

Merlin's Net

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Editor's Note:

The manuscript for this story was written by Luther Pendrake. It purports to be a true account of his actual experiences. As I've edited the manuscript, I've tried to respect the substance and the mood of the story as he presented it. With that in mind, I've done considerable work on the story, such as correcting errors of grammar or spelling. In every such case, I've tried to insure that the corrections didn't affect the substance or the mood of the story. Obviously, there aren't any privacy concerns regarding the people who appear in the story. Therefore, I've used the real names as presented in the manuscript except that I've adapted them for use in the English language. I've also used the author's real name, at his request.

Additional stories are available on my [personal website](#).

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Thin Air

I was walking on the beach near Santa Cruz, heading toward the boardwalk, when suddenly I was walking along a lane in a forest. I stopped, confused and disoriented. I shook my head. What? I'd been walking on the beach. The roller coaster had been in sight. I shook my head again and tried to think. It's surprising how difficult it can be to think when you're completely baffled. I looked around. Those were huge trees. There aren't any huge trees on the beach near Santa Cruz. Just sand. I tried hard to recall what I'd done after leaving the beach. I couldn't remember leaving the beach. All that I remembered was walking on the beach and then finding myself on a lane in a forest. So far as I could remember, the change had been instantaneous. A lot of things went through my mind. All of those *X-Files* episodes, the missing time after an alien abduction. I felt around my body but I didn't feel any of the traditional stuff like implants in the back of my neck or new holes in my teeth. I was so disoriented that I felt a little dizzy. I just stood there, looking at those huge trees. I was afraid to even take a step. Suddenly, I thought about my clothes. *The X-Files* again. In one episode that I recalled, a teenage girl had come back from an alien encounter with her clothes on backwards and inside out. It took me only a few seconds to assure myself that my cutoffs, T-shirt, and sneakers were all right-side-out and facing forwards.

The trees were huge. They looked like maybe Pines. At the location where I was standing, they were a considerable distance from the lane. It appeared that, at that location, the lane went through a meadow in the midst of a trackless forest. Trackless except for the lane, of course. The lane was two ruts, dry, and mostly dust. I looked back over my shoulder. Both ahead and behind, the lane disappeared into the forest. I didn't know what to do. A large black bird, maybe a crow, flew by in the near distance. There was a slight breeze. There were puffy clouds in the sky. The sun was warm, just high enough to be visible over the trees. I didn't know if it was morning or afternoon. I shook my head again. The ground was flat. No hills that I could see. I thought about trying to climb a tree to see if there were any houses nearby and, without actually planning to do so, I started walking in the direction that I happened to be facing. I quickly decided that climbing one of those huge trees was a stupid idea but, once I was walking, I kept walking. I stopped when I got close to the place where the lane entered the forest. It was dark in there but I had to go somewhere. I couldn't live in the meadow for the rest of my life. So, I walked into the forest.

In the meadow, the lane had been mostly dust between two ruts. In the forest, it was covered with needles. They looked like Pine needles. The trees looked like Pines. I assumed that the ruts were made by cars. They weren't the right distance apart for ATVs so I figured cars. Maybe it was a logging road. Whatever it was, if I walked far enough then I'd eventually find a highway and then a house and then a telephone. So I walked. I walked some more. I kept walking. The only thing that changed was that, occasionally, the lane went through meadows. They were different sizes. After a while, in one of the meadows, I noticed that the sun was overhead. So, it'd been morning when I'd arrived. I'd walked a long way to no apparent

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purpose and I was getting tired and frustrated. I drifted to a stop. I was about halfway through that particular meadow and I just stood there and looked around. I was listening to the birds and wondering what to do when I heard a different noise. It took me a couple of seconds to realize that it was hoof beats in the distance. I'd never heard hoof beats in real life but I've watched movies like anybody else so I knew hoof beats when I heard them. I also knew that the horses were coming fast. I don't know why, but I panicked. You'd think that I'd have wanted somebody to find me, given my situation, but my only thought was to hide. I ran for the forest like the Devil himself was after me.

I hadn't previously thought of the forest as a place to hide so I hadn't really noticed how open it was. Sure, there was some small growth along the borders with the meadows but, once inside, the trees were widely spaced without much underbrush between them. So, after I entered the forest, I darted to the right and crawled into the undergrowth at the edge, startling a few birds and one rabbit. The undergrowth turned out to be not nearly so good a hiding place as I'd expected. I could see out well enough that I decided that I probably wasn't going to be able to hide there. I crawled backwards back out of the bushes, intending to run off into the trees. However, just at that instant, a group of men on horses, four in all, burst from the forest on the opposite side of the meadow and skidded to a halt. I jumped behind a nearby tree and peeked out around the edge.

As soon as the riders halted, they pointed at the lane, shouted, and began to ride along the lane in my direction. As I watched them, I could see that they were watching the surface of the lane. When they got to the point where I'd started running, they stopped and looked around. I realized then that they were following my tracks. I hadn't given it much thought before but the lane was dusty in the meadows and covered with Pine needles in the forest. So, they'd raced through the forest and slowed at its edge to see if my tracks continued. When I'd heard them, I'd run. They could tell that from the tracks. They knew that I was nearby. They could easily see that my tracks continued along the lane toward the woods. It didn't take a genius to figure out where I was hiding. They headed for the trees. I gave up hiding and ran. They spotted me and gave chase. It wasn't much of a chase. They could ride in the forest almost as fast as they could ride on the lane. Within a few seconds, they overtook me and surrounded me. I stood and looked at them. They sat on their horses and looked at me. They seemed puzzled.

I didn't know what to do. Obviously, I couldn't get away. They didn't seem to know what to do, either. After they'd looked at me for a few moments, one of them said something that I couldn't understand. Another one replied and they all nodded agreement. The one who'd spoken first, who seemed to be the leader, got down off of his horse. He was moving very slowly. He took a cautious step toward me but, at a short statement from one of the others, he stopped and nodded agreement to whatever the other man had said. Then he backed up cautiously and, still moving very slowly and using only one finger and his thumb, he carefully lifted his sword from its scabbard and handed it to the horseman who was nearest to him. He bent slowly, never taking his eyes from me, and extracted a knife from his boot. He gave

the knife to the man who already had his sword. Then, he somehow produced a smaller knife from his sleeve and gave that one to his buddy. Then he moved slowly and cautiously toward me. About halfway to me, he stopped, spread his arms, and turned around slowly. He appeared to be trying to reassure me that he was unarmed. What the heck difference that was supposed to make when his buddies were armed to the teeth was a mystery to me. As soon as he'd reached for his sword, I'd noticed their weapons. I sure felt stupid. Up until then, I hadn't even noticed that they were armed, but they were. I saw bows and arrows, one crossbow, and of course various swords and knives. Meanwhile, the leader continued to approach me until he was standing in front of me.

He said something that I couldn't understand.

I said, "Dr. Livingston, I presume." Well Hell. What else was there to say? Take me to your leader?

He said something else that I couldn't understand.

In the spirit of gibberish, I said, " 'Twas brillig and the slithy toves."

He reached out slowly, cautiously, and tugged gently on the hem of my T-shirt. I didn't dare move. He knelt down and looked at my sneakers, reached out and stroked the edge of the rubber soles. He shook his head and stood up with a puzzled expression on his face. I stood still, afraid to move. He walked slowly around me, looking at me. When he'd started examining my clothes, I'd noticed that his were very rugged. Rough cloth. Everything looked like it was hand made. After he finished examining my clothes, he reached tentatively for my right front pocket, started to reach in it. Suddenly, I slapped his hand away. I don't know why I did it. Maybe I'd had enough. Maybe I just didn't want him feeling around inside of my pockets. He jumped back like I'd shocked him, spread his hands, palms toward me, and smiled. He seemed to be apologizing or maybe trying to reassure me. He said something that I didn't understand.

"OK," I said, "You're Brillig and those guys are the Slithy Toves. Take it or leave it!"

He turned to talk to the others and two of them rode away. That left me with Brillig and one Slithy Tove.

Brillig walked over to his horse, grabbed its reins, and said something. I didn't understand it and I didn't have the faintest notion what he wanted. I suppose that my puzzled expression got the message across. He pointed to me, walked to the side of the horse, and gently slapped the surface of the saddle.

