arrived and Philip looked at his best friend. He couldn't believe Luke had betrayed them.

"Why Luke?" Philip asked in a shaken voice. "We trusted you. We accepted you into our family."

Luke shrugged. He couldn't move his hands because of the handcuffs that suppressed his physical and magical powers.

"I thought you liked Carol and Gus," Philip said tearfully. "Mum and dad treated you like their son."

General Walters and the other officers looked at Luke with intense hatred. Everyone wanted to beat the crap out of Luke for his betrayal of the royal family.

"Why?" Walters demanded. His face was red with rage.

"That's simple. The royal family slaughtered my entire family. I remember it as if it were yesterday. Your evil king sat on his horse as one by one my sisters were slaughtered, then my brothers, father, mother, everyone," Luke said with intense hatred.

War

Walters looked at the wizard and she nodded. "He's telling the truth sir and his anger is genuine."

"You do know that you will die, don't you?" Walters asked.

"I should have died with my family," Luke cried as tears streamed down his face. The look of guilt and self-hatred was evident for everyone to see. "I hate you, the gods, everyone."

"Luke, prepare to die for treason," Walters said solemnly.

"I've been prepared since I was eight years old," Luke replied grimly. "I'm sure *he* would be upset when he discovers he couldn't watch my execution."

"Maybe we should wait and talk to my dad first," Philip suggested.

A soldier entered and saluted. "Sirs, the enemy has begun withdrawing."

Philip noted a smile on Luke's face. The smile was gone a moment later, making Philip doubt what he saw.

"Lock him up," Walters commanded.

The general raised the hilt of his sword to his lips and spoke. His voice echoed throughout the battlefield. "Attention everyone. Under no circumstances must you let the enemy escape. Do everything in your power to stop them. If you love your country, if you love your king, if you love your family...we shall fight with everything we have to protect our country."

Walters put his sword away and commanded, "Captain Philip, we have a war to fight. Return to your post."

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Philip looked at the door through which Luke was escorted out and gave a half-hearted salute. "Yes sir," he said and headed for his post.

Walters shook his head sadly and then barked more orders.

For the next few hours the fighting was fierce as the Candarcas soldiers fought for their lives. Ultimately it was an exercise in futility.

Philip watched the desperation in his citizen's faces as the enemy left in their ships. Finally the last of the enemy ships left.

The soldiers milled around, waiting to die.

"Captain Philip, the last of the enemy has crossed the border. We got in touch with His Majesty," a soldier reported. "He will arrive in about an hour."

Philip nodded listlessly. It was over. The enemy had won and his best friend had betrayed him and destroyed his country.

After awhile Walters came and guided Philip to the officer's mess hall. Of course Philip wasn't hungry and only played with his food. Walters tried his best to console the prince but it was futile.

"Sirs, His Majesty has arrived," a soldier said with a salute.

The two got up and went to greet the king as he disembarked the flagship *Dolphin Strider*.

"Bring me Luke," the king commanded by way of greeting.

Within moments Luke arrived in his handcuffs, escorted by two burly guards.

"Luke," the king said sternly. He then said, "Well done," and clapped. "That was brilliant what you did. Your plan worked to

perfection. The border has been secured for one year.” John beamed.

“Thanks Uncle John,” Luke said with a half-smile.

Everyone looked back and forth between the king and Luke in confusion. No one knew what had just happened.

“Majesty,” Walters said. “I don’t understand what is going on. Major Luke has betrayed your trust. Now our country is lost.”

“General Walters, I assure you, Major Luke has not betrayed anyone,” John said seriously. “There is no doomsday weapon. There never was. That was just a lie to trick the enemy into leaving. It worked.”

Luke turned to Philip and said, “I’m sorry for hurting you. I know the pain of betrayal.”

With eyes streaming with tears, Philip wrapped his arms around Luke and gave him a hug.

“If His Majesty says so, then it must be true,” Walters declared with evident relief. He approached Luke and removed the handcuffs. “We almost put you to death,” he scolded. “What you said about the king was so convincing I believed it.”

Luke nodded. “I was prepared to do whatever is necessary to protect what is important to me. I’m glad you waited General. I didn’t want to become a dead hero people would cry over.”

A soldier approached and saluted. “Majesty, Sirs, the enemy is trying to re-cross the border but can’t.”

“I guess they have discovered the deception. Thank you Lieutenant Adams,” John said.

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“General Walters, call for a war council aboard *Dolphin Strider*. We have things to discuss. Major Luke has bought us time, but we are not out of the woods yet.”

John wrapped an arm around Luke and said, “You’re shaking.”

Luke nodded. “Being forced to hurt Philip and the others wasn’t easy. Then waiting for the enemy to leave without giving away the plan was even more stressful.”

“You’re a national hero son,” John said as he guided Luke to the flagship *Dolphin Strider*. “You protected your country. Someone place a chair beside mine.”

“Not yet Majesty,” Luke refuted. “All I did was to buy some time. Philip, aren’t you coming?”

The king nodded at Philip and Philip followed.

“Much needed time I assure you,” John said. He guided Luke into the war room.

Out of thin air a large muscular man appeared in front of Luke. He was battle-scarred and his damaged armor was splattered with blood.

“Greetings Luke, I am Mars,” the god said.

Immediately everyone got down on one knee, including the king.

“Throughout your life you have battled, fighting against forces trying to destroy you. You fought for what is important to you.

“As a symbol of my approval, in the presence of these witnesses, I give you the rulestone called ‘War’,” the god said. He placed a blood red stone on Luke’s collar and continued. “This is only given

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to those who have successfully either conquer a country or prevent a country from being conquered.”

The god disappeared. A moment later everyone got up and clapped.

Luke remained kneeling, feeling embarrassed.

“Congratulations Luke,” John said with a radiant smile and helped Luke to his feet. “Only a small handful of people have the privilege of owning Mars’ rulestone. With this, you shall gain much wisdom in the art of war, something we desperately need.”

Red faced, Luke said, “You’re embarrassing me.”

“Nonsense,” John said. “You’re a national hero. All that remains is for you to get a parade.”

“Please Uncle, I don’t need a parade,” Luke objected. “Candarcar won’t be safe until we stop Grenden.”

“I’m sorry Luke but it is necessary. The country needs this,” John explained. “Now the question is what do we do next?”

The top brass discussed the problem but couldn’t come to a decision. All eyes turned to Luke.

“Candarcar is safe for one year, so we don’t need troops deployed here,” Luke suggested. “We can deploy them to free neighboring countries. The more countries freed, the safer our position.”

“I agree,” John said. “We shall deploy to Wateran next, since they have a strong military. General Walters please take care of the logistics.”

New Adventures

No matter how we change
Our past is still there

"Brother Luke," Carol and Gus screamed as they ran up the plank of *Dolphin Strider*.

Luke gave both kids a hug and then said, "I think your brother needs a hug too."

"Congratulations Luke," Jane smiled.

"Thanks, but that was a simple lie," Luke said modestly. "I don't understand why it worked. You should be proud of your son. He did well considering this was his first battle."

"I am proud of him, and also so worried," the mother said.

"Hi Luke," Annie greeted. She waved with a shy smile.

"So are you going to kiss?" Carol asked and Gus giggled.

Face red, Annie declared, "No I'm not!"

Once again Luke wondered why he associated with the royal family.

"Luke," John said. "You are good at reading people and you have the blessing of Kindschutz, so you should understand the heart of children. Don't you understand Annie's heart?"

Annie stepped back in horror and screeched, "There's no way I want him to understand my feelings."

"Believe me I don't want to," Luke shot back. "Besides, she told me in no uncertain terms how she felt about me. That doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that Carol and Gus love me. That's

good enough for me. Carol, Gus, tell me the adventures you had when you were forced to leave the palace.”

They entered the palace and Luke was guided to the royal family room. The kids talked about their adventures.



Two days pass as the capital spent its time preparing for a parade.

Luke stood beside the royal family on the float in his military uniform. The bars for Colonel shone brightly on his shoulders, as reward for his achievements.

“Luke, why are you so nervous?” Jane asked.

“I’m not used to all this fuss Majesty,” Luke confessed. Jane pinched his arm and Luke hastily added, “I mean Aunty Jane.”

Luke watched as Philip snuggled with his princess and felt a pang of jealousy. It was time he got a girl. In the meantime Annie flirted with nobles.

The parade began and Luke waved at the people. Eventually he relaxed and enjoyed the ride.

Soon enough they arrived at the Winter Palace. There they went to the royal balcony overlooking a sea of people.

The king gave a speech explaining how heroic Luke was and how they were protected for one year from invasion.

Annie came up to Luke, and in the presence of the citizens, pinned a medal upon his uniform. She then gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Luke reluctantly stepped up to the railing and spoke, his amplified voice reaching everyone in attendance.

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"Fellow citizens, war has arrived at our door. An evil empire is trying to take over the world. It is up to us to join forces with our neighboring countries and protect our way of life. Tomorrow I shall deploy to our forces now fighting to help free Wateran. Once freed, we shall form an alliance to help fight the evil empire. Please pray for our troops as we fight for your freedom."

Luke stepped back, not knowing what else to say.

The king nodded in approval.

"Time to go in," the queen said and guided Luke in.

Entering, he was greeted by an army of nobles. They wanted to be friends with their newest hero.

An hour passed and Luke said, "Excuse me but I need to go to the little boy's room." That wasn't true. He just found the nobles suffocating and needed space.

"I'll show you the way," Gus offered.

"Sorry Gus but he has to go by himself," John said with a raised hand.

That was strange, Luke thought, noting that the king was unusually jumpy.

Wandering through the palace, Luke entered a room and got the shock of his life.



Luke entered a room and got the shock of his life. There in front of him was Gloman. The bastard was sitting in a chair and smoking a pipe while servants gave him a massage.

Overcome with hatred he never thought possible, Luke screamed, "You!" and whipped a stone at Gloman's head. The stone whizzed past the former king's head and hit the wall with a resounding bang. Avoiding a one-hit kill took all of Luke's willpower.

The two servant girls screamed in terror and ran away. Gloman looked at Luke in terror and stammered, "You'll be court marshaled for what you just did."

"I," Luke said and whipped a stone past Gloman's head. "Don't," Luke said and whipped another stone. "Care." A third stone zoomed.

"What do you want?" the terrified Gloman asked.

"What do I want?" Luke grabbed Gloman by his robe and flung him against the wall. Again he had to exert restraint to prevent a cracked skull.

Guards approached and the former king screamed, "Help."

The door slammed by itself onto the first guard's face when he tried to enter. The guards banged but to no avail. The door wouldn't budge.

"It seems the gods have given me permission to do whatever I want with you," Luke noted.

"Please spare me," Gloman whimpered.

Enraged, Luke asked, "Spare you?" The next stone hit the wall so close to the sprawled man that shrapnel cut Gloman's face. Gloman flinched.

"Did you spare my sister when she begged for mercy?" Luke asked and touched Gloman's face with a claw, leaving a red line of blood.

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“Did you spare my mother as she watched as her newborn baby’s guts spilt out?” This time Luke broke a finger and Gloman screamed in pain.

Out on the balcony guards tried to break the window but failed.

Luke got up and his bell rang. He thought of little Carol and Gus. Both kids would cry if their useless grandfather died.

“Oh gods please save me, your humble servant,” Gloman wailed.

Luke laughed. “Are you stupid or something?” Luke asked. “The gods don’t care. As a matter of fact, I’m sure the gods are betting to see which one of your fingers I will break next.”

Luke bent down and his bell rang again. Luke hesitated a moment and then snapped another finger.

The former king screamed and then whimpered, “Who are you?”

“Ah, finally a good question. You wouldn’t recognize me since I was hiding like a coward as my family got slaughtered. My name is Mark Callahan.”

Recognition crossed Gloman’s face and he said, “I thought I got rid of every one of you.”

“I only survived because it amused the gods,” Luke said and touched his collar.

Almost against his will, claws extended and Luke placed his claws against Gloman’s heart.

Images of Carol, Gus, and even Annie and Philip crying buzzed in Luke’s head.

Luke fought valiantly against a lifetime of hatred as claws sank into the former king’s chest.

Finally, with a herculean force of will, Luke withdrew his hand and said, "You're not worth killing."

Luke took a deep breath and focused his magical power through his healing stone. Slowly, gradually, Gloman's injuries healed. Fingers popped back into place.

Luke then helped Gloman up and to his chair.

Luke turned to the door and waited.



"What's going on daddy?" Annie squeaked as she held her dad's arm. The sounds coming from the locked room were terrifying.

"The gods are testing Luke," John said with a pained expression. "This will determine Luke's future, and the future of our home. Unfortunately there's nothing we can do but pray he passes this grueling test."

Time seemed to drag forever. Then all was quiet.

The door swung open and the royal family rushed in. Standing there was Luke, next to Gloman.

Carol and Gus ran to Luke and hugged him tearfully.

"I'm ready for my punishment," Luke said to the king.

"Thank the gods you didn't kill him, but I see you killed this room," John said with a relieved chuckle. "The gods told me to bring you here in order to test you. Wizard Zoe, how is father?"

"He's fine Majesty," Zoe replied. "Even his arthritis has been cured."

"You're not going to punish me?" Luke asked in surprise.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Why would I punish you for curing my dad's arthritis? Up until now, no healer could fix that."

"I don't understand," Luke asked, confused.

As an answer to his question, a man and woman appeared in front of Luke.

The man was muscular, wore a short-sleeved toga and sandals and had golden wavy hair.

The woman was slender with a kind, peaceful face.

"Luke, I am Quan Yin," the goddess said. Immediately the guards, maids and royal family knelt down in homage. Luke followed suit.

"And I am Hercules," the god said and made a muscle-man pose.

"You grew up in a world of injustice. Despite that you learnt to be compassionate to your enemies, sparing them when you felt there was the slightest possibility of redemption," Quan Yin began.

"Oh yea," Hercules said and flexed a bicep.

"Now you were presented the man who destroyed your family and given the opportunity to exact revenge," Quan Yin continued. "To overcome the hatred, pain and despair that enslaved you takes strength..."

"Herculean strength," Hercules interrupted and cut a new pose.

"Therefore, in the presence of these witnesses, I give you the rulestone called Compassion," Quan Yin, the goddess of mercy said and placed a violet and pink stone in Luke's collar.

"Luke, there is more to strength than big muscles, and our All-Parent knows I have big muscles," Hercules said and made his pectorals dance.

"Strength is the ability to overcome any and all adversity and to prosper," Hercules continued. "Your ultimate proof of strength was your ability to spare your greatest enemy..."

"Because of compassion for the people you care for," Quan Yin finished for Hercules.

"Therefore, in the presence of these witnesses, I give you the rulestone called Strength," Hercules said and placed a maroon stone in Luke's collar.

Smiling, both gods disappeared from sight.

The king got up and everyone followed.

"Congratulations Luke, I'm so proud of you," Jane said and gave Luke a hug and kiss.

"Thanks mum," Luke replied and glanced at Gloman slumped in his chair. The man was a shell of his former self. There was no reason to do anything to him because his revenge was complete.

Luke glanced at Annie standing to the side, with her fist in her mouth. He had the urge to hold her in his arms.

Turning to Philip Luke asked, "What's the matter?"

"Will I be able to pass the tests when the time comes?" Philip asked.

"Of course you can. Your dad has the twin stones of Strength and Compassion, although until now I didn't know," Luke said, glancing at the stones on the king's crown. "I have them now. There's no reason you can't have them. Always keep in mind what's important to you and you will not make a mistake."

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Luke turned to John and asked, "There's only one thing I don't understand. How come I've been given so many rulestones?"

"Sorry son but you'll need to figure that one out on your own," John said. "We have fulfilled the reason for coming here. Let's go back to the main palace. Dad, I hope you feel better."