"Sorry," I said, shrugging my shoulders, "I don't know how to ride a horse."

Brillig came back to me, gently took my arm, and led me toward his horse. Again, he made that open-handed gesture, with his arms held out from his sides. Then, he bent over and gently tried to lift my left foot into the stirrup.

I backed up a couple of steps and shrugged again.

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He demonstrated mounting, then dismounted. The horse looked at me with what seemed a lot like a look of sympathy. It snorted and nodded its head. Oh well, if the horse wanted me to climb aboard, then who was I to refuse? I'd never ridden a horse before but, with a little pushing and shoving by Brillig and some struggling and pulling on my part, we got me aboard. The animal seemed a lot taller from the top than it had seemed from the ground. It was a long way down. I shamelessly grabbed a knob that stuck up at the front of the saddle and hung on. Brillig took the reins and led the horse back toward the lane. The other Slithy Tove followed. In that configuration, we walked along the lane back in the direction from which I'd originally come.

The trip was long and somewhat tedious but I was grateful to be riding. I'd walked a long way and I was tired. The horse occasionally looked back at me with what seemed like a look of reassurance. The sun was getting low when we finally got to wherever it was that we were going. To me, it looked like any other place along the lane, in another meadow. If you've seen one meadow in a forest, then you've seen 'em all. However, there must have been something special about that particular spot on the lane because the two Slithy Toves who Brillig had sent back along the lane were guarding it. That's right, guarding it. I found out later that there'd actually been six riders, but that they'd left two guarding that spot while the other four followed my tracks. The two that Brillig had sent back, after catching me, had stayed to guard the spot and sent the two previous guards to complete whatever the errand was.

At first I couldn't figure out what the Slithy Toves were guarding. They were about 30 feet apart, each with his horse sideways across the lane. There were also six rough looking men with a team of what I took to be big cows of some kind hitched to a wagon loaded with logs. I learned later that they weren't cows. They were oxen, but I didn't know that at the time. I thought that they were cows. The men with the cows and the load of logs were waiting to get by but the Slithy Toves wouldn't let them. I wondered why they didn't just drive into the meadow and go around the spot that the Slithy Toves were guarding. I eventually understood that they'd waited because they were just as curious as Brillig and the Slithy Toves were. When I arrived, the men came strolling over from their wagon to watch. I noticed that none of them walked in the lane. They all seemed very interested in me. I couldn't imagine why. When we got near the place, Brillig helped me to dismount. Then he took me carefully by the arm and led me off of the lane onto the grass and along the edge of the lane to a point midway between the two guards. He pointed at the lane. When I saw where he pointed, I understood. There were my tracks in the dust, leading away from the spot where I'd appeared. There weren't any tracks leading up to that spot. Brillig looked at me with a puzzled expression on his face. The log men and the other Slithy Toves were very quiet. I shrugged and said, "Beats the Hell outa me."

Brillig again took my arm and cautiously led me a few feet along beside the lane, then directed me out into the lane and led me past the place where my previous tracks began. A few more feet and then he guided me back off of the lane and back

along its edge to the spot. It was clear that the new tracks that I'd just made were identical to the ones that led away from the spot where I'd appeared. He turned loose of my arm, stepped back, and — I swear — he had a expression of awe on his face. The other Slithy Toves shook their heads and the log men just watched in silence. Brillig said something to the Slithy Tove who'd ridden back with us and the fellow slapped his horse off along the lane in the direction that we'd been going, opposite to the direction that I'd originally been walking. Brillig guided me back to the horse and helped me aboard. The guards left their posts and the log men all walked back to their wagon and climbed aboard. One of them took the reins, whooped a couple of times, snapped a large whip, and the wagon creaked forward. Me, Brillig, and the two remaining Slithy Toves all headed off along the lane in the same direction that the other three Slithy Toves had gone. I guess that they didn't need to guard the spot any more. They'd confirmed that I'd appeared out of thin air.

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A Night Ride

It seemed that Brillig and the Slithy Toves could ride all night, but not me. I'd already had a busy morning in Santa Cruz. Since then, I'd walked through a primeval forest, been chased and captured by friendly armed horsemen, ridden one of the huge beasts for miles and miles, and proved that I'd appeared out of thin air. I was tired. Brillig was walking along, leading the horse and I guess that it became obvious that I was about half asleep. By the time that the sunlight was fading, the two remaining Slithy Toves were riding right beside me, one on each side. Whenever I'd start to drift off to sleep and start sliding sideways in the saddle, the Slithy Tove toward whom I was sliding would catch me and ease me back into the saddle. They decided that it was time to stop. I slid off of the horse and somebody caught me. We were in another meadow. I staggered a few steps away from the lane, laid down on the grass, and went to sleep.

I woke up later to the smell of food. They'd built a fire and had some kind of an animal, or the remains of some kind of an animal, speared on a stick and suspended somehow over the coals. When they saw that I was awake, they snagged the critter, whatever it was, and sliced off a piece. I was so absolutely starving that I didn't even stop to wonder if the knife was clean. I just grabbed the meat that Brillig handed to me and bolted it. They seemed pleased and gave me some more. I'm afraid that I made a pig of myself and ate most of whatever it was. Then I went back to sleep.

Some time later, I was awakened by Brillig. It was cold. When I looked around, I discerned in the darkness a large sort of blocky shape on the lane. Brillig helped me to my feet and led me toward the shape. It turned out to be some sort of a carriage. I found out much later that the two Slithy Toves who'd originally been guarding my arrival spot had ridden back to the castle to get a carriage and a driver for me. The third Slithy Tove had, of course, ridden back to verify that I'd actually appeared out of thin air. I didn't know about any of that at the time. I didn't even know that there was a castle. Brillig helped me into the carriage. After it began to move, I discovered a blanket folded on the opposite seat. I wrapped myself in the blanket and, within a few minutes, I was sleep.

It was just about dawn when I awoke. I was stiff and dirty. I was also sore in some places that I didn't want to show to anybody. Riding the horse must have done that. We were passing through the ugliest bunch of hovels that I'd ever seen. There was a really bad smell. I leaned out of the window to see what was going on and discovered that the smell was even stronger outside. I saw that the other Slithy Toves were back. Brillig and one Slithy Tove were leading the way. There were two Slithy Toves behind the carriage and one on each side. People were being careful to stay out of the way. It wasn't very far before there were fewer hovels and more places that looked like maybe they were some kind of shops or stores. I didn't know what they were but they were different from the hovels. Whatever they were, they were still crude and dirty. We passed out of that region and into a more swanky looking part of town. There were some houses that were fancy compared to the others but still not much by my standards. Most of those were built of stone. The ones

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that I seen previously were made out of sticks and straw. Then there was a wide grassy area and I noticed ahead, off at an angle, an edge of what looked like a castle wall. I leaned out for a better look straight ahead and, sure enough, it was a castle. Stones, turrets, crenelations, the whole works. A real castle. There were even some pointed little flags flying from the pointed tops of the turrets. I'd been pondering where I was. It was getting harder and harder for me to believe that I was still in California. I couldn't think of anything to do about it except to sit in the carriage and wait for it to get to wherever it was going.

When we were about halfway across the wide grassy area, I heard a blare of trumpets. At least they sounded sort of like trumpets except that maybe the sound was a little more mellow. A bunch of men on horseback and wearing bright colors came galloping out of the castle gate and formed a short double line through which the carriage passed. I couldn't imagine why I was getting so much attention except, of course, for the fact that I'd appeared out of thin air and that I was wearing weird clothes.

We rolled through the castle gate, did a sort of zig-zag through a double bend surrounded by tall stone walls, and then emerged into a large area that was paved with stones. A lot of people were waiting there and watching the carriage. Damn, I thought, I must be the talk of the town! I guess people don't appear out of thin air just every day in this neck of the woods.

The carriage made it to wherever it was supposed to stop. It stopped. I saw that there was a short corridor, formed by two lines of men, through the crowd. The men were wearing livery that matched that of the horsemen who'd formed the corridor through which we'd just ridden outside of the castle. Apparently, corridors of men in bright colors were important to these people. I couldn't see what Brillig and the Slithy Toves were doing but, a few seconds later, they appeared on foot and pushed their way into the corridor. I noticed that the corridor led from the right-side carriage door to a wooden door in a stone wall. Apparently, the purpose of the corridor was so that I could get through the crowd of people from the carriage to the door in the stone wall. Brillig opened the carriage door and beckoned for me to get out. The people were all craning their necks, trying to get a glimpse of me. What could I do? I got out.

Everybody in the crowd yelled joyfully as soon as I stepped out of the carriage. The sound was so sudden that I almost scrambled back into the carriage. It wasn't a hostile sound. It was joyous but it was very startling. Brillig grabbed my arm and urged me forward, along the corridor that the men were maintaining for me. We'd gone only about half of the distance to the wooden door in the stone wall when the door opened and a man stepped through it.

Merlin

I immediately thought of the man as Merlin. I don't know what his name was before I arrived but, after my arrival, he was Merlin. I called him that so everybody else called him that. However, I'm getting a little ahead of my story.

The man who opened the wooden door and stepped through it wore a long blue robe covered with mysterious signs and symbols. Yes, that seems trite but that's what he wore. He had, you guessed it, a tall pointed blue hat with a narrow brim. The hat also had mysterious signs and symbols on it. He had a squirrel riding on his shoulder. I know that, according to the legend, it should have been an owl. It wasn't an owl. It was a squirrel. It turned out to not even be a magical squirrel. It was just a squirrel. Merlin kept it as a pet.

I'll be honest about this. I don't remember most of what Merlin showed me that day. He had a labyrinth of rooms and corridors that occupied an entire wing of the castle. Some of his rooms had animals in them. Some of them had things kind of like a chemistry lab, strangely shaped little jars, glass tubes, little burners, and so forth. Some of them had things that didn't make any sense to me at all. Actually, most of Merlin's domain didn't make any sense to me. The most terrifying thing that he showed me, or tried to show me, was a room that was empty. By that I don't mean that it lacked furniture. I mean that it was empty. There wasn't anything in it. Not anything at all. It wasn't even dark. It was just an empty place. I don't know of any other way to describe it. When I tried to look into the room, my eyes and my brain did something strange. I couldn't see the other side of the room. I couldn't see anything. It was a long time before I'd go back to that particular corridor again, even after Merlin assured me that he'd turned off whatever it was that he'd been doing there. Eventually, I got up the courage to go back and look into the room. It was just a room. Even so, I wouldn't go into it. I never went into it. Merlin never did explain what he'd been doing there. Anyway, most of that happened a long time later. That first day, all that I saw when I looked into the room was an empty space that terrified me.

After I looked into the empty room, Merlin appeared to regret having shown it to me. He seemed to think that maybe I'd seen enough for one day so he took me directly from there to what became my apartment for the next several months. I spent most of that time learning the language. During those lessons, as I began to have the ability to communicate with him, I began to learn a little about Camelot and about how I'd come to be there.

I came to think of the place as Camelot before I knew enough of the language to learn its previous name. By the time that I knew better I was in the habit of thinking of it as Camelot so that's what I called it. Eventually, Merlin started asking me questions about the names that I gave to places, things, and people. I explained the sources of the names as well as I could. Merlin seemed very interested and made a lot of notes.

Anyway, I called the place Camelot so everybody else called it Camelot. That became its name. Merlin also acquired his name permanently because that's what I

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called him. The reason that I had such power over names was because I was the king. I didn't believe that at first. After Merlin told me the story of how I got there, and why, and after I'd seen some of the amazing things that he could do, I decided that it was probably true. Even if it wasn't true, there didn't seem to be any alternative to believing it. So, as a matter of necessity, I decided that the story was true. I was the king.

Here's how Merlin explained it. Camelot, or whatever it's name had been before I came along, had prospered under its previous king, a wise and benevolent ruler, for about 40 years. Then the king had died. There wasn't any clear and undisputed heir to the throne and there were several contenders who were interested in the job. It started to look like there might be a very brutal and complicated fight between several different factions. Merlin proposed an alternate plan. He suggested that if all of the contenders would form a temporary Regency Council to run the kingdom on an interim basis, then he'd locate the True and Proper King, the one man from all of time and space who was best suited for the job. Such was the respect that Merlin enjoyed that people in all of the various factions actually thought about the suggestion for a few days. That was enough time for them to come to their senses and to realize what they'd been about to do. So, the Regency Council was formed. During the years of its existence, it did as good a job of ruling the kingdom as you could expect a committee to do at that sort of thing.

The first thing that the Regency Council did was to collaborate with Merlin and put together a profile of what it would take to make the perfect king. Merlin did some editing of the profile that he didn't mention to the members of the Council and built the edited profile into a Net. Actually, I don't think that it was anything physical but Merlin called it a Net. It was designed to catch only someone who matched the profile. He hadn't been kidding when he said that he'd search through all of time and space. He cast the Net through all of time and space. I've wondered since then if that empty room might have had something to do with the process. I never got around to asking. Anyway, the Net came back empty. He revised the profile and cast the Net again. Empty. He refined the Net. He worked at it for years and more years. Given the eventual result, I suppose that he must have gradually lowered his standards as time went by because, after all, he snagged me and I'm far from the perfect king. Indeed, there were times when I wondered if maybe his Net had misfired completely.

While Merlin tried to catch a king, the Regency Council did its best and the kingdom managed to get by. At first, the Regency Council was plagued by lingering grievances about the amount of power that was exercised by different factions. Eventually, they developed a system of time limits, called Rounds. Members rotated in and out of the Regency Council from one Round to the next and only the current members got to sit at the table. It reduced the number of arguments within the Council and, at the same time, it prevented anybody from exercising power for too long. However, it wasn't as good as a real king. The longer people waited the more they realized that a Regency Council, however conscientious its members or however clever its organization, could never take the place of a king.

Merlin kept revising the profile, refining the Net, and trying to catch a king. He'd been at it for several years when his Net finally snagged somebody. He'd never actually caught anybody before so the performance of the Net was a little hypothetical. He was sure that the Net had caught somebody alright, but the catch had slipped out of the Net just as Merlin was reeling it in. Merlin was sure that the catch had been brought into his own reality, somewhere nearby, and approximately to the current time before it had slipped from the net. If things had gone according to plan, then I'd have appeared in Merlin's laboratory. Unfortunately, nobody knew exactly where or when I'd appeared. People had been looking for me ever since Merlin had announced that I was somewhere nearby, relatively speaking. Brillig and the Slithy Toves, and other groups like them, had been scouring the countryside, seeking anything that might be a clue as to my whereabouts. When they'd discovered footprints appearing out of thin air, they thought that maybe they'd found their king. They followed the tracks in the lane and the rest is history.

When Merlin told me the story, I asked him why he hadn't just cast the net for me again, and caught me a second time. He looked startled and then embarrassed. He admitted that he just hadn't thought of it.

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Coronation

It took several months of language lessons before Merlin decided that I was ready for the job. After that, there was an endless stream of people planning things. They'd decided to hold the Coronation on the Winter Solstice. The people of Camelot regarded that day as the end of the previous year and the beginning of the next year, both on the same day. Thus it was an important day, simultaneously celebrating, as it did, two different events. Having my Coronation on the Winter Solstice would make it an even more important occasion.

Most of the Coronation ceremony was defined by tradition as recorded by scribes throughout the ages. However, I did veto a few things. For example, I decided to forego the *jus primae noctis* thing, even though there were several couples who rearranged their marriage plans and petitioned for the privilege. I was informed that they were disappointed. A chance to have a child of the king in the family was a big deal. I don't think that anybody understood why I declined the right of first night. It was accepted in Camelot, though the Church frowned upon it. I wasn't trying to reform the local morality. It just didn't quite fit in with my own beliefs.

I also vetoed a few things from the menu. It's been a long time and I don't remember what they were. I just remember that there were some exotic things that didn't strike my fancy, so I said no. I also decided against some gladiator-style entertainment that was traditionally a part of the pre-Coronation festivities. I think that, during the process of planning the Coronation, my various changes might have disappointed some people and maybe even offended a few.

The day of the Coronation dawned overcast. That was expected, since it was during winter.¹ The Coronation was planned to take place inside of my Great Hall anyway, so the weather was reasonably irrelevant. Of course, everybody was bundled up to the ears because of the primitive state of the heating system, which is to say that there wasn't one. I was planning a lot of changes, once I was officially in power.