Luke sat on a couch, surrounded by the orphanage kids. The royal family was there as well. In addition was Monty, Susan and all the people he called friend. Strangely enough his enemies were there, including Gloman.

Slowly, one by one, people disappeared, each one ripping a chunk out of Luke's heart as they vanished.

The neighborhood evaporated into fog, followed by the country and then the world.

In isolation Luke hovered in limbo, accompanied only by a sense of loss and the feeling of loneliness. He couldn't scream because he had no mouth, or hands or anything else. The only sound was the echo of someone screaming in terror. That too was far away and indistinct.

The surrounding fog coalesced into a shadowy form. The form spoke without words or sound.

"I am Loki, the destroyer of worlds, the enemy of expectation and of conformity. I exist to destroy the imperfect so that which is closer to the All-Parent can come about.

"In your life, you have continuously defied expectation, first by living when you should have died, then by prospering in the face of despair. Every time people thought they knew you, you did something that threw them for a loop."

The god laughed and said, "I loved how you fooled your friends in order to fool your enemies. If they suffered because of that, it was their fault for trying to box in reality, which, by the way is infinite and known only to the All-Parent.

"Normally I would give you my rulestone in the presence of witnesses, but who am I kidding? That's not how I roll." Loki laughed again.

"Remember always, the path to greater freedom and happiness is always the path of greatest challenge, defying expectation, embracing the unknown, and the willingness to lose everything and start anew."



The royal family sat down in the family room and discussed nothing in particular. Luke nodded off to sleep as relaxing music filled the room.

A grey fog entered the room and encircled the feet of those present. Deafening silence descended as grayish fog rose. With the fog came a feeling of otherworldliness.

Luke screamed and trashed about as black smoke billowed from his eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

The kids screamed in terror and ran to their mother but Philip reached her first. Even John was white-faced with terror as he held Annie and his wife.

Annie tried to ask what was going on, but no sound came out. All was quiet as the world became fog.

The Silence took on a voice and the family and servants heard it talk to Luke.

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After a seeming eternity the fog drained into Luke's collar and became a rulestone the color of angry grey and black clouds.

Luke stopped screaming and awoke. He looked at the huddled royal family and the terrified servants but said nothing.

John was the first to speak. "I never expected a visitation from Loki. He is scarier than I imagined. I don't envy you for having that rulestone."

Loki's stone hopped from one dimple to another and travelled to the back of Luke's collar and out of view of everyone.

"And tomorrow I have to go to war," Luke muttered.

A maid held a tray of tea with shaking hands and almost dropped it. Luke jumped up and grabbed it before it fell.

"Why don't you take the night off?" Luke suggested. "I can serve the royal family."

The servants looked at the king and John said, "You are dismissed." In relief the servants vacated the room. Luke served evening tea.

"You don't need to serve," Jane insisted. "You must be exhausted from that experience."

"That's what it means to defy expectations," John noted with an exhausted chuckle.

The Water Continent

The sea, the source of life,
And of calamity

An aerial battle raged just outside the Candarcar border as the flagship *Dolphin Strider* approached the fray.

Luke felt overwhelmed by the scale of the battle and a little disheartened. All that effort to expel the enemy from the country was for nothing. He thought of Monty the monkey-man and touched his tracking stone. His friend was on the Stratus.

Luke wondered why he was serving. The monkey boy didn't seem the military type.

As answer to the unasked question Walters said, "We started drafting all warriors of fighting age and preparing them for war. In the next two weeks our military ranks will almost triple."

"I don't have experience in aerial combat," Luke warned. "I can't offer any suggestions right now."

"Neither do I," Philip added.

"Be patient Captain Philip, Colonel Luke," Walters said. "No one expects either of you to perform miracles on your first day in aerial combat. For now just pay attention to the flow of battle."

Walters barked orders and people hustled. Luke couldn't do anything since they were engaged in a long range battle. The nearest enemy was a thousand feet away.

Feeling useless, Luke looked around. Unfortunately, he lacked the training needed to fight with either gun or bow at long distance.

Luke stared at Walters' map. They were outmatched five to one. The possibility of backup was zero.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Could they ascend? No, since their forces were just as vulnerable as the enemy to altitude sickness.

Descending was no good either, as any local sea monster would attack both friend and foe.

Luke took out his siren ring and wondered if he could use it and changed his mind. From personal experience he knew it took hours to enslave people and in the heat of battle, it wouldn't work. Also, he couldn't just command monsters to attack. Anything of that nature would probably take days to setup.

What was the true nature of sirens? They lured people to their doom. That wouldn't work since there was no doom to be had, but perhaps he could lure something else.

"General Walters, is it possible to force the fight to descend near the water?" Luke asked.

The general looked at the red stone of Mars on Luke's collar and nodded. He barked orders. "It will take hours to force the battle down. What do you need to execute your plan?"

"I need a way to get to the enemy ships," Luke said.

"You're not planning on battling them on your own, are you?" Walters asked in surprise.

"No sir. I don't have a death wish," Luke replied. "Wizard Zoe, can siren rings summon sea monsters?"

"Yes, but they would probably eat you before you could do anything," Zoe replied.

"I thought you said you didn't have a death wish," Walters said with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes sir, getting away would be a problem," Luke admitted. "Can I combine the powers of my anti-surveillance stone and disguise stone?" Luke showed the two stones.

"Yes," Zoe replied. "However you will have to mount them." She then gave the necessary instructions.

Luke placed a stone on each gauntlet and said, "Now for the transportation."

"General Walters, I can fly," Philip suggested.

"No you can't," both Walters and Luke objected at the same time.

"I'm expendable, you're not..." Luke began.

"No you're not expendable," Philip objected.

"Colonel Luke, you are King John's trusted advisor and chief advisor to the military. You are not expendable," Walters insisted.

"We are outgunned in this battle," Luke objected. "If we don't do something our military and our country will fall."

Just then the ship shook as the enemy scored a direct hit. Dust fell on Luke's head.

"In this battle I'm just a soldier volunteering for a dangerous mission," Philip pointed out.

Walters considered and muttered, "The royal family still has three heirs." He then said, "Okay Captain Philip, I grant you permission. Wizard Zoe, do you have any advice to give?"

"Yes sir. You mustn't directly attack the enemy or they will see through your disguise using their magic. Also, don't approach closer than hundred feet from the enemy or they might spot you. This isn't an invisibility stone which only ninja may use," Zoe

warned. "Too bad we don't have a civilian craft. The military is sensitive to military craft."

"I still have the royal boat from when I previously rescued the princess," Luke said. "I never got around to returning it and they never asked for it back."

Zoe explained how to use the siren ring and then Walters asked, "Is there anyone else you would like take with you?"

"My friend Monty sir," Luke said. "Unfortunately he seems to be in the brig on the Stratus."

"Lieutenant Hanks, please confirm a Monty in the brig of the Stratus," Walters commanded.

"Yes sir," the information officer replied. "Private Monty was thrown into the brig for gross insubordination."

"Some people aren't suited for the military," Luke noted. "However, he is strong and fearless and I like him."

"Very well," Walters said. "I'll have him transferred. Take this note and present it to Captain Haley."

The two men saluted and exited to the flight deck. Luke brought out his boat and the two stepped in.

"Oh my gods, I forgot," Zoe screamed in horror. "Only wizards are allowed to use two stones at the same t...Never mind," she said as she watched the boat disappear.



Monty stepped out of the brig, looking like a chimpanzee escaping from the zoo.

The Sea Continent

“Hi Luke, thank the gods for rescuing me,” Monty said. “I’m not suited for the military but no one believes me.”

“You can’t force a monkey to act like a dog,” Luke noted.

“Unless you give him a banana,” Philip added.

Monty looked at Philip in surprise and then burst out laughing. “That’s a good one. I never expected a prince to have a sense of humor.”

The ship captain looked at Monty with disgust and said, “Is there anything else you need Colonel Luke?”

“No captain,” Luke said and saluted.

As they walked away Monty said, “That captain is hot. Too bad she’s such a hard ass.”

“You’re lucky she didn’t throw you overboard instead of in the brig for making such comments,” Luke commented as they returned to the boat.

As they zoomed away Luke said, “I requested you because we are going on a dangerous mission.”

“Who do you want me to beat up?” Monty asked.

“Possibly some sea monsters,” Luke said as they approached the nearest enemy ship.

“Cool,” Monty grinned as they docked just under the ship.

Luke focused his attention on his tracking stone and then at the ocean less than a hundred feet below. Far in the distance Luke got a signal. It was a sea monster and it was approaching, attracted by the commotion.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Sorry I can't help," Philip apologized. "Most of my life was spent learning politics and leisure activities."

"If you don't fly, who will?" Luke asked. "All of us come from different worlds," Luke noted. "You come from high society, I come from the slums, and Monty comes from the jungle."

"The jungle is the best," Monty said. "There are no highs and lows, just eat and be eaten and, best of all, we are all strong, so why worry?"

"Prepare yourself Philip, a big one is approaching," Luke warned. "Now."

Shooting straight up, the serpent burst forth from the sea. It chomped onto the enemy ship above them, barely missing them. The ship disintegrated.

There is a rule. Where there is one monster, others are sure to be found.

Within moments sea serpents erupted from the ocean. Unfortunately they didn't distinguish between friend and foe.

"Okay Philip, let's go to the next enemy ship." Philip did as instructed.

Within moments they were under the next target ship.

"Fishing for sea serpents is fun. You want a piece of this?" Monty asked and waved his butt.

Just then a monster shot up, engulfing them as it took a chunk out of the overhead ship.

"Damn it Monty, don't you know sea monsters hate it when you make fun of them?" Philip said angrily.

The Sea Continent

Philip weaved the boat as screaming people and ship debris fell from above. At the last moment they escaped through the monster's teeth. They headed for the next enemy ship.

"On the bright side, you'll be able to tell your grandkids how you escaped the jaws of a sea serpent," Monty stated.

"Provided I survive that is," Philip grumbled.

Both navies ascended, trying to escape the monsters. The serpents sprouted wings and gave chase.

"Monty, wave your monkey butt at them. That seems to be more effective than my ring," Luke said as they headed for their next target.

"Damn it Monty, Luke didn't tell you to drop your pants," Philip grumbled, feeling sick.

"Why don't you join me? It's fun," Monty said and made farting sounds with his mouth.

They were once more engulfed.

"Oh yah, the sea monster loves Monty. Sorry dear, I have no time for dinner. I have places to go, women to lay and wine to drink." With that Monty hit the creature's uvula with his nyoibō. Coughing violently, the monster expelled them and they went flying through the air, covered with mucus.

Monty opened a bag and collected the mucus. "Don't just sit there. Collect this stuff. It makes for a great aphrodisiac. It will make you popular with the ladies."

Luke did as instructed and said, "I like collecting unique monster drops. You never know when it will come in handy." Feeling unsure, Philip collected some as well.



Normally only one sea monster at a time would attack a ship and they would have a fine battle. That gave the ship a fighting chance. Any ship that killed a monster got booty and those who lost got sent to Davy Jones' Locker. It was one of those things the gods supplied to people to entertain them.

This balance got disrupted by Luke's crew. Instead of just one monster attacking, multiple serpents attacked at once. As a result, most of the fleet dedicated to subduing Candarcar was destroyed. The rest fled in all directions.

"Well done Captain Philip, Colonel Luke, Private Monty. You helped secure an important victory," General Walters commended them as he pinned medals on Philip, Luke and Monty.

"But sir, because of that plan we lost two ships," Luke objected.

"Losses are part of war," General Walters assured. "Besides, we knew the risks were when you detailed your plan.

"Because of your plan, our fleet survived almost completely unharmed. It's time to help our allies free their country."

With that they headed to Wateran.



"Majesty I have bad news," General Phrasing of the Grenden army announced. "A crazy rumor circulated that King John of Candarcar was going to launch a doomsday weapon to destroy our forces. As a result, our forces voluntarily left and we were locked out."

"Damn it," Zenbil swore. "Who called the retreat? I want his head."

The Sea Continent

"That's impossible sir," Phrasing said. "Days after that, the Candarcar military attacked with sea monsters and destroyed our forces stationed there, killing Admiral Kooker in the process."

"Who cares about that?" Henry asked. "What about my sweet Annie?"

"Sorry Highness, we were unable to bring her here," Phrasing apologized. "It seems they were warned just before the operation."

"Are you saying we have spies in our midsts?" Zenbil demanded.



The fighting ended and the last of the enemy withdrew from Wateran territory.

It seemed that the Grenden military made several strategic mistakes. First, they assumed no country would offer assistance to another country. The assumption was justified since Grenden attacked all neighboring countries with twice the power needed to defeat them. Candarcar was attacked with five times that power to hasten victory.

The second mistake was spreading their forces too thin. Fighting the fourteen countries surrounding Candarcar at once wasn't easy, even for a country that conquered a continent.

With no spare troops, the arrival of the Candarcar forces tipped the scales of war and the result was expected.

The afternoon sun shone bright on the silent battlefield.

Luke, Philip and Monty shared a late lunch in the enlisted personal's mess area. Monty couldn't eat with them in the officer's

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mess area since he wasn't qualified for a commission. It took more than fighting skill to be an officer.

Philip stared out in the distance as they ate.

"What's the matter Philip?" Luke asked. "Are you missing Jessica?"

"Yes," Philip replied. "She'll turn nineteen January 27." That was three days from now. "How about you? Aren't you missing Annie?"

"Of course not," Luke denied. "How could I miss someone who's always abusing me?"

"Then why is your little soldier always at attention when she's mentioned?" Monty asked.

Face red, Luke exclaimed, "Shut up," and covered himself.

Monty just laughed.

A soldier ran up to them and saluted, "Captain Philip, Colonel Luke, General Walters wants to see you after you finish eating."

"Here Monty, you can eat mine," Luke said and got up.

"Mine too," Philip added as he too got up.

"Cool," Monty said excitedly.

As they headed out an announcer spoke. "Attention all personal, assemble on the parade grounds in fourteen hundred hours."

Eventually assembly time arrived and Monty headed for the parade grounds.

Walters, Luke and Philip stood onstage, next to Corrales, king of Wateran.

The Sea Continent

"Fellow citizens, thanks to the help of Candarcar, our country has been rescued from invasion," Corrales said. "Prince Philip, can you please say a few words?"

"Thank you Majesty," Philip said. "Majesty, now that your kingdom is free I ask that you form an alliance with us to oppose the Grenden aggression."

"Of course Prince Philip. We would be honored to be a part of your alliance." That was an easy answer since both countries had already agreed to the alliance before the battle to free Wateran began.

"But first, both King John and I want to acknowledge your leadership skills in battle," Corrales continued.

"By virtue of your level 52 status and your valor on the field of battle, John has awarded you the rank of Major.

"Unfortunately, King John couldn't attend. As a result, he asked me to give you the award on his behalf. Congratulations Major Philip."

Luke clapped, along with the assembled soldiers.

"Citizens, I would like to introduce Colonel Luke, Candarcar's strategic advisor. Thanks to his keen insights in battle and the key role he played in our victory, King John has decided to award him with the rank of Brigadier General." This time it was Philip who clapped.

"This war is far from over, and if we don't combine our power, all will be lost. The next country we shall free will be Ocenia.

"Fellow citizens, fighting for our neighbors isn't just being neighborly. It's protecting ourselves from a tyrant bent on world domination. If we don't oppose them now, then this time next year we shall all be enslaved."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Luke touched his forehead and the king did the same. The king nodded and said to the crowd, "We have an advantage the enemy doesn't have. Since we successfully defended our countries, we don't have to worry about the safety of Wateran for one year. Unlike us, the enemy doesn't have this luxury, making them vulnerable to attack, meaning we can win."

The crowd cheered.

Once all formalities ended, they got off the stage and Corrales said, "Honored guests, please accompany me to the palace. We have things we need to discuss."