I'd been sort of overwhelmed during the planning of the Coronation and there were one or two details of which I didn't become aware until things were actually under way. Of course, my rejection of some of the things that people wanted to include might have caused a certain caution about mentioning to me other things that were dear to the hearts of some of the planners. On the other hand, maybe they just assumed that some things were sacrosanct.

We'd gone through a couple of dry runs of the Coronation so I knew, in general, the order of events. I knew when to walk somewhere and where to stand. However, we hadn't actually gone through every word that was going to be said, in complete detail. As the ceremony progressed I listened carefully to the Liturgy that was being

1 Editor's Note: While discussing the story with the author, I learned that the people of Camelot have a different view of the seasons than we do. To them, the seasons and the calendar year are two different things. Winter is a season defined by earthly events. In Camelot, winter begins when the first snow falls and lasts until the first flowers bloom. The calendar year is defined by celestial events. It both begins and ends on the Winter Solstice. Although Mr. Pendrake didn't see fit to put that information into the manuscript, I thought that it was at least worth a footnote.

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performed by the religious functionaries who were in charge of the ceremony up to and including the actual crowning. My grasp of the language wasn't yet perfect but it was good enough that I understood the gist of what was being said. I heard a lot of talk that I hadn't expected about things like the Sanction of God, the Privileges Bestowed by Heaven, the Divine Right of Kings, and so forth. Before the ceremony got to the actual crowning part, I knew that I was about to offend a few more people but I just wasn't willing to go through with the religious rigmarole. I was nervously wondering how to put a stop to it when I realized that there just wasn't any more time to delay. It was the now or never part, the forever hold your peace part. I was kneeling before the Cardinal who was about to crown me. He had my crown in his hands and was pronouncing the Blessings of God upon My Holy Reign. That was it. Right in the middle of his Blessing, I stood up and took the crown right out of his hands. His mouth fell open and he got a blank expression on his face like maybe he was reviewing the past few minutes to see if he'd forgotten some important part of the ritual. While he pondered it, I turned around with my crown in my hands and walked from his place at one side of the platform. I walked to the center, just in front of my throne, turned and went down the two steps and onto the main floor. The Great Hall was a sea of surprised faces.

I didn't know what I was going to do. I just walked down the center aisle looking randomly around at the faces in the Great Hall. About halfway along the length of the aisle, my gaze fell upon the wrinkled face of an old woman who had sparkling eyes, no teeth, and a bright yellow shawl wrapped across her head. I stopped and looked at her. She looked back at me.

"Come here, old woman," I commanded.

She stood up and sidled through the narrow space between the people seated in her row and those on the next bench forward. When she got into the aisle, she just stopped and looked up at me, without any particular expression on her face. She was about half my height.

"Will you have me as your king?" I asked.

"Lordy, Majesty!" she exclaimed in a high, piercing voice that carried throughout the Great Hall. "You already tha king. Them buzzards just tryin' ta git tha credit for it!"

"Then," I said, "place this crown upon my head." I handed her the crown and knelt before her.

She placed the crown upon my head and, without another word, turned and made her way back to her seat. That was Blessing enough for me. I stood up and walked back along the central aisle, up the two steps to the platform, and sat on my throne.

"I will not rule in the name of God," I declared. "I will not rule in the name of any religion, any dogma, or any group of clergy." I glanced at the Cardinal, who was still standing at his place near one end of the platform. He was beginning to look angry. "I will not rule in the name of any faction, whatever it might be." I glanced at Merlin, who was staring abstractly at a corner of the Great Hall. Looking back

at the crowd of people, I declared, "I don't need any sanction but yours. If I have that, then I'll be your king. Do I have it?"

I don't know what I'd expected. It wasn't much of a speech and the people weren't prepared for it anyway. I doubt if most of them even understood it. I was just winging it. However, just as I finished my impromptu harangue, there was a hole in the clouds to the south of us and the low winter sun shined through the high windows at the south end of the Great Hall. My throne was at the North end of the place and the light came from behind the people who were watching me. It fell directly on me. The air around me was filled with some kind of incense that the religious people had been burning and, when the beam of light passed through the incense, I was surrounded by a golden radiance. Believe me, I was as surprised as anybody else was. I'd seen that kind of phoney theatrics on the television and in the movies but I'd never expected that it would happen to me. The effect on those mediaeval people was overwhelming. I doubt if many of them had understood that I'd been trying to declare a secular reign instead of a religious one but they all understood a miracle when they saw it. Except for Merlin and the members of the clergy, everyone in the Great Hall knelt humbly before me. The place was filled with a reverent silence. I glanced at Merlin where he sat on a bench at one side of the platform. He was involved in an elaborate examination of his fingernails. It appeared that he hadn't even noticed what was going on. I cleared my throat. He looked up at me and then at the people in the Great Hall. He appeared to suddenly become aware of the situation, got up from his bench, and went down on one knee. I turned to the Cardinal, who was still standing with his various clergymen behind him and said, "You may stay if you wish, but not in authority over me. In that regard, you are no longer needed here. If you choose to stay, then kneel. Otherwise, leave" I suppose that they understood a miracle as well as anyone else. They knelt.

I looked at Merlin where he knelt by his bench and commanded him, "Give me your staff." He stood and walked to my throne. There, he went to one knee again and meekly handed me his staff.

"Go sit on your bench," I told him. He walked back to his bench and sat.

As I sat there looking at the staff, I remembered that line from *The Ten Commandments*, the old religious epic by Cecil B. deMille. Without stopping to think that I was using a line spoken by a Pharaoh, I stood up and declared, "So let it be written!" I held Merlin's staff, my staff, upright in my right hand and stamped its end firmly against the floor. "So let it be done!" Then I sat back down on my throne. The hole in the clouds closed and the golden radiance faded.

Merlin never did admit to having influenced the clouds but, on several subsequent occasions, I saw him do things like avert tornadoes or dissipate thunder storms that were threatening crops. I suppose that a little thinning of the clouds might have been within his power. Anyway, the Light that had shown upon me at my Coronation was generally regarded as a miracle. I went with the flow. It appeared that, whether I believed in it or not, I was stuck with God's Approval of my reign. At least, I'd bypassed the Cardinal and his crew.

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After the golden radiance faded, there was a little confusion as the people who were in charge of different aspects of the ceremony improvised a way to get things started again. I'd kind of thrown a monkey wrench into their planning and they ended up skipping whatever had remained of the religious rigmarole. The Cardinal didn't seem to think that it was important. My bailiff took over from the Cardinal and managed to get things going again. The ceremony went pretty much according to plan after that.

It seemed that the festivities were going to last all night. There came a point late that evening when I was about to go to sleep on my throne. I signaled my bailiff and told him that I was tired and that I wanted to leave. He immediately called a halt to the festivities, right in the middle of a juggling act. I told him that they could continue the celebration without me, if they wanted to. Without a further word, I got up and walked out. It probably wasn't the courteous or the kingly thing to do but I was tired. My bailiff alerted Arnold, my new chamberlain, who arrived at my chambers right behind me. I stood my staff in a corner, sat my crown on the little table bedside my bed, and began to undress myself. Arnold stood and watched. I'd already made it clear to him that I could handle the process of dressing and undressing. As I removed my garments, he took them. When I awoke the next morning, they'd be clean and ready for me to wear. Rank hath its privileges and, for a sufficiently high rank, clean clothes is one of them, even in a mediaeval setting. After I'd handed the last garment to Arnold, I crawled under the covers on my bed. I was asleep within a few minutes. I slept late the next morning but they delayed breakfast for my convenience. After all, I was the king.

Pipe Dream

The first thing that I'd planned to do after I was officially the king was to install a decent sewer system. The conventional method of disposing of things was to dump a pot full of it out of the nearest convenient window. After many centuries of that, a lot of debris had accumulated. The castle, indeed the entire town, sat on a rather high hill in an otherwise flat landscape. The reason for the hill was the historical accumulation of filth. It dried out, people walked on it, and it became compacted. Eventually, street level was higher than the floor level of the adjacent buildings and, after that, every bit of weather washed or blew debris indoors. That caused the floor level in the buildings to rise. Since most buildings had dirt floors and since people were accustomed to the situation, it was the accepted state of things. When floor level rose high enough that walking inside of the building became a problem, there were several options, depending upon the building. If the building was a flimsy hovel, then it would be either abandoned or torn down and replaced with another flimsy hovel. The replacement flimsy hovel was usually built, at least in part, with material salvaged from the previous flimsy hovel. A sturdy, stone structure would get a second floor if it didn't already have one. Most activities moved upstairs and the first floor became a storage space and, eventually, a crawl space. When ground level rose enough that the previous first floor wasn't useful even as a crawl space, then it would be abandoned and forgotten. Most stone structures extended down into the ground for several levels. One of the things that I'd hoped to do, eventually, was to excavate one of them just to see what had been abandoned and buried there. I never got around to doing it.