Luke was hesitant since he didn't want to leave Monty behind. Unfortunately taking him along was out of the question, since Monty had no social graces.

"We are honored," Philip said and followed Corrales to his flagship.

The trip to the capital was uneventful. At the palace, Corrales escorted them to the royal diplomatic chambers where royals communicated remotely with other countries.

They entered and the holographic images of John, Jane, Annie, Gus, Carol, and Jessica greeted them.

The kids eagerly greeted Luke and Philip.

Luke looked at Annie and discovered that she was prettier than the last time he saw her. He didn't say that. There was no point since she, as a princess, already knew that.

"Philip, Luke, do you think we can win if we continue doing what we're doing?" John asked.

"Yes," Philip said confidently. "Our forces increase every time we free a country. They can't attack us, but we can attack them. It's only a matter of time before we win."

"I agree with Prince Philip," Walters said.

"Luke, what do you think?" John asked.

This was a question Luke had been brooding about for days. "Majesty, the enemy is trying to conquer as many countries as possible to increase its military.

"They can't withdraw now, since that would close countries off to them for one year. I think it's better for them to ignore us and continue conquering..."

"What do you mean, it's better for them?" Admiral Hooters of the Wateran navy demanded. "Whose side are you on?"

Luke looked at him with scorn. He wanted to tell the admiral he was an idiot. Instead he said, "We need to understand our common enemy before we can defeat them."

"Carry on Brigadier General Luke," Corrales said.

"This is a waiting game where the enemy will succeed in the long run," Luke continued. "Our protection will only last one year and they are conquering countries faster than we can move."

"Excellent observation Brigadier General," Corrales said. Luke blushed from the praise. He also noted the rulestone for wisdom on the king's crown.

"So far only the Ice and Water continents have been affected by this war," John said. "That's not surprising since Grenden's forces are spread thin."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"John and I believe that will change in about six months from now, when they begin their next phase of the war," Corrales said.

"Philip, we are sending you on a diplomatic mission to Blaze of the Fire continent," John said. "You are to speak to King Ardor and convince her to join our alliance. Brigadier General Luke, you will accompany Major Philip as his advisor."

Luke saluted John and said, "Yes Majesty."

"King Ardor is the most respected ruler of the people of the Fire Continent," King Corrales said. "If you can convince her to join the alliance, other countries will join, not just from the Fire continent but from other places as well."

In the world Luke lived in, the ruler of a country was called King, regardless of gender.

"Be warned," John said. "She hates weakness and she's incredibly stubborn." He smiled and added, "She has a fiery temper."

Turning to Corrales, John said, "Corrales, I would like my kids to spend some time with their brother before he leaves. I'll speak to you later."

Corrales nodded and exited the chamber, along with his advisors. General Walters and the others exited as well, leaving only Luke and Philip.

Little Carol chatted with Luke about nothing while Gus pelted Luke with questions about the war. Philip chatted with his girlfriend Jessica.

"Okay kids it's time to go," John said. "Give Luke and Annie some alone time."

"Uncle John, what are we supposed to talk about?" Luke asked.

"How about how much you miss each other?" Gus asked and ran away giggling when Luke chased him.

Following that was a chorus of byes, as the family exited.

"Have fun you two," Philip said with a smile and exited the room, leaving Luke alone with Annie.

"So what are we supposed to be talking about?" Luke asked.

"I don't know," Annie replied.

"Any more kidnapping attempts lately?" Luke asked.

"No," Annie replied. She then screamed, "I'm like a prisoner here. I haven't left the royal suite since you left. I hate this." She then tossed chairs about.

"Did that feel better?" Luke asked.

"No," Annie replied and picked up the chairs. She didn't want people to see evidence of her tantrum. Princesses only throw tantrums when they aren't properly pampered.

"Has your dad decided who you'll marry?" Luke asked.

"I don't want to get married," Annie shouted. "There are no good princes out there. Hundreds of them and they are all useless."

There was a giggle in the background.

"Annie, Gus, what are you doing?" Annie screamed.

The two stepped in, still laughing.

"They aren't the only mice," Luke commented.

"Your ears are too sensitive," Philip grumbled as he too entered.

"Sorry about that," Jane said. "Let's go kids."

Waving they left.

"Annie, I'll do my best to protect you, so that one day you can do what you love to do, and that's to break the hearts of all the princes of the world."

Luke waved and touched the communication stone mounted on its pedestal. The princess disappeared as the connection was cut off.

"You do care for her, don't you?" Philip asked.

"Shut up," Luke muttered.

Monty entered and said, "*Dolphin Strider* is ready to depart."

They followed Monty to the flagship.

Onboard, Walters greeted them by saying, "Major Philip, Brigadier General Luke, we'll drop you two off with your assistant at the Blaze capital. We'll arrive tomorrow at around 2:00PM. Unfortunately we'll have to leave you there to return to the fighting."

"Don't worry General, we'll be fine," Philip said.

Blaze

Fire is passion

"I'm sorry but in order to have an audience with the king, you need to prove your skills," Admin Raoul said.

"But this is a diplomatic mission," Philip objected. "The world is at war." He was a little cranky since he was unable to sleep aboard ship. He knew what to expect but was hoping to bypass the stupid challenges because of the emergency.

"We know," Raoul shrugged. "We just don't care."

"You don't care if they kick your asses?" Monty asked.

"They can't, as you say, kick our collective asses," Raoul replied with a frown. "We are too strong for that."

A man entered and scolded them, "It's about time you showed up. I've been waiting forever."

"I know you," Luke said. "You're Brad. Why were you waiting for us?"

"No spoiling the fun," Raoul reproached. "The rules are simple. Enter those doors and defeat whatever the gods decide to throw at you. If you survive...perhaps you should write your last will and testimony."

"Good luck Luke, I really do like you," Brad said with a smile. "I'll mourn your death."

"Leave your mourning for the dead," Luke said in annoyance. "Come guys; let's go kick some monster butt."

They entered and Luke found himself alone. He wasn't worried. Challenges to prove a person's mettle were normally fought alone.

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Luke faced a man lounging on a bench and picking his nose. A table covered with dozens of keys lay before the man. Behind him was a locked door. Above the door was a plaque. It read, "Get man to give you the correct key. Violence is forbidden."

"What do you want?" the man demanded.

"I need a key to that door..." Luke began.

"Frig off," the man swore.

"You won't accept a bribe, will you?" Luke asked.

The man leaned close to Luke and said in a lecherous tone, "You're a pretty boy. Why don't we play a little?"

Luke cocked his fist and swung it at the man's face. He stopped at the last second.

"Damn," Luke swore. He almost lost the challenge.

Composing himself, Luke said in disgust, "I'm sorry but I would rather not have sex with someone as ugly as you. How did you survive till manhood? Didn't your mother try to kill you when you were a baby?"

"No that was you," the man shot back.

"Nice try, but you said I was pretty, you freakin' perv," Luke said with revulsion written on his face. "Why do you think you go after men? It's because all the women of the world have rejected you, including your mother."

The man punched Luke in the face. The doors opened.

That was one down, two to go. Why were there always three challenges? Luke didn't know.

"Thanks for opening the door," Luke said and entered – and almost fell over the edge of a pit.

The next room was perhaps a hundred feet long with a pit in the center. The only way across was a rickety plank.

Far below were spikes, decorated with skulls. Critters gnawed on the fallen victims.

Luke had never been afraid of heights. He was however gripped with terror the moment he stepped on the plank.

A voice in Luke's head spoke. *Do you really need to do this? Philip is there and this is not your fight. Monty is there as well and that plank is not safe.*

A door at the side opened. Monty and Philip waved. "Yo Luke, we made it," Monty called. "You don't need to do that."

"That's right," Philip beckoned. "We have our audience with the king."

Feeling relief, Luke said, "Alright," and stepped towards the exit.

Luke's bell rang.

Something wasn't right. Why would the gods allow anyone to bypass a challenge? It wasn't in the nature of the gods to do that. Unless that was a trap.

"What's the matter?" Monty asked. "Let's go."

"Yes Luke, the king is getting impatient," Philip beckoned.

Again Luke felt like exiting.

"No!" Luke declared. "Let that damn king wait. It's not in my nature to back down from a challenge."

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Easier said than done, Luke thought.

Heart thumping, Luke gingerly stepped up to the plank. He couldn't believe how terrified he was.

"One step at a time," Luke intoned and stepped on the plank. "A foot-wide plank is like a highway."

'Until you fall off,' the snakes in the pit seemed to say. *'Or when the plank breaks under your fat ass.'*

Ignoring the creatures, Luke took another step. Fighting dizziness and nausea, he took a third step, and then another.

Time seemed to go on forever as he fell to his knees and crawled. The creaking of the plank was deafening. Nothing in his life compared to how scary the crawl was.

The most annoying thing was he knew it would be easy if he turned around and withdrew.

After an eternity he stepped to the other side. Never before was he so happy for solid ground.

Immediately his fear of heights disappeared, proving the fear was induced by the gods in order to test him.

Still wobbly at the knees, Luke stepped through the doors to his third challenge.

The next room was a battle stadium. Spectators screamed as the announcer gave play-by-play commentary.

Luke's exhaustion disappeared as he cheered along with the crowd. He even bet on the match.

The great thing about battling in official arenas was that any injury could be healed when the match ended. That meant you could go all out without fear.

"Ladies and gentlemen, matches in this arena are fought with passion," the announcer said. "Show us how passionate you are for fighting and become the hero of the arena."

Luke ran to sign up. Within moments a full roster of fighters was assembled.



Emerging victorious, Luke greeted Monty and Philip with a wave.

"Congratulations Luke," Philip greeted Luke with a touch of disappointment.

"The challenges kicked both our butts," Monty explained.

"Congratulations Warrior Luke," Raoul said. "You get an audience with the king."

"What about Prince Philip?" Luke asked.

"He failed, and so is forbidden from speaking to the king," Raoul said. "He may however watch. Please come with me."

Luke looked at Philip, unsure of what to do.

"It's okay Luke," Philip said. "The important thing is that we have an audience."

"Okay," Luke said reluctantly and followed Raoul into the royal audience chamber.

Sitting on the throne was a beautiful woman with flame-red hair. She wore a provocative red dress. She was like a hungry tiger,

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eager to rip someone's throat out. Unconsciously Luke flinched from the stare.

King Ardor gave a slight smile and Luke cursed himself for losing that battle of wills.

"I like you," Ardor said. "You have a great deal of fire in your heart and in your belly. I'm aware of your battle with Grenden. Warrior Brad, step forward.

"Each of you has requested our help in this war. We personally don't care who wins. Our motto is, 'Let the strongest rule.' Therefore in keeping with that, you two shall have a competition.

"You shall go to each of the kingdoms of the Fire Continent and obtain a token from the king of that country. This token will represent their commitment to help you in this battle for the world.

"Blaze, being the strongest of the Fire nations, will side with the one who has the greatest number of tokens.

"Once the battle for the rest of the world ends, the entire Coalition of Fire Nations will pledge our allegiance to the winner.

"May the gods allow you to battle at your best. Dismissed."

"Follow me," Raoul said and headed out.

Luke looked at Philip. This wasn't right. It should have been Philip in the spotlight, not him.

In the next chamber Raoul presented them with maps of the continent. "When you conquer a country, it will show up in your color, purple for Warrior Luke and red for Warrior Brad. Countries that neither can conquer will show up as grey. Once the map is filled out, return here. Good luck, and may the strongest win."

Like all magic maps, this only showed the outline of the countries. Details would fill out as Luke explored each area.

Luke touched the map and it zoomed to the palace. The rooms of the palace where he walked were marked. However it didn't show the contents of any of the rooms. It just said, 'People'.

"Warrior Luke, I suggest you go to Terra Marte first."

"I'll go there too," Brad said.

"There's no point since you will lose there, but go if you wish," Raoul advised.

"Fine," Brad conceded with a grimace. "I don't need that country to win." He walked away.

"Wait Warrior Brad," Raoul called. "You're advised to go to Laval. Also, we are supplying you both with transportation since Warrior Luke has a much further distance to travel."

"Terra Marte and Laval are on opposite sides of the continent," Philip commented.

A ship captain approached and said, "Greetings Warrior Luke, I am Captain Flint. I've been assigned to take you to Terra Marte. Please follow me."

Within moments they were off and heading to Terra Marte.

The landscape of the continent whizzed past far below. Off in the distance a volcano spewed fire into the sky.

"Holy gods, there's a forest fire over there," Luke exclaimed.

"You're right," Monty marveled. "That's freaky. Why would they allow so much valuable land to be destroyed?"

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"This is the land of fire," Philip explained, feeling useful for the first time in a long time. It was disheartening to know how much better a commoner was at everything than a prince. Even now, in a war to determine the fate of the world, the only help he could offer was some trivia he learned from his tutors.

"The Continent of Fire is located in the southern hemisphere," Philip explained. "Although it's January, it's summer here."

"On the Fire Continent, there are only two seasons. In the growing season, plants grow like crazy in the rich volcanic soil, covering the continent with dense jungle."

"We are in the burning season now. Even though the burning season is only two months, 90% of the forests will be destroyed."

"If you think that's impressive you should see it at night, with multiple volcanoes erupting," Flint said. "You would think you were in hell. Let's go to the bow."

The front of the ship was indeed the best.

"Look, there's a thunderstorm," Monty said, pointing at ominous clouds. Lightning flashed in the clouds and they could hear thunder. "I guess it'll put out some of the forest fires."

"I've never seen clouds that color before," Luke commented. "They look like soot."

"Those aren't rain clouds," Flint explained. "Those are clouds of volcanic ash. Below that is the hell on earth I mentioned. We'll fly above since it's too dangerous to cross through without reason."

They sailed over the ominous black clouds on their tiny white cloud trail. Luke felt disappointed at missing a view of a lifetime but said nothing.

"Do many people live here, on this continent?" Luke asked.

"It's not as populated as the other continents," Flint admitted.
"Only the brave and the strong live here."

And the foolish, Luke thought as he watched as a town got engulfed by lava far to the north.

Soon enough they arrived at the palace. Waving goodbye to the captain, the three followed a steward to their audience with the king.

"Welcome Prince Philip, Warrior Luke," King Homer said and got up from his throne. He was a big man with bulging muscles. He walked up to Luke and shook his hand and almost crushed it. That was no easy task, since Luke had his gloves on.

"Congratulations Warrior Luke on obtaining the Rulestone of Strength," Homer said excitedly. "Hercules is my patron god as you can tell," he said and cut a pose.

"But for some reason I can't obtain that rulestone, no matter how much I exercise," Homer said sadly.

That's because there's more to strength than big muscles, Luke thought, remembering Hercules' words. Unfortunately King Homer didn't seem to understand that.

"To acknowledge your personal victory, I give you my token. We shall deploy immediately."

Luke bowed to Homer and accepted the token. "Thank you for your assistance. We appreciate it."

"Your next kingdom is Melba. It's always toasty there. Ha, ha. You will have completed your next challenge when you arrive. You

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need to arrive day-after-tomorrow, noon, at the latest or you fail. Good luck warrior,” Homer said, dismissing them.

“Thank you Majesty,” Luke said and bowed. He turned and walked away, followed by Philip and Monty.

“Well that was easy,” Monty said as they exited the throne room.

Melba Toast

Melba,
Enjoy the bread but don't get toasted

"It's almost 5:00PM," a steward informed. "Do you wish to leave immediately or stay the night?"

"So how do we get there?" Monty asked.

"You're responsible for your transportation," the steward replied. "That's part of the next challenge King Sepia of Melba has laid on you."

"In that case why don't we eat and then leave?" Monty suggested.

"Very well. Please follow me."

The steward led them to a restaurant where attendants sat them and a waiter took their order.

"I wonder what challenges we will face," Monty pondered as he reached to fondle the ass of a serving woman.

The woman slapped his face and then dumped beer on his head.

"I guess the beer is on me," Monty quipped.

The serving woman looked at Monty with disgust and walked away.

"Damn, it's going to take at least five days walking," Philip frowned. "There's no way we can succeed."

"Nonsense," Luke denied. "Our task is to get there. We aren't limited by what transportation we use. Therefore we can use the boat I have."

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"You're right," Philip said with relief. "With that boat we can arrive sometime tomorrow."

They talked strategy and then Monty said, "You better eat or your food will get cold. I think I ate too much. Buuuurp!"

They finished eating and entered the nearest garden. Luke took out his boat and they zoomed into the sky.

For the next several hours they zoomed through a sky filled with an ever increasing amount of smoke, soot, and intense wind.

Then there was the suffocating heat. "Damn! It's so hot," Luke grumbled. He was soaking wet.

"What do you expect," Monty laughed. "This is the land of fire after all."

"At least we don't have to walk," Luke said as he eyed the hellish landscape below. "I can't handle heat. It makes me weak."

"So you do have a weakness," Monty laughed. "I was starting to think you were some kind of monster."

Just then a nearby volcano erupted, throwing rocks and debris everywhere. One rock flew at them and made a hole in the center of the boat.

"Brace yourself," Philip warned. "I'm losing control."

They spiraled down and crashed near a boulder.

"There goes our transportation," Philip declared. "The magic circuits are destroyed and I don't know how to make repairs."

Crouched on all fours where he landed Luke said, "I think the gods did that on purpose."

“Not to worry,” Philip said. “We should arrive for the day-after-tomorrow deadline if we walk at our normal pace.”

Luke got up and put the boat away. Even with a hole, it was still valuable.

Wiping sweat from his brow, Luke followed his friends across a rugged terrain filled with jagged rocks, dusty hills and clingy vegetation. Above, lightning flashed as hot dry wind caressed his face.

Half an hour into the hike Luke tripped and fell.

“Are you okay?” Philip asked in concern.

Luke just nodded blankly and got up.

“Remember to drink plenty of water,” Monty suggested. “A fella can get pretty dehydrated in heat like this. I wonder why it’s so hot. It normally gets cold at night.”

“I suppose it’s because that forest is burning on the right and there’s a river of lava to the left,” Philip explained and took a sip of water. “Also, the ash clouds overhead are blocking the heat from escaping. On the other hand, we have plenty of light to see.”

The hours dragged on as they trudged along a path that seemed to go on forever. Each step was torture as Luke’s feet cooked in his boots.

Luke looked at Philip and then Monty. Neither seemed much bothered by the oven-like conditions, probably because one was a prince and the other came from a sweltering jungle.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Philip asked worriedly.

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Luke chugged down water and stammered, "Like what? You can't carry me. I'm too heavy and our boat is trashed. Heat has always been my weakness. I've always hated the summer."

"Perhaps we should rest for the night," Philip suggested.

"No way," Luke objected. "During the day it'll probably get hotter, and then I'll die from the heat and then our mission will have failed. Besides, we have a deadline."

Not knowing what else to say, the two companions strolled by Luke's side as he staggered in a daze.

"What's that smell?" Monty asked.

"That's sulfur, also known as brimstone," Philip replied.

"Fire and brimstone," Luke muttered. "I really am in hell." He collapsed. This time he failed to get up.



Luke stood in the narrow alley and watched as the thugs he just beat up ran away.

"Take the money and give it to the orphanage," Luke instructed the woman.

"Yes Luke," the woman said. "Thank you for saving me."

"If we don't protect ourselves then no one will," Luke replied. "The king certainly won't. He's doesn't care. The gods don't care either."

"You shouldn't say such things," the woman said worriedly. "Both the king and the gods care."

"It's true and you know it," Luke said angrily. "The guards are scared of this area and haven't visited in years. As for the gods, they enjoy watching us worms struggle and fight. Like I always say, the only ones we can rely on are each other."

Little Carol stepped out from behind a door and said, "Those are some pretty words. How come you don't follow your own advice?"

Luke woke up with a start.

"Are you okay Luke?" Philip asked in concern.

"Yes...No...Yes...No...Yes...No," Luke muttered.

"Make up your mind. Are you okay or aren't you?" Monty chuckled.

Luke took a deep breath and said, "My guardian angel just scolded me. For years I've been telling my people that we need to rely on each other, since neither the gods, nor the king, nor anyone else will help us. And here I am, ignoring my own advice.

"Monty, Philip, you are my best friends. If I can't rely on your power, then there's no one in this world I can rely on." Luke bowed to the two from where he sat and said, "I leave myself in your capable hands."

A moment later Luke transformed into a kitten.

"I hadn't realized that Luke's animal form was a cute little kitten," Monty said and picked Luke up. "I expected a huge lion or tiger or some other big cat."

"I know," Philip replied. "That's the surprising side to him. Super strong but also vulnerable."

Luke didn't respond since he was out cold.

Monty transformed into a flying monkey, complete with marching-band-style red jacket and hat. Philip looked at Monty in surprise but didn't say anything. Instead he transformed into a swan. Both took off and flew towards their destination.

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They arrived at their destination just after noon. They entered the air-conditioned palace and Monty put Luke down. Luke turned back into his human form.

A steward approached the three and said, "Please follow me. You stink and are not fit to see the king yet."

At the guest quarters, serving girls approached to bathe them.

"This is so cool," Monty said. "They are treating me like a prince."

"Trust me," Luke said. "The only princely thing about you is the fact that you know one."

"The same thing applies to you," Monty retorted.

"That's true, and for that I'm glad," Luke admitted. "I've had plenty of glimpses into their world, and from what I've seen, it's too much trouble."

Luke let a servant escort him. Squeaky clean, he returned to his friends. Both Monty and Philip looked exhausted. That wasn't surprising, considering the distances they travelled. More importantly, they didn't sleep while he did during the trip.

Luke looked at his two friends, wondering whether he should suggest they go to sleep. Philip resolved the issue by saying, "Let's get it over with. Then we can go eat."

"I'd rather sleep, but eating is good too," Monty said. "Yo Jeeves lead the way to the king."

"Right this way and my name isn't Jeeves," the man sneered.

After an annoying wait, they were taken to see King Ashley of Melba.

"Congratulations Warrior Luke on completing your ordeal of fire," Ashley said.

"Thank you Majesty," Luke said as he knelt before the king. "However I couldn't have done it without the help of my friends. People are useless without friends."

"You're absolutely right," Ashley praised. "That was the real test. Could you rely on your friends to help you fulfill your obligations? I have a great deal of respect for you. You showed me your strength. Therefore I give you my token. Now for your next test."

"King Torrent of Ember wants you to compete in a battle of beasts in her kingdom. You must win in order to obtain her token. Good luck Warrior."

"Thank you Majesty," Luke said and got up. He walked out of the audience chamber, followed by his friends.



The steward approached them and said, "The competition is tomorrow afternoon. We shall provide transportation in the morning. Please follow me and we shall feed and entertain you."

"Thank you," Philip said with a smile.

"So how are you going to win a competition of beasts, when your beast form is a kitten?" Monty asked and then yawned.

"Don't worry," Philip assured. "The gods never ask for the impossible."

They arrived at the noble's hall, where high-ranking people mingled and watched entertainment.

The three sat at a table and servants brought food.

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"Don't be so sure," Luke replied. "With the gods you never know. I've known people who have worked hard their entire lives and then were snuffed out just like that."

"However I don't believe I'll get killed the instant I enter the arena. Where's the fun in that?"

"You're a very cynical young man," the steward commented.

"You would be too if you spent your life in the slums," Luke replied. "This is good. What is it?"

"The meat is from a type of quail," the steward replied. "It's very hard to cook, since the creature is fireproof. The vegetables only grow in the fire season and also require special preparation. It's not cheap but the king wanted to show you some hospitality before you left."

"Well, you can tell the king that this food is d-licious," Monty said and gobbled the food down like a pig.

"Well I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," the steward sneered and brushed food from his vest. "There will be more entertainment this evening. After all, your schedule is free for the rest of the day."

"No my good man. I can't let you do all the entertaining," Monty objected. "As a gentleman I'm perfectly happy to give entertainment and happiness to the ladies."

"That's very gracious of you," the steward said, rolling his eyes. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

White Tiger

When you have friends, even a kitten
can be a tiger

The three entered the coliseum. An ash storm had delayed the trip, making Luke the last contestant to arrive.

Spectators screamed as the contestants waited in their beast forms. Each beast seemed fiercer than the next. In size the smallest was bigger than a bear and the largest weighed more than a whale and could easily squash the smaller contestants.

“Good luck Luke,” Philip said, eyeing a steel-grey dragon the size of a mammoth.

“I don’t need luck,” Luke said with full confidence. “I have you two to protect my back.”

With that declaration, Luke dove head-first into the arena. He transformed in mid-air into a massive white tiger.

“Isn’t that sweet? Our little kitten has grown,” Monty cooed and then laughed. More seriously he added, “I hadn’t realized people could have more than one spirit beast.”

“It is possible but rare,” Philip replied. “However in this case, that seems to be a grown version of the cat he is. He seemed to have changed.” He paused at his unintentional pun. “I mean he has grown. I mean he has matured as a person.”

“Greetings warriors,” King Torrent called. “You have come from all over the world to compete in a battle for our help. Some want aid conquering the world.” She looked at a vicious looking wolf that Luke guessed was Brad.

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"Some want protection for their own country," Torrent glanced at various contestants. And some want help protecting the world." This time she looked at Luke.

"We shall offer our assistance to whoever wins this competition," Torrent continued. "The competition is simple. You shall participate in a race. You are free to use any natural abilities you have. However, you may not use magic stones. Doing so will disqualify you.

"The first person who retrieves all four items from the four specified locations will win. How you get those items is up to you."

That meant stealing was allowed. Luke surveyed the contestants, trying to decide who his opponents were.

Everyone turned back to their human form and maps were handed out. The items were simple monster drops at the four cardinal points. However they were unique to the specified locations.

Luke watched as most fighters headed for the north exit. Obviously that was the easiest task. Luke turned back into a tiger and headed for the west exit, where no one went.

Outside, a scorching city greeted Luke with smoke-filled streets. Luke was forced to turn back to human form, since white tigers can't run far in extreme heat.

The path forked outside the city and Luke was compelled to make a decision. He could go over the mountains and face a forest fire, steep ravines, raging rivers and cliffs. Or he could go through the cave system and face monsters, underground rivers and tight crevices only a baby could fit through. That was a no-brainer since caves are cool and the distance, according to the map, was shorter.

White Tiger

Passages opened and closed as Luke ran. Soon enough he faced the first of the monsters.



Philip and Monty ignored the other contestants and watched Luke fight monsters.

“Why did Luke choose the hardest route?” Monty asked, yelling over the din of the crowd. “I would have chosen the easiest route and then stolen the prizes from another contestant.”

“That’s because Luke is honorable,” Philip said angrily and then stopped, realizing Luke would have laughed at him for making that statement.

Beyond the monsters, Luke turned into a kitten and ran through a labyrinth of narrow tunnels and crevices. The next obstacle was a raging river that Luke’s tiger form easily conquered.

Finally he arrived at his destination, where a fire drake guarded a chest. Luke took out a bow and quiver of arrows, surprising both Monty and Philip. Of course that was Luke’s only choice, since the drake’s heat made it impossible for close combat.

Arrow after arrow zinged at the monster, turning to ash as they hit the fire enveloping the monster.

Luke paused and then shot an arrow at the ceiling. It hit a stalactite, causing dust to rain down. Two more arrows dropped the rock on the drake’s head.

The monster’s hit-points dropped by a third and it charged at Luke.

“Damn! That Luke is nuts,” Philip muttered as he watched Luke scurry for his life.

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Luke grabbed a boulder and hit the drake. The drake weakened, but it was strong enough to spit a blob of lava, which landed on Luke's gauntlet.

Screaming in pain, Luke continued running. He fired arrows at the ceiling, causing rocks to fall. A minute later a rock hit the monster and the creature exploded in smoke.

Luke retrieved the item and headed back to the coliseum. Before arriving he was accosted by an elephant, a water buffalo, and a rhino. "Give us your item and we'll let you live," the rhino said menacingly.

"You already have three items," Luke said. "Why do you need to steal from me? For strong warriors like you, getting the fourth should be easy."

Watching, Philip asked, "How does he know they have three items?"

"Probably a lie," Monty replied. "He must have figured they went for the easy marks before going after him."

"Do you think we would trouble ourselves collecting, when we can steal?" the elephant asked. "A white tiger is no match for us and you know it."

Luke looked at the three in stark terror and nodded. "Okay. Okay. Just don't hurt me," he said and tossed an expensive gold bracelet behind the elephant.

The members of the audience saw that and some sneered at Luke's obvious cowardice.

The elephant turned his back on Luke and reached down with his trunk to retrieve the item. At that moment, Luke jumped on the elephant's hindquarters, grabbed his tail, and gave the creature a vicious kick to the balls.

The elephant screamed and involuntarily charged forward. He slammed his head against the cliff wall and collapsed, unconscious. A moment later he turned back to human form.

White Tiger

The other two were taken aback by the turn of events. Taking advantage of the confusion, Luke jumped on the rhino and banged his palms against his ears. The rhino staggered.

Manhandling the rhino like a horse, Luke turned him around and kicked his flanks. The rhino charged and gouged his friend. Both turned back to human form.

Luke placed a knife against one of the attackers and said, "Give me your three items or I'll turn you all into kitty bits."

Within minutes Luke was back at the coliseum with all four items. Torrent gave her token to Luke, just as Brad entered the coliseum.

"Damn, I thought I beat you," Brad cussed. "It doesn't matter. I'm still ahead by one. Since there are only two left, I will win. See you around." He followed an attendant away, presumably to another challenge.

Luke met the others and Philip scolded, "Don't you think kicking someone in the nuts is a bit dishonorable?"

Luke frowned at Philip and said, "I am not and will never be royalty nor nobility. I'm not destined to rule the world, thank the gods for that.

"Throughout history, it has always been people like me who have worked behind the scenes to support the rulers, so the rulers may remain pure."

"It was his fault for turning his back to the enemy, or was that turning his balls to the enemy?" Monty shrugged. "Besides it was funny to watch. By the way, why did you go for the hardest challenge first?"

"Because only strong warriors would do that," Luke replied. "Stealing from them would be impossible. On the other hand, weaklings would go for the other items first. They would be easy

pickings. It just turned out better than I planned. I'm surprised Brad did it so fast. He's a dangerous opponent."

Vermilion Bird

The road to our future
lies in our past

“Greetings Warrior Luke,” King Harry of Parch hailed. “Your challenge from me is simple, but by no means easy. You are to enter the Caves of Passion and obtain the blessings of Fire.

“Be warned. Only those who are driven by passion may succeed. But those who are slaves to that passion are doomed. Good luck.”

They exited the audience chamber and Monty asked, “Are you driven by passion or are you a slave?”

“Don’t know,” Luke replied.

“You better know,” the steward warned. “Your adversary has shown great passion and wasn’t destroyed by it. If you don’t show more passion than him, you will lose.”

Chilled by the warning, Luke walked in silence through a labyrinth of corridors bustling with people. Finally they ended up at the back of the palace, where the building was buttressed up against a nearby hill.

The destination was a chamber containing a set of imposing steel doors. Statues of grinning dragons greeted those foolish enough to enter.

The doors creaked open, revealing a passageway lined with torches. One by one the torches came to life. Sound, almost like the screams of people in torment greeted Luke’s ears.

Luke entered and the doors slammed shut. Downward he walked into the bowels of the earth. The passage turned into a cave system of branching tunnels and dead-ends. The heat was stifling.