Even the castle had levels below ground level. That hadn't resulted from debris washing in or blowing in during bad weather because the castle was much better built than the other structures. However, as ground level rose around the castle it was occasionally necessary to do things like elevate the tops of the walls, knock out holes in the walls for various new doors up at the next level, and seal the old doors above which the ground level was rising. Ground level in the castle yards had to be raised occasionally so that they were higher than the ground level outside. Otherwise, they'd flood during wet weather. Thus, the castle had at least two levels below the outside ground level. Nobody knew for sure if various rooms or maybe entire sections might have been sealed off, over the centuries, for one forgotten reason or another. Nobody knew what was down there, sealed behind stone walls that had once had doors in them.

To me, it was an intolerable situation. All that we needed was a decent sewer system and things would be better. I'm afraid that I overestimated what I could accomplish by simply issuing commands. I spoke about it first to Arnold and he just didn't seem to grasp the idea at all. I tried to promote the idea with various other members of the castle staff and, although some of them understood the idea in theory, I don't think that any of them really saw the advantages. It seemed a lot simpler to just dump the chamber pots out of the windows. Nobody actually refused to obey me but they just didn't know what to do to accomplish my commands. It became clear that I was going to have to provide some very detailed instructions.

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It seemed logical to start at the far end of the sewer system and work uphill from there. So, the first thing that I wanted to build was the sewer main. I intended to run it from the swamp, somewhat less than a mile away, uphill to the castle. Fortunately for me, the river and the swamp were about eight feet below ground level. The swamp was about a half mile wide at that location, with the river on the far side. I'm not a sanitation engineer but I thought that I recalled reading somewhere, before I'd come to Camelot, that a wetland would purify contaminated water. I didn't know for sure if it would work but it seemed a lot better than dumping chamber pots out of the windows. I figured that it would do until somebody else thought of something better

I commanded all of the craftsmen and artisans in the area to come to a meeting. The meeting wasn't a ceremonial event but I held it in the Great Hall anyway. That was the best place for a meeting. After everybody was there, I tried to explain what I needed in the way of hardware. I didn't want to actually tell them what I wanted to do with such a long length of large pipe because of the cool reception that the idea had received within the castle. However, word gets around and the people at the meeting already knew that I wanted to build a big pipe to carry sewage from the castle to the swamp. They came to the meeting because I commanded it but I got the impression that, to them, the idea was kind of a joke. Nobody would admit to the ability to manufacture clay pipe with a large diameter and bell ends that could be assembled into a long length and not leak or break. They weren't disobeying me. They just didn't know how to do what I wanted to have done. After a while, I dismissed them and sat on my throne wondering what to do next. One of them didn't leave when the others did. When I looked up and saw that he was still there, he quickly came off of the bench and bent a knee, apologizing for his continued presence. I let him make such apology as made him feel comfortable and then I asked him to stand and tell me what he wanted.

"Your Majesty," he began uncertainly, "While I do understand your desire, the making of such pipe is beyond our ability, especially since you wish a diameter of one length from fingertip to fingertip."

"Yes," I said, "It seems that nobody can provide what I want."

"However," he ventured, "It may be that I can suggest another way to accomplish it."

He hesitated and I prompted him. "What's your idea?"

"I'm sure that you have already considered this idea and rejected it for good reasons not known...."

"Out with it, man!"

"Your Majesty, use bricks."

He stood looking at me and I sat looking at him. He looked uneasy and I jumped down from the platform and grabbed him by the hand, an unheard of departure from kingly behavior. I laughed in delight, pumped his hand up and down vigorously, and exclaimed, "Of course! Of course! Bricks! Why didn't I think of it? We'll

build the sewer main out of bricks!" My bailiff, who attended all of my meetings in the Great Hall, had an expression on his face that suggested some disapproval of my unkingly deportment.

I learned that the man's name was Jon. He was a recent arrival from Ebon, the kingdom to the south. He was having some difficulty earning a living as a brick maker in a kingdom where almost any permanent structure was made out of stone. We had lots and lots of stone and a long tradition of building things with it. When he'd heard about the sewer project, he'd immediately hoped that it might be an opportunity for him and that it might lead to other work in the future. For the next hour or so, we strolled around the countryside between the castle and the swamp discussing the project. Jon had anticipated something built on the surface. I'd envisioned an underground system. However, Jon assured me that the cost of all of the digging and filling that would be necessary to build an underground main in a straight line would be a lot more expensive than building the sewer main on the surface. Actually, digging the trench wasn't so much of a problem on the hill, which was composed of the historical accumulation of debris that had been thrown out of the windows. The real problem was to dig the trench in the hard and rocky ground from the edge of the hill to the swamp.

The next day, I checked with some people who dug holes — grave diggers. It turned out that the only tools available were kind of primitive. Picks and shovels. They hadn't even invented the wheel barrow. In Camelot, if people wanted to carry bulk material, they used straw baskets or sacks made of skin or cloth. Camelot was mostly a farming, ranching, and hunting region. Most things made of metal came from Ebon, and were expensive. Flat, planed wood was expensive. I had to admit that the local ground tended to be rocky, so I was thinking about following Jon's suggestion and building the sewer main on the surface. However, I really wanted the whole thing to be underground. I was discussing the problem with General Herman at supper a few days later and he offered to dig the trench for me, for free.

"Hell," he said, "soldiers dig holes in the ground all the time. It's part o' fightin' a war. It'll be good exercise for 'em and keep 'em busy and out o' trouble." So, I sent word to Jon and told him that we'd be using the underground plan.

As soon as Jon knew what I wanted, he submitted his estimate and my purser threw a fit. I learned that the castle treasury didn't have enough funds for the project even if we didn't spend anything else on anything else. I'd assumed that everybody worked for the king for free. I was wrong. Some things are due to the king from some people. Other things, we had to buy. It turned out that a sewer main was one of the things that we had to buy. So, I wrangled a deal with Jon. He and his wife got to move into the castle for the duration of the job. They had all of their needs during that time supplied by the castle staff and from the castle resources. He would make the bricks for half of his originally quoted price and take his payment in the form of tax credits until the full cost of the bricks was paid. Once that deal was arranged, he formed a new company for the sewer project and set up a brick works in a back corner of one of the castle yards. Before long bricks began to accumulate. I didn't actually accuse him of malingering but he didn't seem to be in

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much of a hurry. I suppose that living in the castle was a pretty cushy deal. It's to be expected that he wouldn't want to end it any sooner than was necessary.

The job for my sewer main was a temporary deal and he left his sons running his normal business. In addition to that, they procured the raw materials for the bricks and sold them at a profit to Jon's new sewer main company. Naturally, the price that he paid for the materials was one of the expenses that was covered in our tax credit deal. I never did find out what kind of an arrangement he had for his sewer main company to pay off its debt to his permanent company. Jon was a real businessman. I guess that he did rather well on the deal, financially. I know that once he was finished with my sewer main project he built himself a very fancy brick house upwind from town.

At about the time that Jon got started making bricks, I discovered that the only available man with any experience at laying bricks was Jon's brother, Nat. It seemed that the whole family had moved to Camelot. Anyway, when I showed Nat the trench that General Herman's soldiers were digging, he shook his head sadly and said that it wouldn't work. "She'll collapse," he stated. "Can't load a flat surface of bricks from the top like that." Strange that he hadn't mentioned that to Jon or that Jon hadn't mentioned it to me. Anyway, I thought about it for a few seconds and then said, "Why not make it cylindrical?"

"Cylindrical?"