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As Luke walked his thoughts drifted back into his childhood.

Luke remembered playing with his siblings and friends. The days filled with hard work were fun, since there was always singing and joking. Then came the faithful day when the soldiers came.

Amongst swirling memories Luke opened a set of doors and entered a room identical to his childhood room on the farm. As a matter of fact, it was his room. Looking down, he discovered he was once again an eight-year-old child.



Little Luke heard soldiers gathering up his family for slaughter. The fear and helplessness he felt before flooded him anew. This time it was accompanied by anger. The thoughts, *'How dare they harm my family?'* echoed in his brain.

Armored gloved and boots appeared on Luke's hands and feet. Years of accumulated hurt, anger and pain exploded in Luke's brain and he charged forth. It was time for vengeance.

Luke attacked the first soldier and killed him with a swipe of his claws. Within moments every soldier was dead. He turned to King Gloman.

Luke stabbed and hacked at the king. Strangely enough the king did not die. Instead he just laughed and ridiculed Luke.

Without warning, the dead soldiers rose up and attacked his family anew. Luke had to stop attacking the king and deal with the soldiers.

One by one Luke again slaughtered the soldiers until none remained standing, and then he attacked the king with renewed hatred. Once again the soldiers arose. The cycle continued.

A thought entered Luke's head. Was this how he wanted to spend the rest of eternity, trapped in hatred and vengeance, surrounded by monsters that would never die?

Luke's bell rang.

The killing and vengeance continued. No matter how many times Luke stabbed and hacked at the king, he wouldn't die. The soldiers only laughed and mocked Luke, all the while killing his undying siblings, relatives and parents in an eternal orgy of blood.

Again a thought entered Luke's mind. Was it possible to subdue these demons? Was this what he desired? Was this what his family wanted for him?

The bell rang.

Luke remembered. He had set aside vengeance for something else. What was it?

The bloodbath continued, with Luke alternating between killing the soldiers and the soldiers killing his family.

Vengeance and hatred was so empty. Passion for vengeance was not true passion. It was slavery.

With conscious effort, Luke stopped hacking at both king and soldiers. He turned to his family and bowed to them. Curiously, the soldiers stopped their attack. Both king and soldiers stared at Luke, waiting for him to do something.

"I'm sorry I couldn't save you. I'm sorry I couldn't die with you," Luke said tearfully. "I'm sorry for a thousand and one things. However this is not my destiny. I will always love you."

Luke turned and opened the door to his half-destroyed family home. He stepped through and reentered the dungeon.



Back to his eighteen-year-old self, Luke took a shuddered breath and wiped tears from his eyes with a trembling hand. This challenge was harder than he expected.

Dizzy from the heat, Luke entered a large cavern filled with pools of molten lava. Carefully avoiding the pools and lava falls, Luke wound his way to a pair of doors.

The doors were ornately carved, gilded with gold, jewels and expensive woods. They reminded Luke of the time he was in his old gang, the Kalians, before he took over and turned it into the Neighborhood Patrol.

After leaving Upheaval, Luke joined the Kalians and changed his name for self-protection. However, the Kalians offered more than protection. They offered companionship, fun and excitement, as well as freedom.



The doors opened and people he knew from the old days flooded out. They greeted Luke like a king. "Welcome back Master Luke," the former boss, Billy, said.

"Welcome back," a dozen women sang and escorted Luke through the doors. The doors closed and Luke found himself in a luxuriously furnished room. He was in the mansion of the previous boss, his place now. "Let's go to the Black Wings Casino. We all know how much you love gambling."

Forgetting his quest and everything else, Luke allowed himself to be escorted to the casino. There he won, and won, and won.

Afterwards he went to the fight club and participated, and watched others fight.

That night the ladies entertained him. However none tried to seduce him.

The next day was the same. Luke was free to spend the rest of his life fighting, gambling, eating, sleeping and womanizing to his heart's desire.

While swept up in the events, a thought entered Luke's head. Was this what he wanted? Was this passion? His passion? Why was he here?

Luke touched the bell around his neck and pondered what it meant to be passionate. You could be passionate about gambling, fighting, women, and other things. But were they things he *should* be passionate about? Weren't they just means to an end? What was that end?

"Come on baby," a hot woman said sensually. "Stop thinking silly thoughts and let's get passionate."

"This isn't passion," Luke declared. "I don't want to be trapped by this nonsense," he shouted and punched a wall.

The house shuddered and collapsed, leaving him back in the chamber filled with lava pools.

Vengeance was not for him. Mindless pleasure and being a boss wasn't for him. What was?



Luke walked through an inferno of suffocating heat, chugging water like a fish. He knew that he was getting heat stroke and was delirious. If he didn't end the quest soon, he knew he would die.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Up ahead awaited a giant bird made entirely of brilliant red flame with golden streaks. It sat in a nest of glowing rocks and bubbling lava.

The Vermilion Bird spoke. "Luke, what are you passionate about? Place your passions on the altar. Do that and you will receive a firestone."

An altar appeared before Luke, along with a basket on a stand. The basket contained icons symbolizing all the passions of his life.

The first item was a statue of Gloman with a knife in his chest, symbolizing Luke's thirst for vengeance. The second was a statue of a beautiful naked woman. There was also a treasure chest, a plate filled with delicious food, a bed, a deck of cards, and a fighting arena in miniature. Everything he ever felt passion for was there.

"Go ahead. Place your passions on the altar and receive your reward of the firestone. Hurry up or the heat will kill you."

Luke reached up to place the basket filled with passions onto the alter, but then hesitated. Something was wrong. Something was missing.

"Hurry up," the bird demanded. "Those are your passions, aren't they?"

The room went hazy and Luke collapsed to the floor as his knees buckled. In his delirium Luke thought back into his past.



Luke thought of his days doing criminal acts for a rebellion guild and his escape. He then thought of the gangster organization and his revolt, turning it into the Neighborhood Patrol. He did it

because he couldn't stand innocent people getting hurt. Perhaps he revolted because the victims reminded him of his family.

Luke remembered. He created the Neighborhood Patrol to make the area safer for everyone. He remembered the orphanage and the little children in need of protection and nurturing.

Strangely enough, Luke thought of Annie. He realized with astonishment that he did care for her.

What was Luke passionate about? He was passionate about the people of his neighborhood and he enjoyed helping them become strong. He was passionate about the orphanage, the children and its caretakers.

Luke staggered to his feet. He then tossed the basket filled with trinkets into a lava pool. "This is all junk," he declared as he watched the items burn.

"Passion is about *who* you are and *what* you are. It has nothing to do with possessions, abilities, status, and the pursue of mindless pleasures or revenge. Those things come and go with the tide. The only true passions in the world are passion for the important things in life, such as friends and family."

Luke placed his hands on the alter and said, "I love my friends. I love the people I have adopted to be my family. My passion is fighting for them, and playing with them and helping them, and also letting them help me in times of need."

Luke paused and added, "I do care about Annie. I love how she smiles in the morning, and plays with the children. I love how she flirts with the princes as she breaks their hearts. I also love her hidden depths of character that are constantly growing inside of her.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"This journey isn't just about protecting all that is important to me. It's also about protecting the smile of a girl who can at times be a real princess. This is my passion. This is what I place before you."

"Well done," the Vermillion Bird praised. "You have looked past the temporary things and found what matters. For that you shall receive something far greater than a firestone."

When the world was created, four guardian deities came into existence. They were the Black Turtle of the North, the Vermilion Bird of the South, the Azure Dragon of the East, and the White Tiger of the West. In the center was the city where the king sat.

Luke's clothes changed to his formal regalia. On his back, the image of the White Tiger moved to the left of center. At the same time the Vermilion Bird swooped at him. Before he could react, the bird engulfed him in flame and was gone. On his back the image of the Vermillion Bird appeared, below the center.

Luke headed back to the exit. While returning, Luke realized he was no longer hot. He had conquered Fire.

In the king's chamber, King Harry said, "Congratulations Luke for getting the greater blessings of fire. The gods permitted me to see.

"Warrior Brad got the lesser blessing of a firestone. As a result you have won and shall have our assistance in the war."

Hell is Murky

No one ever went to hell
Because it was fun

The next day they arrived at Slag, capital city of Furno. This was the final contested country on the Fire Continent. Since both Luke and Brad were tied, whoever won this country would get the help of Blaze.

“Greetings Warrior Luke,” King Cindy of Furno greeted with a smile. “Are you ready to go to hell?”

“Are you serious?” Philip asked incredulously.

Smiling, Cindy said, “Your task is to retrieve a black rose from the Darkness Continent. Portals to the continent can be found everywhere.” She pointed at a set of iron gates decorated with scowling demons. The doors opened, revealing a black oily surface.

“I always wanted to know what it was like. Is it really filled with suffering souls, being punished for their unspeakable crimes?” Monty asked. “Can anyone enter?”

“You may try,” Cindy offered.

Monty touched the black, rippling surface and then stepped through. A moment later he stepped out again.

“What just happened?” Monty asked, confused.

“You obviously don’t have sufficient sin to allow you to enter,” the king said simply.

“But I killed people in the battle,” Monty objected.

“How about me?” Philip asked and stepped in. He popped out a moment later.

"Killing the enemy on the battlefield isn't a sin," the king stated. "It's a duty."

Everyone looked at Luke. He seemed terrified and was sweating.

"What's the matter Luke? You can't enter. You're a good person," Philip assured.

"You're so full of bull, it's a wonder you don't explode," Luke said angrily. "You don't know anything, being as perfect as you are."

"I'm not perfect," Philip mumbled, hurt by the comment.

Luke turned to the king and asked, "Brad has already entered, hasn't he?" Cindy just nodded. "And he hasn't exited, has he?" Again the king nodded.

"I guess we must all face the crimes we have committed," Luke murmured. "Philip, it was nice knowing you. Tell Annie – hi. Monty, try not to be too much of a pervert." He stepped in.



Luke found himself in a bleak landscape with overcast skies. Everywhere vegetation seemed to be in a state of constant decay. To the left was a field filled with rotting vegetables. On the right was a crumbling town.

Luke knew there were people there, since he could hear their tormented cries. He too felt like screaming, as the sins of his past smothered him like a putrid blanket.

Just after joining Upheaval, Luke met a ten-year-old boy with a gentle soul. They became friends. Unfortunately in Upheaval, friendship wasn't an option. Like half the conscripts, Jamie couldn't handle the brutal nature of the organization and earned the scorn of the bosses.

Hell is Murky

Being driven by the need for revenge, Luke was able to flourish. It was then that Luke and Jamie were forced to battle to the death. The battle was harsh, not because Jamie was strong, but because Luke couldn't bear to take the life of his best friend.

Unfortunately, under the pressure of the bosses, the senior members of Upheaval, and his burning desire for revenge, Luke committed his unspeakable act and became a full member of Upheaval...

There was a movement to the right and Jamie stepped out from the decaying town. He looked the same as when he was alive, except he was covered in bruises and his fatal wound was flowing with blood.

"Why did you kill me," Jamie wailed. "We were friends, weren't we?"

"I'm sorry, Jamie," Luke cried. "I was too weak to do anything." He fell to the ground under the overwhelming weight of his sin.

Other people came out of the town. First was the first government official he assassinated. "Why did you kill me?" the official asked. "I was just doing my job, trying to clean up corruption. Now my wife and children are destitute." The wife and kids stood behind the official and cried.

"I'm sorry," Luke whimpered.

One by one more victims appeared, including some of the soldiers who had participated in Luke's family's slaughter.

Hell wasn't a place of fire and brimstone. It was a place where you drown in your own regrets and sins.

Jamie looked at Luke and asked tearfully, "Was killing me worth it?"

The Princess and the Hoodlum

One of the hardest things in life is facing your own weaknesses, especially when someone else reveals that weakness to you. It is so much easier to blame the other person.

Luke touched his rulestone called Strength, and knew that blame was not an option. He had to face the reasons for killing his friend. Peer pressure played a role. However, he knew that killing was his first step on the path of revenge. He also resented his friend for being so pure, and that was a sin.

The other victims came forward to ask questions of him. Again Luke had to resolve his own motives for sinning. Free will always gave an out, even if that out was death.

Luke contemplated his years of brutal assassin training and the nameless people he sent to the grave. In the back of his mind he marveled at how much pain and guilt a person could bear without dying. But of course this was the Darkness Continent.

Touching the rulestone called Compassion, Luke remembered the victims. They included not just the targets, but also the innocent bystanders. Members of Upheaval treated everyone like dirt.

Again Jamie asked, "Why did you kill me?"

Luke opened his mouth but no words came out. This was the fundamental lock that held him. Why did he kill Jamie? Strength and Compassion were clues.

After what seemed like eternity Luke finally answered. "I killed you because I wanted to be strong. I wanted to fight an unjust world. I killed you because I was weak. I let them use me because I was weak. I was a slave to hate and fear."

"And yet you escaped Upheaval," Jamie pointed out.

Luke nodded. "It was because of you. It was because of that nameless government official. It was because of the helpless people those in power used and abused and discarded."

Luke touched the rulestone called War. He also touched the rulestone called the Future. "At some point a person must make a stand and fight. You were just a child and a victim. No one was there to protect you. Because of your death, I eventually gained the strength to take on that role. You are my strength and you will always live inside of me."

Jamie stepped up to Luke and gave him a hug. With tears flowing Luke hugged him back.

"Thank you for giving my death meaning," Jamie said and vanished. In the center of Luke's chest appeared the image of the Black Rose.

The other people bowed to Luke and disappeared. Moments later Luke found himself back in the Furno palace. The doors to the Darkness Continent closed.



Cindy knelt before Luke and said, "You are amazing. Your strength is beyond anything I have. I pledge to you my undying loyalty." The king tried to say other things but something prevented her from talking.

Embarrassed by the response, Luke grabbed the king and forcibly raised her to a standing position. "Please don't kneel to me. I'm neither a god nor royalty."

Philip pondered a moment and then turned to the steward and said, "Brittany, please arrange a tour of the palace for Luke."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Turning to Luke he said, "I'm sorry Luke but I need to speak to King Cindy in private."

"Okay," Luke said, happy to leave.

"I'll go too," Monty said.

At the king's nod Brittany gave the necessary instructions and Luke and Monty headed off.

When they were gone, Philip said, "I think you said too much Majesty. Luke still hasn't discovered his destiny."

"I know," Cindy sighed. "I just got carried away." Turning to a general she said, "General Tao, please deploy our troops immediately to aid in Warrior Luke's war."

The general saluted and departed.

The Air Continent

As flowing as the Air,
As swift as the Mind

Luke stepped off *Dolphin Strider* and was greeted by the royal family. Off in the distance Annie came running.

“Good work on getting so many Fire Nations to sign on,” John praised. “Congratulations on getting the greater blessings of fire. Was it difficult?”

“Uncle John, when it comes to the gods, is anything ever easy?” Luke asked as he looked at Annie. She was wearing blue jeans and a white t-shirt with kittens.

As the out-of-breath Annie stepped on the ship, Luke noted her lips and had the urge to kiss them. He then noticed her jeans. They were way too form-fitting, which only he seemed to notice.

The king and queen stared at Luke. Even the kids stared. They knew he was thinking perverted thoughts, forbidden thoughts about their princess.

Luke couldn’t help wanting to touch her, to feel her, to kiss her. He felt intense embarrassment, something he never experienced before.

“Are you okay?” Gus asked, stepping a little too close. Everyone was too close.

“He’s okay,” Monty assured, smiling evilly. “You like the princess, don’t you? And your little soldier likes her too.”

Now everyone on board was looking at him. Even the birds were laughing. The awkwardness was overwhelming. Yet he couldn’t avoid one last look at Annie’s jeans.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

“Off course not,” Luke screamed. “Why would I be interested in a stupid, arrogant princess who no one likes?”

Annie jerked her face as if slapped. A look of intense hurt showed on her face. A moment later she ran off.

The reaction from everyone varied. The kids were confused. The mother was hurt. The father just frowned. The crew wanted to strangle Luke. Monty just snickered.

“How could you say that?” Philip said in shock and hurt. “I know you like her. All your battles were for her and you talk about her all the time.”

“Well you know what kind of horrible person I am,” Luke shouted, overwhelmed with emotions he couldn’t comprehend.

Luke ran off, trying to clear his mind. Finally he went to train with practice dummies, resolving to apologize to Annie when he saw her next.

After an hour an attendant approached. “Master Luke, His Majesty wants to speak to you. You are required to be in your regalia.”

“Thank you Simon,” Luke said and ran towards his room. While running, he realized that he didn’t know the man. So how did he know his name?

In the world Luke lived in, bosses always knew the names of their subordinates, and kings knew the names of all their subjects. So why did he know the names of more and more people?

Putting the question out of his mind, Luke bathed, changed and headed for the king.



John greeted Luke. "Luke, from now on you will be having a very tight schedule. When called upon, you will help with the war effort and council duties.

"After that will be your studies on geopolitics and then magic. You now have the spirit of fire and must master that power. Please follow me."

"Yes Uncle John," Luke said and entered the diplomatic chamber used to communicate with foreign kings. The tables were shaped into a horseshoe with a fancy desk at the opening.

All the kings of the alliance sat at chairs in the horseshoe. Included were the kings of the fire nations he recruited.

"Luke, your role here is simple. You will act as the chair for all council meetings," John stated.

"But Uncle John, that's impossible. I'm not qualified for such things," Luke objected.

A beautiful woman in flowing robes appeared in front of Luke. Everyone knelt down before the goddess.

"Greetings Luke, I am Athena," the goddess said. "Luke, what is wisdom?"

"I don't know," Luke admitted.

"Luke, for you what is the most important thing in life?" Athena asked.

"That's protecting what's important to me," Luke replied.

Athena raised an eyebrow and Luke continued. "The important things are family, friends and neighbors. It's about getting along and having fun."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Luke paused and then continued, "Wisdom isn't about being smart, or knowing how to defeat your enemy. It's about knowing the value of human life, and of friendship. I use my knowledge of people and things to solve problems so that everyone may benefit, and not just me."

"You are correct," Athena praised. "Wisdom is the application of knowledge and strength for the greater good. But is that all?"

"No. Wisdom is also acknowledging that the viewpoint of others have value too," Luke said.

"Luke. What is a wise leader?" Athena asked rhetorically. "A wise ruler is a person who creates an environment where people can be treated fairly and where trust can be extended, so that people can work together towards a greater good."

"As neighborhood boss, you did this by helping people become strong so that they could take care of themselves. You taught them the value of cooperation and education and strength."

"You also grew from the ideas presented to you by others, even if they were painful."

"Yes, ma'am," Luke said, feeling flattered.

"Luke, you are required to give up your citizenship with Candarcarr and quit the military. Will you do that?"

Heart pounding, Luke said, "Yes ma'am." That was unexpected.

"You are also required to chair these meetings impartially," Athena continued. "Candarcarr is just one of many countries you are responsible for. You can't give them an unfair advantage over other countries. Can you do that?"

"I can try," Luke replied.

Athena smiled and said, "As a symbol of my approval, in the presence of these witnesses, I give you the rulestone called Wisdom. It symbolizes your desire to protect and serve the important things in life, and the knowledge of what is important."

Athena disappeared and everyone got up and clapped.

"Congratulations Moderator Luke," Uncle John said. "Please sit in the chair and we shall begin the meeting. With the Pearl of Wisdom, you should know how to conduct these meetings now."

John then joined the other kings in the horseshoe.



"How was your day dear?" Jane asked Luke while he lounged in the family room.

"Exhausting," Luke replied. "First, my Candarcar citizenship was revoked and I was discharged from the military. Then I was given the Pearl of Wisdom. Then I was asked to help negotiate fishing, trade and other disputes between alliance nations."

He paused and added, "Dealing with kings fighting over petty concerns was driving me crazy. They are like a bunch of unruly kids. How did they manage before the alliance?"

John laughed and said, "They didn't. That's the reason for wars and such. Full council meetings are held as needed. However, every day you will be called on to resolve disputes."

"Next I had a planning meeting with the generals and admirals of the member nations. Again I took on the role of moderator. I'm currently on call 24/7 in case of emergency.

"Finally I had to study geopolitics and then magic. Fire magic is surprisingly tiring."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"I'm glad everything is going well," Jane said.

Luke turned to Annie and said, "I'm sorry for calling you useless. You are a strong and intelligent girl. Every day I see you get stronger. I know for certain, when you turn eighteen, you will get plenty of rulestones."

With cheeks bright red, Annie stammered, "Thank you."

"Aww, that's so sweet....," Carol began and then giggled when Luke tickled her. He tickled Gus as well.

"Luke, we haven't had an emperor sit on the throne of Skyron for well over a hundred years," John stated. "When the last emperor died, she didn't leave an heir. As a result, the world has descended into chaos.

"The island of Skyron has since been abandoned and no one has been permitted to step onto the property. Whoever gains possession of that property will have a decisive advantage.

"Seiryu, the Azure Dragon of the East, has offered to host a contest for possession of the property. We have selected you to represent the alliance.

"Grenden has selected General Brad Meyers for their representative. He is a noble of the house of Meyers and is considered a brilliant strategist and is absolutely ruthless. He was instrumental in the conquest of the Ice Continent.

"He was released from the Darkness Continent since he's still alive and the contest ended. His memories of the experience were wiped, since knowledge of that place is forbidden to mortals. You were permitted to remember since you passed the test and obtained the Black Rose."

"Can I see the Black Rose?" Gus asked and almost ripped Luke's shirt off. Shirtless, the family and servants stared at the tattoo of the Rose.

"It's beautiful, but also sad," Annie murmured.

Luke nodded but said nothing.

"Luke, the contest is in one week," John said. He paused and then added, "That's not much time to train."



The island of Skyron was typical of islands in the Air Continent, and floated nine miles above the ocean. It looked as if someone had ripped out a chunk of the ground and made it float in the air.

The roughly six-mile-in-diameter island was covered in lush vegetation, gardens, ancient structures and monuments. At the center was the sprawling palace. Beside it stood a stadium with seating for tens of thousands of people, and a parking lot for ships and boats.

Dolphin Strider ascended to the upper atmosphere with the help of both people with flying spirits and air wizards. The air wizards worked hard to maintain the air around the ship and keep everyone warm.

They approached the island and entered the bubble of warm air surrounding the island. *Dolphin Strider* then docked at the stadium's Emperor's pavilion. Luke stepped off, along with Philip and Monty. Next to them was the ship from the Grenden kingdom.

"I don't remember how or why I lost to you on my journey to the Darkness Continent," Brad said as he walked towards Luke. "However, there's no way I'll lose here. I'm after all stronger and smarter than you. Above all I'm a winner."

"We'll see about that," Luke replied.

From far in the distance a sky-blue dragon swooped into view. It descended and landed before the two.

"Greetings warriors, I am Seiryu," the Azure Dragon of the East spoke. "You shall both participate in a game of chess. In order to move, you shall have to answer a riddle. Failing to answer means losing your turn.

"To make this game a fair game, you shall both be stripped of all knowledge of chess, except for knowledge of the basic moves. In addition, you shall both answer the same riddles.

"You shall however only hear the question when it's your turn, and you shall not hear the answer your opponent gives. You have a one-minute time limit.

"Warrior Brad shall move first since Grenden started the war."

"Will we become chess pieces?" Monty asked.

"No," Seiryu replied. "That would skew the game in Warrior Brad's favor. Let's begin."

The game field transformed into a giant chess board with red and purple squares. Raised pavilions appeared on each end of the board for Luke and Brad. A moment later Luke found himself transported to the purple side of the field.

Dolphin Strider moved to a position behind him.

Seiryu said something to Brad that Luke did not hear. Brad answered, and then said, "e4." The pawn in front of the red king moved two spaces ahead.

The Air Continent

Seiryu asked, "There is a certain crime that, if it is attempted, is punishable, but if it is committed, is not punishable. What is the crime?"

"Suicide," Luke replied. "c5." The pawn in front of Luke's right bishop moved two spaces.

"That was a lame move," Brad called. "Just like your mother."

Luke flinched. He then waited for Brad to make a move. Brad moved, "Knight f3."

"At least she wasn't ugly, like yours," Luke shot back.

Seiryu asked, "On my way to St. Ives I saw a man with 7 wives. Each wife had 7 sacks. Each sack had 7 cats. Each cat had 7 kittens. Kitten, cats, sacks, wives. How many were going to St. Ives?"

"Only one," Luke said. "e6."

"She wasn't ugly ... At least she didn't make harpies blush, like yours," Brad retorted. "d4"

"Was your mother beautiful before or after she turned into a man?" Luke asked.

Seiryu asked, "There are four days which start with the letter 'T'. Two of them are 'Tuesday, Thursday'. What are the other two?"

Luke racked his brain for a few moments and then said, "Today and tomorrow. cd4."

"Both. There you go making more amateurish moves. Then again your mother was a tramp and your dad was a traitor," Brad said. "Knight d4."

"Are you speaking from experience? Was that shortly before the, shall we say, unfortunate accident?" Luke retorted.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Seiryu asked, "The man who invented it doesn't want it. The man who bought it doesn't need it. The man who needs it doesn't know it. What is it?"

Luke struggled with that and then broke down the question into parts. What would you make and buy, but not want – as long as you lived. "Coffin – Knight c6"

The game continued. Onboard *Dolphin Strider*, Monty commented, "I hadn't realized this contest involved insults."

"Luke's last insult hit close to home," Philip noted. "Warrior Brad just made a mistake."

Move after move were played as time passed. However it seemed Luke was slightly better at insults and that was taking a toll on Brad.

After 45 rounds, Luke checkmated Brad.

"Damn," Brad cursed. "If only I had access to all my chess skills. Then I would have defeated you."

"I never learnt chess," Luke replied. "That was your weakness." A moment later Luke found himself back at the Emperor's pavilion, along with Brad.

"Congratulations Warrior Luke on winning the tournament by using the full force of your intellect and experience," Seiryu commended. "Warrior Brad, please vacate the premises."

Both warriors watched as the two ships approached and docked. Philip and Monty got off.

"You can have this useless piece of rock," Brad sneered. "It has no strategic value. Eventually it will be ours, when we complete our conquest of the world." He boarded his ship and the ship sailed away.

The Air Continent

“Warrior Luke, you have a great intellect and a smooth flowing mind. As a sign of my approval, I bestow upon you my symbol,” Seiryu said. “With this you shall gain knowledge of Skyron, and gain power over the element of Air.”

Seiryu shot directly at Luke, shrinking at the same time. Before Luke could react, Seiryu plunged into Luke’s chest.

“Did that hurt?” Monty asked. “Why did that dude say Skyron had no value?”

“No,” Luke replied. “It just startled me.”

“The image of Seiryu is on your back, on the right,” Philip noted. “Also the image of Skyron is in the center. Only Genbu is missing.”

“Brad wasn’t wrong in saying that Skyron doesn’t have military value,” Luke said. “It has portals that connect it to the capital buildings of all countries. However, no one will be able to get through if the doors are prevented from swinging open. If I were them, I would have blocked the doors before the contest, just in case. We should have done the same. Too bad I didn’t know then.”

The Earth Continent

The earth is our mother
And the source of our life.

The next several months were uneventful but hectic. The council and military meetings were now held on Skyron. During his free time Luke travelled to the member nations to explore and get to know the people. John said it was necessary and Luke didn't think to question him. Besides, it was fun.

Unfortunately, Annie couldn't come. She was still pretty much a prisoner. It didn't help that the number of kidnapping attempts had risen.

"When will this be over?" Annie grumbled as she walked beside Luke in the Skyron gardens.

"It will only get worse," Luke warned. "We are evenly matched with them now and Grenden is getting desperate. Even if we win the war, all will be lost if they force you to marry Prince Henry.

"You need to decide who you'll marry or the gods will force you to make a decision. Aren't there any princes you have your eye on, whom your parents approve?"

"Mum and dad have a candidate but they refuse to tell me the name," Annie said. "As for me, I have a few candidates I'm looking at."

"That's good," Luke nodded. "That prince will take on the duties currently assigned to me. I have been examining potential suitors as well, but have yet to meet a prince I feel is fully qualified and is worthy of you. Thankfully that decision is not mine to make."

The Earth Continent

"All the water and fire nations have taken sides, haven't they? Have you made progress in recruiting the air nations or Balzac?" Annie asked.

The Earth Continent, being an earth turtle, had Balzac as its only country.

"No," Luke replied. "As you know, the islands of the Air Continent are kind of aloft. No pun intended. They don't care what happens down below since they are protected from attack by altitude and various air barriers. They are only interested in intellectual pursuits such as art and philosophy."

"I know," Annie sighed. "Dad allows me to travel to the sky islands. However, there's only so much art you can watch and classical music you can hear, and libraries you can visit before going crazy."

"On the other hand, thanks to them, my studies are over."

"Is there any progress on Balzac?"

"They will only negotiate if you agree to marry Prince Andrew," Luke said. "Your dad refuses and I agree. I think they are trying for a power grab in order to make themselves rulers of the world by marrying you. That would be no different than letting Grenden win. Unless of course you want to marry Prince Andrew."

"No way," Annie rejected. "He's not even handsome."

"The good news is they are refusing to help Grenden with their ambitions. With their impenetrable forests, the mile-high ridges on Genbu's flanks, and hordes of flying monsters, they can safely ignore us if they want to. On the other hand, their help would definitely turn the tides, since their earth magic is strong."

A soldier entered and saluted. "Master Luke. King John needs to talk to you."

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Thanks Corporal Bob," Luke said. "Annie, do you want to come? Let's have a race."

They crossed a bridge over a river lined with flowers and passed sculptures and fountains. The corridors of the palace were decorated with paintings by famous artist. Beyond that was a gallery lined with portraits of past emperors.

Annie was out of breath when they arrived at the audience chamber and met John.

"You need to do more exercise," Luke scolded as they approached the king.

"Easy for you to say," Annie grumbled.

"Annie, Luke is right," John stated. "You will need exercise now more than ever." Turning to Luke he said, "Luke, we found a way to get Balzac's help without giving up our greatest treasure."

"What greatest treasure?" Annie asked.

Luke pointed at Annie and said, "You."

"As you know they venerate Genbu, Black Turtle of the North," John explained. "That's not surprising, since they live on the turtle's back.

"What our spies have found, what they wanted to keep hidden, is that they are obligated to support anyone who obtains the blessings of Genbu."

"That's great Uncle," Luke beamed. "With their help we can gain a decisive advantage."

"That's provided we get the blessings before Grenden," John warned. "Even now Grenden is mounting an expedition to go to

the sacred temple at the center of the continent. Please make whatever preparations are necessary. *Dolphin Strider* is waiting at Solofa, which is currently the closest allied country to Balzac. They will set sail when you are ready.”

“I’m ready to go now,” Luke assured. He and Annie followed a driver to a carriage. A short ride took them underground, and into the main trunk of the Gatehouse, the transportation hub that connected all the capital cities of the world to Skyron.

Spacious corridors branched off the central trunk. Allied forces travelled through the thousand-foot wide, brightly-lit corridors, alongside merchants.

They passed portals that were blocked from the other side, as well as portals leading to allied nations. Minutes later they reached the portal to the Solofa palace.

Border security guards saluted as they entered into the public area of the palace. After that it was another five minutes before they arrived at the merchant ship *Cumulus*.