"Sure. Don't make flat surfaces. Make a...." I didn't know the word for cylinder but eventually I managed to explain it. He didn't think that it could be done. I explained to him that brick and stone arches had been made for centuries in my previous reality. At that point, it occurred to me that I might have been able to have the whole thing built with stone instead of brick. Maybe it would have been less expensive. However, the deal with Jon was already made and Jon was already making bricks. I thought about it for a few seconds and decided that I'd stick with the plan to use bricks.

Nat was skeptical about a cylindrical tunnel of bricks but, after a while, he started to get excited about the idea. I got General Herman to provide a few soldiers to help Nat do some experiments in a short piece of the trench that was completed. Nat needed the soldiers to move supplies and materials for him and also to remove the rubble from failed experiments. He also needed some of Jon's bricks. Of course, those bricks were included in the tax credit deal. In addition to the bricks, he needed mortar. I hadn't even thought about mortar, but they had. It turned out that Jon's sons had been mixing the ingredients for mortar non-stop ever since I'd first started talking to Jon about a brick sewer system. They had a lot of mortar mix stockpiled in sacks. Apparently, the other local builders hadn't thought of that. They just mixed the stuff at a job site, as needed. Jon's sons mixed it in advance and just added water at the job site. Since my original deal with Jon had been for bricks, it cost me several more years of tax credits to get the mortar from his sons. It would have been even more expensive if I'd bought it elsewhere. Not only that, Jon's sons claimed that the mortar used for stone was inferior to theirs, because it

was intended for rocks. Theirs was actually intended for bricks. I didn't know if there was really a difference. I still don't. I just made the deal for the mortar. Once the deal was made, Nat got right to work. In later years, I hired Nat, Jon, or Jon's sons to negotiate most of my business deals for me. Over the long run, they saved me a lot more money than I originally paid them for the bricks, the mortar, and the construction. I guess that I did rather well, financially.

Nat experimented for several months. His big problem was how to support the bricks while he set them in place and waited for the mortar to dry. I don't know how its normally done but Nat developed a technique of using mud to shape the bottom half of the trench into a half cylinder, exactly like he wanted the bottom half of the brick cylinder to be shaped. The real trick was getting the right consistency of mud and getting it shaped correctly and compacted properly, so that it wouldn't settle afterward. After General Herman's soldiers had the bottom half of the supporting surface done, Nat laid bricks along that curved surface making the bottom half of the brick cylinder. When that part of the brickwork was dry enough, he had them fill the whole thing with mud and then heap more mud up above it in the shape of the top half of the cylinder. He used an entirely different consistency of mud for that part. He then laid the bricks for the upper half of the cylinder over the cylindrical mound of mud. After that, he had the soldiers cover the exposed upper surface of the bricks with more mud. After the mortar was sufficiently cured, they removed the dried mud from the inside of the brick cylinder. There were several failures and some frantic digging to rescue trapped soldiers. One man was killed by the first collapse. After that, Nat used shorter sections of tunnel for his experiments. That way, if one of them collapsed it didn't take as long to reach the buried men. After some tinkering with his technique, Nat managed to build a short section of cylindrical tunnel that didn't collapse when they removed the mud from inside of the cylinder. After the mud on the top was dry, we tested it by riding horses over it, driving heavily laden wagons over it, jumping up and down on it, and so forth. It didn't collapse. Nat was just about the happiest brick layer in the kingdom. Of course, he was the only brick layer in the kingdom.

I think that Nat must have used about a zillion water bladders of swamp water and a huge amount of dirt during the development of his mud techniques and the subsequent construction of the sewer main. The mud was free but the water had to be carried from the river and the dirt had to be dug up and then carried from the several locations that had the kind of dirt that he needed. He'd wanted to hire laborers to carry it and charge the cost to the tax credit deal that he expected to eventually make with me. I vetoed that and told him to use General Herman's soldiers. He used all of the soldiers that were available. However, once he'd proved that he could do what I wanted, I made the same deal with him that I'd made with Jon. After that, Nat and his family moved into the castle and he got right to work.

Nat built the sewer main as fast as the drying time of mud and mortar would allow, which turned out to take longer than digging the trench. By the end of the next winter the entire sewer main was completed and a new lawn was growing over it that spring. For about a year, the grass along the sewer main was a lot greener and

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healthier than the lawn elsewhere. I think that must have been a residual effect of all of that swamp water.

Even after the grass along the route of the sewer main had returned to normal, nobody had yet figured out how to install sewer lines inside of the castle. For quite a long time after the sewer main was completed there were only three obvious consequences of the project. One was that the local children had a new toy. They never tired of playing in the sewer main. Another consequence of the project was that General Herman's soldiers had learned a lot about digging holes in the ground and about dealing with mud. The last consequence was that the soldiers acquired a new nickname. They were thereafter known as Mudnecks. The nickname had originally referred to a different body part but I decreed that the body part originally used would be replaced with *neck* and so it was, at least in my presence.

Robin Hood and His Merry Men

The sewer project was a long term thing. It used up a lot of my time over a long period of time but it didn't occupy much of my time on any particular day. I spent a lot more time holding court in the Great Hall.

I was doing just that early one morning when a small band of orange-clad men came walking in. The bright orange duds were the first thing that I noticed about them. The next thing that I noticed was that they were all armed. I stood up nervously and my bailiff, recognizing my concern and the reason for it, came quickly to my side.

"It's alright, Your Majesty," he whispered. "Those are Forest Rangers."

"Forest Rangers come into my Great Hall armed?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Forest Rangers go armed wherever they will. It is a tradition from antiquity and honored by all."

"I see," I said. I sat down again.

By that time, the band of men had reached the edge of the platform and stopped. They just stood there.

I beckoned my bailiff. When he leaned close, I whispered, "And is it also normal for them to stand before a king without bending a knee?"

"Yes Your Majesty. That, too, is a long and honored tradition. They owe fealty to no Lord."

"So, what am I supposed to do now?"

"Speak to them. The one in front is Loxley."

Of course, that immediately made me think of Robin Hood.

"Does he have a title?"

"Since he uses none for others, you need use none for him. Just call him Loxley."

I thought about it for a moment and I just couldn't resist the temptation. "I shall call him Robin Hood," I whispered with a smile.

"Yes, Your Majesty," intoned my bailiff skeptically.

"Hail and welcome, Robin Hood."

"What name is this you give me?"

"A legendary fellow from my own time and place. He hailed from an estate called Loxley. Also, you remind me of him except that he wore green. Otherwise, the style is very similar, even to the pointed hat. And, he used a long bow much like yours. He was the best bowman in all the land."

"Well," replied Robin Hood, "it seems the fellow was a goodly knight."

"That depends on ones point of view. Some people thought that he was a scoundrel."

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"That seems often to be the case. I'd guess that your previous time and place must be much like this one."

"In some ways. So Robin Hood, I expect that you have some sort of a petition for me."

"First, a question. Why did your Robin Hood garb himself in green?"

"He lived in the forest. He wanted to be invisible to the people who thought him a scoundrel."

"Ahh," said Robin Hood. "I will remember his method in case I ever need it. We clothe ourselves thusly so as to be most highly visible. We don't have many enemies and we'd not want our friends to mistake us for a stag behind a bush and shoot us by mistake."

"Smart idea. Now, Robin Hood, what is your petition?"

"A merchant of your town, Gates by name, has refused to meet my need for some tools. It is a product that we cannot produce for ourselves."

"He refused to sell you tools?"

My bailiff leaned close again and whispered, "Your Majesty, Forest Rangers never buy necessities. Such things are due them in return for their service in the maintenance of the forest."

I again addressed the man in orange.

"Tell me, Robin Hood, why is the maintenance of the forest of such great importance that my merchant would give away his valuable tools?"

"Nothing", replied Robin Hood, "could be as it is without the forest. The majority of this land is covered with forest. It is the first source of everything that you need. It catches rain and holds it. Thus do your streams and rivers flow cleanly and smoothly. The forest shields you from the worst of the weather, deflecting wind, moderating temperature. It is the source of wood. Game lives in the forest. Medicines come from the forest. When your fields or pastures are depleted, you clear a piece of forest for new ones. We plant a new piece of forest on the old ones."

"How long have the Forest Rangers been doing that kind of thing?"

"For longer than the memory of legend.

"And you've always been given what you need?"