“See you later,” Luke said as he exited the carriage.

Annie waved at Luke as the carriage headed back to the portal to Skyron.

A five minute drive brought Annie back into the Gatehouse. They then drove a short distance and entered a door to a foreign country and Annie realized something was wrong.



“Welcome aboard Master Luke,” Jonathan said with a salute. “We will arrive at Genbuland in about three hours.”

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Thanks Captain, but you don't need to salute," Luke objected. "I'm just the advisor to the alliance."

"I'm sorry sir. I can't do that," Jonathan objected.

Luke rolled his eyes. Jonathan wasn't military, but he was just as stuffy.

"If you'll excuse me sir, I have work to do," the captain said and left.

Luke greeted Philip and Monty. He hadn't seen the monkey man in awhile, because of his duties.

As they sailed away, Philip asked, "How come you let Annie see you off?"

"Damn," Luke sword. "I tend to take the Gatehouse for granted. Crap. Someone opened the Genbuland gate. Annie just passed through. It's closed now at their end."

Luke turned to Philip and said, "Sorry dude. I messed up badly."

"It's the will of the gods," Philip said solemnly. "But why Genbuland?"

"They were putting pressure on Uncle John to get Annie to marry Prince Andrew," Luke revealed.

"Look on the bright side," Monty said cheerfully. "You now have another excuse for rescuing her."

"Believe it or not but I don't enjoy rescuing Annie," Luke grumbled. "It's too stressful."

"Can we visit my village? I haven't been there in years," Monty asked.

"No problem," Luke said with a smile. "You can be our guide."

"Luke, I notice you're now level 71," Monty said. "That's great, since some of the monsters can be nasty. Unfortunately I'm only 67 now. Philip, good job on becoming level 68."

Hours passed and a black form appeared far in the distance. It resolved into the shape of a turtle. It grew in size until it was a huge mountain. With a shell measuring 30 miles in width and 80 miles in length, it was the largest of the earth turtles.

Monsters buzzed around Genbu. A few approached.

"This is the closest we can come," the captain said. To emphasize the point, a bee the size of an elephant shot a stinger at the ship, smashing a hole in the deck. An archer took it down before it could fire another shot, and then collected a coin.

"From here we'll need to go by ourselves," Monty said. "I could take you in, but you wouldn't be able to leave without me."

Luke took out his repaired boat and the three got in. "Captain Jonathan, we'll call you if we need you," Philip said.

They took off and the *Cumulus* turned back.

Monty raised his nyoibō and its tip glowed, bathing the boat in yellow light. "We need to come in from the rear, since that is the entry point for ordinary citizens. Attempting to approach from any other direction will cause the monsters to attack. Unfortunately this light won't protect us from monster attacks in the forests."

In due course all Luke could see was a huge cliff face that was Genbu's black shell. They landed on a clearing and got off. Luke put the boat away.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

“Everyone turn into your animal form and follow me. Don’t worry about the monsters. They don’t normally attack if you stay on the paths and don’t disturb things you shouldn’t,” Monty instructed.

Monty led the way into the canopy of the rain forest and Luke bounded from branch to branch in tiger form. Philip perched on his back, since there wasn’t enough space to properly fly. Monty swung from branch to branch and sang, “Oh give me a home where the bananas roam, and the pears and the pineapples play.”

The journey was slow going as they walked on the massive tree branches and avoided the predatory vines and creatures. “Is it always so noisy in here?” Luke growled, referring to the cacophony of animal calls, insect noises and bird songs that filled the air.

“That’s not noise,” Monty denied. “That’s just nature saying ‘hello’.”

“It’s getting dark,” Philip warned.

“We’ll get to my village in about an hour,” Monty assured. “We still have over three miles to go.”

“We would have been there by now if it weren’t for you stopping every few minutes to munch,” Philip grumbled.

“The jungle is a cornucopia of food,” Monty pointed out. “We don’t need to work like slaves. Besides, how can you turn down these delicious guavas? Besides, I haven’t eaten these amazing foods in ages.”

They arrived at the village at the setting sun. The village was nestled in the forest canopy. Suspension bridges and walkways connected the tree houses. Kids and adults ran around naked.

The Earth Continent

When asked, Monty said, “Most of us live with nature, as you can see. However the royals, being, quote, more *civilized*, wear clothes like the rest of the world. They live in the palace on Genbu’s head.

“Philip, get rid of those stuffy clothes. You too Luke. It’s time to party, and meet the folks. Just say, ‘Oh great Genbu, please store my stuff’ and touch your forehead. When it’s time to leave the village, we say ‘Oh great Genbu, please restore my stuff’ and touch your forehead again.”

“Normally a princess isn’t allowed...ouch,” Philip began but an insect stung him, interrupting him.

“Those pesky laws don’t apply here,” Monty assure. “Both Annie and your main squeeze Jessica can run around naked on Genbuland without restrictions, if they choose. I bet you’d like to see that, wouldn’t you?” Monty elbowed Philip and then Luke.

“What pesky laws?” Luke asked but was interrupted by a growing crowd of people.

“Mum, dad, here are my friends, Luke and Philip,” Monty said, hugging his parents. “Philip is a prince, but please don’t hold it against him. Luke, Philip, here are my brothers Milford and Milroy. My sisters Margret, Maggie and Mandy.”

Introductions continued. “It’s not often we get guests,” Monty’s mother said.

“It’s time for a party,” Monty’s father declared. Everyone cheered. “Philip, don’t be so stressed. Being naked is the most natural thing in the world. It is clothing that is unnatural.”

“Easy for you to say,” Philip mumbled.

“But isn’t it fun being surrounded by all these hot girls? What do you think Jessica would say?” Monty asked.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Philip blushed but said nothing. Instead he watched as people set up the main area for a party.

"Here's some mango juice," a lady said and handed Luke and Philip coconut cups with the juice. "Sit down. Take a load off."

Monty brought out bongos and began playing and singing.

*Each morning, a missionary advertises neon sign
He tells the native population that civilization is fine
And three educated savages holler from a bamboo tree
That civilization is a thing for me to see
So bongo, bongo, bongo, I don't wanna leave the Congo, oh
no, no, no, no, no
Bingo, bangle, bungle, I'm so happy in the jungle, I refuse to
go
Don't want no bright lights, false teeth, doorbells, landlords, I
make it clear
That no matter how they coax him, I'll stay right here...*

Other people came and forced Philip to sing. Luke enjoyed the singing, since that was normal at the orphanage.

Food was brought in and the party began in earnest.

"How are you feeling dear?" Monty's mother asked.

"That's strange," Philip said in surprise. "I no longer feel embarrassed. But what do you do for a living?"

"Genbu gives us everything we need to live," an elder said. "There is never a need for struggle. If everyone in the world realized that, the world would be a better place.

"However, we are given free will to live as we see fit, so of course suffering exists."

The Earth Continent

The area below the suspended platform was pitch black. Above, stars appeared. A bonfire in the center shot sparks into the sky.

A man and woman approached and sat down.

"I am Demut," the man said.

"I am Stolz," the woman said.

The man and woman told stories about the conquest of nations and poverty and struggle, as well as triumphs.

An hour passed as Luke listened and watched the fire. By now the kids had gone to bed, leaving the adults.

"Luke, what is false pride? How has it affected you?" Demut asked.

In a state of peace, Luke replied, "I always felt the gods were against me. First I was born an outcast. Kids bullied me as I grew up. Then the king slaughtered my family and other bad things happened.

"My one thought was, 'Why Me? Why were the gods, the king, everyone picking on me? What did I do to deserve this?'"

"False pride is the victim mentality," Demut declared. "How about you Philip?"

"I was born a prince," Philip began. "I will be the next king of Candarcar. It is only natural for me to be better than everyone.

"Then Luke showed up. Luke is stronger than me, smarter than me, and is a much better leader. I couldn't stand it. So I cursed the gods and asked, 'Why is he superior when I am a prince? It wasn't fair.' No offense Luke. I have the greatest of respect for you."

"Philip, what is arrogance? How did it affect you?" Stolz asked.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"It's having an unrealistic view of your skills, abilities and worth," Philip replied. "As I said, I felt I could do anything just because I was a prince. My perception of my skills and abilities were much higher than what they truly were."

"For me, I felt I was better than everyone else, including princes and kings. As for the gods, I didn't need them," Luke added.

Philip nodded. "I was a cocky bastard. Still am."

"What is pride?" Stolz asked.

Luke and Philip looked at each other.

"Pride is accepting your accomplishments and knowing you have value. Maybe not to the world, but to yourself and to the gods," Luke said.

"Pride is knowing your worth will not be diminished, just because someone else is better than you. It's knowing that I am enough and that I don't need external validation," Philip said.

"What is humility?" Demut asked.

"Humility is accepting yourself as you are, both good points and bad," Philip said.

"It's accepting that no matter how good we are, we can improve," Luke said.

"It's accepting that we aren't the center of the universe. Just because other people look and act differently, and have different cultures and belief systems to us, their value does not diminish," Philip said.

"Pride is having the strength to face hardships, since it is the will of the gods, and everything happens for a reason, even if we don't know what that reason is," Luke said.

"That's humility, isn't it?" Philip asked. "I'm getting confused."

"Me too," Luke agreed.

"Your confusion stems from the fact that true pride and true humility are twin powers of the soul and can't be separated," both Demut and Stolz said at the same time.

Luke's collar and Philip's corona appeared without them summoning them.

"As a symbol of my approval, in the presence of these witnesses, I give you the rulestone called 'Pride'. It symbolizes your ability to accept your accomplishments and your strengths without you being controlled by them or wanting to dominate others with them," Stolz said and placed her rulestone on Luke's collar and another one on Philip's corona.

"As a symbol of my approval, in the presence of these witnesses, I give you the rulestone called 'Humility'. It symbolizes your ability to accept your limitations and your desire to grow. You are not the center of the universe, but that's okay, since rank is not what defines people. It's heart," Demut said and placed his rulestone on Luke's collar and then another one on Philip's corona.

The twin gods smiled at Luke and Philip and disappeared. The collar and corona disappeared a moment later.

Monty clapped, along with everyone else. "Now all three of us have the twin stones of pride and humility," he said with a grin. "Come. It's time to dance and sing."



The Princess and the Hoodlum

Annie watched the doors to another country open. Above the doors was the name Genbuland. The doors closed before she could do anything.

Servants opened the carriage door and Prince Andrew greeted Annie. Annie watched as servants rolled a huge stone, physically blocking entry from the other side.

“Why did you kidnap me?” Annie demanded.

“My interest is purely for the greater good of the world,” Andrew assured. “Don’t you want peace?”

Annie folded her arms, frowned and said, “You have gotta be kidding me.”

“The world is filled with poverty, disease, war and crime,” Andrew said. “We don’t have that here. If you marry me, I can become Emperor and you will be my empress. Then we can bring the prosperity of Genbu to the world.”

“I don’t think so. If that was the will of the gods, that would be the state of the world,” Annie retorted.

“Let me show you the blessings of Genbu, and then you will change your mind,” Andrew said.

“Can you please take me to the sacred temple at the center?” Annie asked sweetly.

Andrew flicked his eyes sideways and back again and Annie noticed his pulse race. “Of course.”

Liar, Annie thought excitedly. Luke’s training was coming in handy.

Annie let the fool ramble on, waiting for her chance to escape. This time she wasn’t going to wait for a rescue.



Night came and a maid prepared Annie for bed. "Linda, please get me a map to the temple at the center," Annie commanded.

"I can't, Highness," Linda objected frightfully.

"Are you saying you can't obey a direct order from your future empress?" Annie asked sweetly. "Or are you saying you don't know where the maps are? I know you can get it, considering how smart you are."

After struggling with herself, Linda finally said, "Yes Highness," and left. Half an hour later she returned with the map.

"Now please tell me the dangers involved in getting to the temple and the best way to travel."

After getting the information, Annie pretended to go to sleep. Once activity in the palace settled down, she turned into a flame eagle and swooped out of the palace and onto the front part of Genbu's shell and waited for dawn.

At dawn, Annie ate food from one of her magic bags, and then began her journey to the temple. She was no longer a princess who needed rescuing.



The temple was a thousand-foot-tall stone pyramid, covered with vines and moss. The capstone sported the all-seeing eye and hovered above the rest of the pyramid. It slowly rotated.

Luke, Philip and Monty approached an archway built into the pyramid. Stone gnomes greeted them. Above the door read an inscription. It said, "What offering does the gods want more than silver and gold?"

"Bananas?" Monty suggested.

"I don't think this is referring to physical items," Philip said.

"That's true," Luke replied. "However it must be something representing the earth."

"Maybe it wants," Philip began and the three finished with, "The sweat of your brow." All three wiped their brows and rubbed their hands on the bowl embedded in the door. The door opened.

Torches lit as they entered the stone passage. The sides of the tunnel were covered with murals depicting an ancient war.

After walking five minutes they entered a large chamber, the end of which contained a pit. Knotted ropes hung from the ceiling above the pit. The bottom of the pit was hidden in darkness, making it impossible to discern how deep the pit was. Additional ropes were piled on the floor.

"I can't transform," Monty declared.

"That's not surprising," Philip replied. "Let's grab ropes and climb down."

Using the supplied knots, they easily climbed down to the end of the ropes. There they found an inscription. "What do you do when you come to the end of your rope?"

"How about we tie more rope?" Monty asked.

"We were given rope, so I guess it's expected," Philip agreed.

Luke didn't object and so they continued descending. Eventually that rope ran out.

"Now what?" Philip asked. "Do we get more rope?"

The Earth Continent

"I have a feeling adding more rope is a dead-end. No pun intended," Luke mused. Looking at the wall, he read, "What do you do when you come to the end of your rope?"

Luke paused and then said, "I guess you jump." He jumped into the darkness. The others followed. The drop was only one foot.

Light flooded the room, exposing a set of double-doors. Beside the doors was a huge basket. Further away was a battering ram. There was also firewood and a pile of bombs you could obtain from certain monster drops.

"So how do we get through?" Philip asked.

Monty tried opening the doors but they were locked.

"Are we supposed to ram the door down?" Philip asked.

"I don't think force is the answer," Luke mused.

"Hey look, this basket is filled with thousands of keys," Monty exclaimed.

"How do we select a proper key?" Philip asked.

"We could try them all," Monty suggested and tried one. It didn't work so he tossed it away and tried another, and then another.

"Something seems off," Luke muttered, deep in thought. "What did the elder say about the island – Genbu?"

"Genbu is the source of all we need," Monty recited.

"He also mentioned that all is given by the gods. We just need to ask," Philip said. "Or words to that effect."

"Does that mean we just need to ask for the door to be opened?" Monty asked.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"I guess so, but this is a door..." Luke began.

"So we should knock," Philip completed.

In unison all three knocked. The doors opened inwards, revealing a large circular bottomless shaft. A balcony encircled the shaft. In the center of the 200-foot-wide shaft was a floating platform.

Standing on the platform was Annie.

"What took you so long?" Annie grumbled.

"Couldn't help it lassie," Monty said. "Yesterday we had a party, and then I got drunk and then other things happened."

The platform moved and stopped in front of the three.

"Welcome friends. I am Genbu," a soft, gentle, feminine voice spoke. *"Luke, you have come seeking my blessings. I have examined both your and Annie's life and I approve. Please step on the platform."*

Luke did as instructed and the platform drifted back to the center. *"Luke, Annie, place your hands on the globe in front of you."*

A white light bathed everyone. When the light faded, Luke and Annie were wearing their regalia. Genbu said, *"You will not remember what I just said, but you will when the time comes."*

The platform returned to the side and Genbu said, *"The doors will take you to the capital."*

Annie and Luke bowed in thanks and passed through the doors, followed by Philip and Monty.