"There was once a kingdom far to the north of Umberland who's king decided that we were unnecessary. He expelled us from that kingdom. Eventually, the part of the forest within that kingdom was ruined by mismanagement. The kingdom became impoverished. Its people died or moved away. There isn't any trace of it left. Even it's name is forgotten."

"What's there now?" I asked.

"It took our ancestors many generations to restore that piece of the forest. They restored all of it, even to knocking down the castle. That was many centuries ago."

Now, the entire land of that kingdom is a preserve. We manage it differently than all other parts of the forest. Elsewhere, we manage for the utility of the forest to the people. In that place, we have created a primeval forest, the kind that existed before man. We use it to gauge the condition of the rest. We have learned much from it that we didn't know before. It has become a sacred place to us."

"What of outsiders who go there?"

"Anyone may go there but no rules of men apply."

"What prevents people from building towns there?"

"So far, no one has tried."

"What prevents an excess of visitors?"

"Few people care to enter such a place. It strikes a chord of fear in most men."

What do you call the forest?"

"We have never given it a name. Would you like to suggest one?"

"Sure I would," I replied.

"I like it," answered Robin Hood. "Sureawood. That shall be its name."²

It was an unexpected coincidence but I had to get on with business so I let it go.

"So you live in the forest, move around a lot, and there are lots of things that you need that you can't make for yourselves."

"Yes. We must have axes, knives, saws, and such. They are necessary for our work, from which everyone benefits. Since we lack the ability to produce those things for ourselves, they are therefore due to us. Thus has it been from time immemorial."

"I'll see what I can do. Do you want to wait while I speak to the merchant?"

"Yes. We will wait."

Thus saying, he and his men walked to the side of the Great Hall and sat cross legged on the floor with their backs to the wall.

"Bailiff, send for the merchant Gates."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

I dealt with other petitioners for a while and Robin Hood and his little band of men sat quietly against the wall, watching and listening.

2 Editor's Note: Editorially speaking, this was a sticky point. I had a lot of difficulty with it. The phrase that Luther used wasn't actually "Sure I would." He answered Robin Hood's question, of course, in the language of Camelot. According to Luther, the phrase translates better as "I wouldn't have any idea." The name that Robin Hood gave to the forest sounded, in the language of Camelot, more like Charlwoud than Sureawood. At the time, Luther thought that it sounded a lot like Sherwood. I think that he was stretching the point. We discussed it several times while I was working with him on the manuscript and I eventually rewrote that part of the conversation so as to make the conversational quirk work in our own language. The best way that I could find to somewhat preserve the original conversation and still present the conversational quirk was if Luther answered with the phrase "Sure I would" and Robin Hood gave the name Sureawood, which sounds, in our language, like Sherwood.

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After about an hour, a rather strangely dressed man approached me. His clothes were of a very fine material and looked more than a little expensive. They fitted him rather tightly but seemed to be of a weave that still allowed motion. The cloth reminded me a little of my old t-shirt, long since worn out and thrown away. The man stood before me and awaited my attention. He simply stood, without bending a knee.

I signaled my bailiff again. "Is this another ancient tradition that I don't know about?"

"I don't know, Your Majesty. I've never seen his like before."

I addressed him. "Don't you bow in the presence of your king?"

"No," he replied. "because I am here on behalf of the merchant Gates and not in my own capacity. Thus, I need not bow and the merchant Gates, being not here in person, cannot bow in any case."

"You must be new to this kingdom. I haven't seen your kind before."

"Yes. I heard that there were no lawyers here and I came to establish a school, a bar, and a guild. The merchant Gates is my first client."

"What did you call yourself?"

"A lawyer."

It was a word in the language that I didn't know but I thought that I detected a certain resemblance to a group of people in my own time and place. I questioned him further.

"Why don't you use the proper form of address?"

"Because," he replied, "I am not here in my own capacity. Thus, my own behavior need not comply with royal protocol. The behavior of the merchant Gates is irrelevant, because he is absent. Thus you see, there are many advantages to the legal profession."

"How do you mean that you're not here in your own capacity?"

"I represent the merchant Gates."

"You're here on behalf of Gates?"

"The merchant Gates. Yes."

"But I didn't send for you. I sent for Gates."

"I know it seems complicated, at first," he said with a superior and condescending smile.

Yup, he was sounding more and more like the ones in my previous time and place.

"You see, I represent the merchant Gates. You can deal with me as if you were dealing with him."

"So, if I decide to punish him then I can punish you instead?"

“No no no!” he exclaimed in exasperation. “If you decide to punish him, then I will convey your decision to him.”

“But if you represent him, then why don't you receive the punishment on his behalf?”

He looked pained, and continued with a words-of-one-syllable attitude. “Because I am here in his place. I am not him. It is as if I were not here at all. In a sense, I am not here because I am not here on my own behalf. In a sense, my presence here is a legal fiction.”

He smiled a superior smile.

“You're not really, legally here?”

“In a very real sense.”

“Then you won't really, legally be in the dungeon where I'm about to have you thrown. Guards!”

They surrounded him before he could do more than squeak. He did a lot of shrieking and squealing as they dragged him out. His protests echoed back along the stone passageway until they were punctuated by the closing of the large wooden door at the top of the stairway that led down to the dungeon. I instructed the bailiff to have the lawyer kept in the dungeon for about a month and then to have him taken to and released in the Sureawood forest. He could represent the squirrels and the bluejays. I also told the bailiff to send some guards to find the lawyer's school and send all of the students back to whatever they'd been doing before the lawyer had lured them onto his own crooked path. Then, just for good measure, I ordered that any property of the lawyer's guild should be confiscated. I ordered that any buildings should be donated to the Church as a charitable refuge for homeless, sick, or injured people. I ordered that any writing found to belong to the lawyer should be burned. Some people very much like him had ruined a large part of society in the time and place from which I'd come and I didn't intend to let them do it here. Robin Hood and his band of men smiled openly throughout my instructions. I had the impression that they'd encountered lawyers before. They traveled a lot so maybe they were familiar with the type.

“Bailiff, send again for the merchant Gates. Send some guards this time just to make sure that he understands the nature of a summons from a king.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

It was time for lunch so I recessed the court until the afternoon session.

When I got back to the Great Hall, Robin Hood and his men resumed their places against the wall. Merchant Gates was waiting for me in the company of six of my guards. He seemed more than a little angry. It's dangerous to be angry at a king.

“What say you?” I asked him after he had grudgingly bent a knee.

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He stood up. "Those thieves," he said through gritted teeth and waving his hand in the general direction of Robin Hood and his band of men, "tried to take some of my best axes and saws without paying for them."

"Are you aware," I asked him, "of the identities of those men?"

"If you mean," he snapped back at me, "that they're members of that gang of thieves and gypsies that lives in the forest and frolics all day while the rest of us work for a living, then yes, I know who they are!"

I nodded thoughtfully and looked over at Robin Hood. He and his men sat quietly. Their faces were expressionless.

"Well," I said, "I suppose that, as with most things, there are differences of opinion regarding the nature and the worth of those fellows."

"Well," continued merchant Gates, "my father ran the mercantile for 20 years and he always gave them thieves whatever they wanted 'cause he was afraid of 'em. Well, I'm not! They ain't getting a dull knife out of my mercantile unless they pay for it!"

"But you are aware of their identities and of the long tradition of supplying their necessities."

"Of course! That don't mean I gotta go along with it!"

I sat for a while in thought and then I asked him, "Do you know anything at all of forest management?"

"Of course not! Why would I waste my time with such drivel? The forest grows by itself!"

"Robin Hood. Please come forward."

When Robin Hood was standing before me, I asked, "Is there any man among your band who'd have the skills and the inclination to manage a mercantile for about a year?"

Robin Hood signaled to one of his men to join him. They spoke briefly. Then, he turned back to me. "Yes," he replied. "Benjamin here has a son who has come of age. The lad has decided to leave the Forest Rangers and seek his life elsewhere. Not all of our children stay. They usually do well in whatever other life they choose. I believe that Benjamin's son, known as William, could learn to manage a mercantile, given about a week of instruction."

Merchant Gates snorted.

"Where's William now?"

"At a camp about a week's march from here."

"Do you believe that merchant Gates would be capable of learning your ways, of living with you as a Forest Ranger?"