Luke found himself in the throne room of Genbuland's palace. The king and spouse were there and they weren't happy. However they came forward and greeted them.

"I see you have the blessings of Genbu," King Sophia of Grenden scowled.

"We formally request that you help us oppose the Grenden aggression," Annie said with a bow. Luke bowed as well.

"I guess we have no choice," Sophia said reluctantly. "We shall deploy our troops to aid you." Turning to an advisor she said, "Please unseal the doors to Skyron."

"Will you honor us by joining our council meeting of allied countries?" Luke asked. "The next meeting will be held day after tomorrow."

"I would be honored," Sophia said. "Grayling, please escort our honored guests to the Skyron palace."

Emperor

Only fools want to be Emperor,
Only megalomaniacs strive for the role,
And so the world suffers for it.

After arriving at the Skyron palace Monty said, "See you later," and wandered off.

Luke, Annie and Philip entered the Emperor's suites and found the family.

"Hi Sis," Carol and Gus greeted Annie cheerfully when they entered.

"Weren't you worried when I got kidnapped?" Annie asked, feeling a little hurt.

"Why would we be worried when that happens all the time?" Gus asked.

"Brother Luke always rescues you without problems," Carol added.

"This time she escaped on her own. She met us at Genbu's temple," Luke said. "Genbuland is amazing. Genbu is so warm and gentle."

"Was it difficult escaping?" John asked.

"It was easy," Annie said. "I got a maid to give me a map, and advice on how best to travel through the forest. On my way I met a woman caught by a tentacle monster and stopped to rescue her. Unfortunately that stupid creature melted my clothes in the process."

"What do you mean melted?" Gus asked, confused.

"Tentacle monsters are perverted creatures," Luke explained. "They enjoy stripping beautiful women naked and molesting them."

Annie blushed at the compliment, and then said. "That's what happened to me. Fortunately I was rescuing a woman, or I would have been in trouble."

Annie frowned and added, "She was rather manly, and I don't mean that she was a mannish woman. More like a pretty boy."

"It doesn't matter dear," Jane said. "The important thing is you are safe."

Luke thought of Brad. He certainly qualified as being a pretty boy and Luke was certain he was on the island.

Before Luke could comment a soldier entered and saluted. "Master Luke. The war council requires your assistance."



Things settled down to routine and the months rolled by. Annie's eighteenth birthday was now only a day away.

After an eighteen-hour meeting with the generals and admirals of the war council, Luke was exhausted. He just wanted to go to sleep. On the bright side, the tides of war had turned. It was only a matter of time before the remaining countries were liberated. Then they had to decide what to do with Grenden.

When Luke stepped out of the war room, he found Carol and Gus sleeping on a sofa in the waiting room. Philip was reading a book.

"What are you guys doing here?" Luke asked, yawning. "I hope you weren't waiting." He sat on the couch between the kids and almost dosed off.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"Dad has decided to get Annie married to Prince Branden of Soarian," Philip announced. Soarian was one of the nations of the Air Continent.

"That's nice," Luke said in a half-sleep. After a few moments Philip's message sunk in. He jerked awake and shouted, "He did what?"

Carol and Gus were startled awake.

"The marriage is tomorrow at noon," Philip said.

Luke felt a mixture of jealousy and hurt. "How could they do that just like that?"

"I don't know," Philip sighed. "We figured you should know."

"Please don't let some stranger marry Sis," Gus begged.

"It's none of my business," Luke said, again drifting off.

"Yes it is," Carol refuted. "Didn't you want to marry her?"

"Why would I want to marry her? For one thing, she doesn't even like me," Luke denied. "For another, I'm not a prince."

"Please let Master Luke sleep," Walters begged. "He hasn't slept in over two days. There are so many key battles raging now that it's impossible to keep track of everything."

"Okay," both Carol and Gus sighed and Philip guided Luke to the Emperor's room everyone insisted he sleep in. "Can we stay with him?" Gus asked.

"Jeeves, please prepare rooms for them," Luke commanded and then plopped on the peeled-back Emperor's bed.

"I want to stay with you," Carol begged.

Emperor

"Fine," Luke mumbled as Jeeves covered him with blankets. A moment later he was fast asleep.

Luke woke up earlier than he would have liked. "Pesky sun," Luke grumbled and closed his eyes.

Unfortunately he couldn't sleep. Annie was getting married. That shouldn't have bothered him but it did and he didn't know why.

Feeling two pairs of eyes looking at him, Luke opened his. Carol and Gus were snuggled up against him. Philip was on the far side of the monster bed.

"What do you want me to do?" Luke inquired.

"You can stop the wedding," Gus said.

"Don't you love Sis?" Carol asked.

"What has love got to do with it?" Luke asked. "Commoners can't marry princesses, and it's a fact, Annie has no feelings for me."

"Do you really think so?" Philip asked. "Can't you understand her feelings?"

"Breakfast is ready Master Luke, Highnesses," Jeeves called.

They didn't need to change since they had all worn their regular clothes to bed. After making the usual pit stops, they went to the dining room of the Emperor's suite.

While eating, Luke thought of Annie's feelings, but came to no conclusion. After contacting Walters, Luke discovered there was no war council scheduled. That meant he only had council duties.

"Can we come to your council meeting?" Gus asked.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"If you want," Luke said. "There's place for guests. However, it's just as boring as your dad's council meetings."

Hours passed as Luke discharged his duties. Luke however couldn't focus on business, since the three were there. Finally session broke for lunch.

During lunch an attendant came to the table to serve.

"I can see your pee-pee," Carol said with a giggle.

Luke glanced down. Sure enough, the attendant's zipper was down. The attendant's face turned bright red as he dashed off in shame.

Luke thought of the man's embarrassment. He then thought of Annie. She too expressed the same embarrassment every time she rejected him.

Luke remembered the time he returned from the Fire Continent. He was overwhelmed by Annie's beauty. He felt embarrassment. He reacted by hurting her feelings. They were the same emotions as hers.

Luke then remembered how shy she sometimes behaved around him. She treated him differently from everyone else, showing sides of her no one else saw, while hiding things everyone else saw. The clues were all there.

Luke got up and exclaimed, "Oh my gods, she's in love with me. She's been in love with me all along, but I was too stupid to see."

"Does that mean you can stop the wedding?" Gus asked.

Luke's face turned white as he realized what time it was. Sitting down, he said, "I think it's too late. It's already 1:30 PM now."

"Why did you wait so long to figure things out?" Carol asked angrily.

"Why did they have to rush the wedding?" Luke asked angrily. "The generals forecasted we will win the war in less than a month. Then Annie would have been free to marry anyone she wanted."

"So it's too late," Philip said in a defeated tone.

While sitting gloomily, Walters approached. "Why are you all so glum?"

"Mum and dad decided to marry Annie off to Prince Branden of Soarian without any warning," Philip informed the general. "Now it's too late since the wedding was at noon."

Walters looked confused. "Isn't Soarian two time zones to the west of us?"

"Time zones?" Gus asked, confused.

"That's right," Walters said. "We moved Skyron to above Candarcarr for convenience. Also, kings don't attend day-to-day meetings because of the time differences. Instead they have ambassadors who live permanently here at Skyron."

"General Walters, please inform the council that an emergency has come up," Luke said. "Come everyone. It's time to crash a party."

The gang got up and dashed out to a waiting carriage. Five minutes later they were at the gates leading to the Soarian capital.

Unfortunately the doors were barred from the other side.

"What do we do now?" Philip asked glumly. "We only have less than ten minutes and Soarian has barred the doors at their end."

"Remember who you are Big Brother," Carol instructed.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

Remember who I am, Luke mused. Deep in thought, he got out of the carriage and wandered to the portal doors.

"I sit on the Emperor's chair at council meetings. I sleep in the Emperor's bed. Kings bow to me. I am master of Skyron. That can only mean one thing," Luke mumbled. Aloud he said, "I think I have an idea."

Luke placed his hand on the doors and said, "In the name of the Emperor, open."

The portal doors swung open with a resounding crash. On the other side, the barrier the Soarians had set up was thrown aside, making a mess of the corridor. Guards scrambled to block the passage.

"Don't worry kids," Luke said confidently. "I finally know who I am." Drawing on the Vermilion Bird's power, he created a wall of flame around them and the enemy retreated.

A general spoke from beyond the firewall. "You're too late Master Luke. Prince Branden is on the sister island of Aviandale and our military surrounds the island. It's impossible for you to stop the wedding and the wedding is starting now."

"I don't want some stupid prince marrying Sis," Gus whined and hugged Luke.

"Hey, my prince isn't stupid," the general said angrily. "You lost. Soon Prince Branden will marry Princess Annie and then he shall become Emperor."

"What should we do?" Philip asked worriedly.

"Trust in the gods," Carol advised.

Emperor

For the first time in years Luke prayed. "Please gods, advise me in what to do." The moment he said that a thought entered his mind.

Luke reached into one of his magic bags and pulled out the box he won in the martial arts competition. "Okay box, let's see what's inside of you." The box opened to reveal a teleportation stone.



Annie and Prince Branden of Soarian stood in front of Mila, the cleric for Hera, goddess of marriage. Annie's parents were nearby, along with Branden's parents.

Cleric Mila spoke.

"Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today in the presence of these witnesses, to join Prince Branden and Princess Annie in matrimony, which is commended to be honorable among all; and therefore – is not by any – to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly – but reverently, discreetly, advisedly and solemnly.

"Into this holy estate these two persons present now come to be joined.

"If any person can show just cause why they may not be joined together – let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

"I OBJECT!"

All eyes turned to the back of the room. Luke walked forward. Philip, Gus and Carol followed close behind. "Brad. I should have known you were behind this."

"What took you so long to come?" Annie said angrily. "It doesn't matter. There's nothing you can do to stop this wedding."

"Yes he can," Carol and Gus shouted in unison.

"Trust in him Sis," Philip called by way of greeting.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

“Ha-how did you come here? Teleportation stones can’t operate across political borders,” Brad stammered in astonishment. “By my calculations you should have arrived by nightfall at the earliest. It doesn’t matter. As Annie said, it’s too late.”

“Sorry son but it’s true,” Uncle John apologized. “My hands are tied.”

“I thought you were a noble of Grenden,” Philip exclaimed.

“I think I can explain,” Luke offered. “Brad is Prince Branden. He infiltrated Grenden and posed as a noble to manipulate Grenden into starting the war.”

“Very good Luke,” Brad clapped. “You are worthy of being my arch-enemy. That Henry and his parents are power-hungry idiots. They were easy to manipulate. I handed them a continent and the possibility of world domination. Unfortunately, because of their incompetence the plan failed. I was hoping to rule behind the scenes. As a result I had to make a change of plans.”

“I don’t understand,” Philip said. “What gives you the right to marry Annie?”

“That’s simple,” Brad said. “According to the ancient laws, ‘A man may demand a princess’ hand in marriage if that princess exposes herself to him.’”

“When did that happen?” Philip asked.

“That time I rescued that woman,” Annie explained. “That was no woman. That was Prince Branden.”

“Do you know how many hundreds of warriors I had to use up to get to that stupid island? Not to mention going through that cursed jungle. But it was worth it. All I had to do was put on a wig, some lipstick and a dress and she was fooled,” Brad laughed.

Luke and Philip looked at each other and then burst into laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Jane asked, angrily.

“Our friend Monty is a native of Genbuland,” Philip explained. “By the way, except for the palace on Genbu’s head, Genbuland is a clothing-optional country.

“Monty said the rules governing princesses don’t apply on the island. I didn’t know what that meant at that time but now I do.

“Wait a minute. I remember Genbu saying the same thing. It means that Annie isn’t required to marry Prince Branden.”

“Are you saying Sis can run around in her birthday suit?” Gus asked in astonishment.

“Only on Genbuland,” Carol clarified.

“I didn’t know that,” John said with evident relief. “Prince Branden. I officially declare the wedding to be off.”

The kids hugged Annie and jumped for joy.

“Not so fast,” Brad challenged. “You’re still in my territory. Annie *will* marry me, or I shall slaughter her entire family.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Luke asked. “I have all four guardian spirits and you don’t.”

“Who cares? I have dozens of level 90 warriors and level 90 wizards,” Brad declared.

Carol dragged the family towards Luke. She also waved for the cleric to join them.

The Princess and the Hoodlum

"The four guardian spirits are required in order to take on the mantle of Emperor, along with the blessings of the gods, including Strength, Compassion, and Wisdom," Carol explained.

"Guardian spirits, in the name of the Emperor, please erect a barrier to prevent Brad from interfering," Luke said, touching his collar.

A translucent bubble enfolded the family, Luke and Mila. Brad's warriors and wizards attacked the barrier but failed to penetrate it.

Luke ignored Brad's cursing and the shouting of the wizards and warriors.

"Annie, do you remember the time I was sleeping in the treehouse and you snuck in to sleep with me?" Luke asked. "Do you remember the fact that you forgot to wear certain items of clothing?"

"Did you mean her panties?" Carol asked and giggled.

Uncle John opened his mouth to say something but changed his mind. Luke could have claimed Annie at any time, if he had known. All was by will of the gods.

Before Annie could make a sarcastic remark, Luke dropped down on one knee and presented her with his grandmother's wedding ring.

"Annie, when I saw you then I lost interest in all other women.

"Annie. I have your parents' permission to marry you, as well as the permission of your brothers and sister. I am also a national hero, so there are no legal reasons not to marry me. Will you wed me and be my empress?"

"Say 'yes'," Gus said excitedly.

Jane placed her hand on Annie's shoulder and said, "Go ahead dear."

"It's the will of the gods," Carol screamed, jumping up and down.

"Annie, Luke has always been the one we wanted you to marry," John said. "We just couldn't tell you until now, by order of the gods."

"I didn't know you wanted to be Emperor," Brad exclaimed from outside the bubble.

"Yes I'll marry you," Annie said excitedly with a flushed face. "I always knew no one else but you were qualified. I'm just glad I'm not marrying an idiot."

"Hey!" Brad grumbled, offended.

While still kneeling, Luke turned to Brad and said, "Brad, I think you misunderstood the prophecy."

"The prophecy said that Annie is destined to marry the Emperor. That didn't mean marrying her would automatically make you or me or anyone Emperor. That's just stupid. The gods don't operate that way. Instead it meant that she was destined to marry me."

"For the record, I never wanted to be emperor. The job was forced on me. Being emperor is a pain."

Luke paused and then added, "Everything became clear an hour ago, when I realized that Annie was in love with me."

Carol touched Luke's forehead and changed his crest. She then removed Luke's collar and placed it on his head, where it changed into the Emperor's crown. "By the authority of the gods, in the presence these assembled, I crown you Emperor."

"You know Carol, I think I prefer a collar," Luke said.

Carol giggled. She turned the crown back into a collar and placed it back around Luke's neck.

"Philip, Gus, please be my best men. Carol, you can be Annie's maid of honor," Luke said. "Cleric Mila, can you please conduct the ceremony?"

"According to Hera, there is no rush," Mila said, "Unless Prince Branden objects."

Brad opened his mouth to say something but changed his mind. He knew he had lost.

"Brad, will you surrender, and submit yourself to the judgment of the gods?" Luke asked.

"Yes I surrender," Brad said. "You have won."

Wedding Bells

"True love stories never have endings."

-- Richard Bach --

It wasn't long before all hostilities ended. Grenden was forced to surrender and relinquish all captured lands.

Then came Luke's official crowning...

The ceremony began. At the “Speak now or forever hold their peace” part,

Finally the vows were exchanged and Cleric Mila said, “You may kiss the bride.”

Luke held Annie’s shoulders and kissed her on the lips. The kids cheered.

“I was born an untouchable,” Luke mused. “Now I am Emperor. More importantly I am married to the most beautiful princess in the world.

“The gods really do have a sense of humor.” Luke laughed.

-- The End --