Robin Hood glanced at merchant Gates, who suddenly looked a little uncomfortable. Robin Hood shook his head with a look of mirth upon his face and said with a

chuckle, "I doubt it but I'd give all my wood carvings for the next year for the chance to watch him try."

"But, Your Majesty —" interrupted merchant Gates.

"Quiet, or I'll send you to keep your lawyer company."

"So, here's my decision. Robin Hood, send for William. Merchant Gates, you are released under your own recognizance until one week after William arrives. Until William arrives, do as you please. During the week after William arrives, you'll prepare yourself to go live in the forest with these thieves and gypsies. You'll also, during that week, instruct William, an erstwhile thief and gypsy soon to be a merchant, in the correct management of your business. Be thorough. He'll be in complete charge of it while you're living in the forest, learning to frolic all day. You'll live there, as a Forest Ranger, for a year."

Merchant Gates looked like he was about to collapse. Robin Hood had a look of glee on his face.

"Robin Hood. You will instruct William that he's to manage the mercantile in good faith and competence. Any deficit in its value at the end of the year will be counted against you and your people. Such deficit will be calculated entirely by merchant Gates. His calculation will be final. You will be required to repay any such deficit."

After that command, Robin Hood didn't look quite so gleeful.

"Merchant Gates and Robin Hood, both listen carefully. Merchant Gates has a one-year sentence. I recommend that he serve it in the forest in the company of the Forest Rangers. However, either of you, at any time, can end that service. If merchant Gates ends it, then he'll be brought back to this castle where he'll remain in the dungeon for twice the time remaining on his service. If his service is ended by Robin Hood, then merchant Gates will stay in the dungeon only the actual remaining time of his service."

"One final statement. After William has taken over the mercantile and after merchant Gates has moved in with the Forest Rangers, you, Robin Hood, will tell Ranger Gates what your people need. He'll go to the mercantile, select the items, and get them from merchant William. That's all. Oh, by the way, Robin Hood, I'll be happy to accept those carvings that you mentioned."

I stood. Merchant Gates, who'd been swaying on his feet, collapsed. My guards dragged him to one side of the Great Hall. Robin Hood bent his knee to me. His men hurried over to the edge of the platform beside Robin Hood and knelt with him.

I stamped the end of my staff on the floor and said, "Court is adjourned for today."

Robin Hood and his men rose and walked over to where Ranger Gates lay, slowly starting to recover his senses.

"Here," said Robin Hood with a note of kindness in his voice, "Help the poor fellow to his feet. Gently there, he's had a rough day. We'll make a Ranger of him yet." They helped him to walk from the Great Hall.

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I watched while everyone left. When they were gone, my bailiff walked over to me and said, sort of hesitantly, "The Forest Rangers bowed to you."

"Yes," I replied, "Ain't life strange."

I walked to my chambers to rest for a while before supper.

A Greater Etiquette

I'd been holding court in the Great Hall all morning and had taken a break for lunch. When I returned to see what cases I had waiting for me for the afternoon, a group of petitioners approached including a young man under guard. The group consisted of five people. There were the two men guarding the prisoner, the prisoner himself, who was a very frightened and angry looking young man, a middle aged man who seemed just as angry as the prisoner, and a young woman who was crying. They approached the platform and each man went to his knee, as was customary before the king. The woman made a curtsy, as was also the custom, but she didn't look up.

"Who shall speak?" I asked.

The middle aged man rose and said, "I shall."

"And who are you?" I asked.

"Rubert Warren," he replied.

"What say you?"

He looked at the prisoner, pointed a finger at him, and declared, "I accuse this man of rape! I want him punished!"

"Tell me what happened," I commanded.

"I was dealing to sell barley and took the merchants into the barn to show a sample and — I caught him in the very act! There's no doubt about it. He's guilty and I want him punished!"

The young woman, still crying, held her hands folded in front of her. She stared at her hands and cried. I sat upon my throne and looked carefully at each of the five people.

"And these two?" I asked, indicating the guards.

"They're the merchants. They held the man for me because they were there when the crime was discovered. They volunteered to bring him here for me, lest I be unable to do it alone. They also bear witness of the facts."

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"But an hour ago!" declared the man. "We grabbed him and brought him here, straightaway!"

"But it usually takes at least several hours, sometimes days, to get into the King's Court. How did you manage it so quickly?"

"Ah, given the urgency of the case and, well, the two merchants are well known and I, myself, am not entirely without influence. In short, your Majesty, we cut in line." At least he had the grace to seem a little embarrassed about it.

"I see," I said, still examining them closely. Something here wasn't as it was being presented.

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I stood and rapped the end of my staff on the floor. "Clear the Great Hall except for these people," I commanded, pointing to the five people before me. Guards began to usher everyone else out of the Great Hall. I turned to my bailiff and said, "Bring one of the benches and put it here," I said pointing, "up here on the platform and right in front of my throne." We all waited while some guards placed a bench before my throne.

"Now," I said, resuming my seat and addressing the small group of people before me, "all of you but the woman go to the back of the Great Hall and sit. You," I indicated the young woman, "come and sit here." I indicated the bench in front of my throne.

When the young woman was seated, I turned to my bailiff and said quietly, "Remove all of the guards and the scribe from the Great Hall. When that's done, you sit there," I said pointing to the other people of the group at the back of the Great Hall.

With the young woman seated upon the bench near my throne, our faces were but a few feet apart. She seemed very frightened. I said quietly, "We can speak alone. No one will hear us. If need be, what we say can remain between only us. If need be, no one else will ever know it. However, young lady, I must be able to look into your eyes if I am to see into your heart. Look at me."

She'd been staring at her hands, folded in her lap. She glanced up and then looked back at her hands in her lap.

"Look at me," I commanded quietly.

She looked me in the eyes and I held her gaze. "Now, tell me what is the problem here."

It appeared that she was going to start crying again and she looked back down at her hands folded in her lap.

"Look at me," I commanded, and she did.

"Tell me, what's the problem?"

"I —"

"Yes?"

"Your Majesty, I —"

"I'm waiting, and though we don't have all day, we do have most of the afternoon."

"Well," she hesitated, then I saw her take courage from somewhere deep within her soul. She took a deep breath and said in a whisper, "I don't want him punished."

"Who?"

"Jame."

"You refer to the accused?"

"Yes."

"You know the man?"

"Yes," she said in a very small voice.

"How well do you know him?"

"Very well."

"Ahhh," I said, beginning to suspect the way of things.

"So, tell me what happened, young lady."

"I fear I am no lady," she mourned.

"Don't be so sure," I consoled her. "You travel in far better company than you might ever know."

She gave me an uncertain look, but I urged her again to tell me what had happened.

"We —" She started over again. "He —"

"No one else can hear us," I assured her.

"He, Jame, came at noon today. He was, he was going to ask my father."

She hesitated.

"Ask him what?"

"He was going to ask if we could be wed."

"I see. And what went wrong? Did your father refuse?"

"No," answered the young woman, "we —"

I interrupted her. "Please forgive me," I said. "I've completely forgotten to ask your name."

"Oh," she said with a small quick smile, "Linda."

"OK, Linda, please continue."

"So," she continued, "Jame came to ask for my hand in marriage but father was so busy talking about barley to those merchants that he scarcely knew that Jame and I were there. We waited, we couldn't interrupt them, that would have been an ill-bred thing to do, and they just walked off talking and left us. So we — I took Jame by the hand and pulled him into the barn. I thought that we might as well make use of the time." She gave me a sort of defiant glance, then continued. "So we were —" she stopped, seeming to realize what she was saying, blushed, and then, I suppose that she skipped a short bit of her story. "Anyway, we were there when father and the merchants walked into the barn. I was terrified. Father shouted. Jame jumped up and grabbed for his, well, he wasn't wearing them, I mean they were laying on a sack of barley and he needed to put them on. While he was doing that, they grabbed him."

"Who?"

"Jame."

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"No, who grabbed him?"

"Oh, the merchants. They grabbed him and held him."

"So your father accused him of rape."

She wouldn't look at me and, again, I commanded her to do so.

"No," she said in a very small voice.

"So, tell me what happened."

"I —"

"Yes?"

"I was so frightened. Father looked so angry. I thought he might beat me. I know I shouldn't have done it but I was afraid."

"What did you do?"

"I, I told Father that he made me do it."

"You said that Jame forced you?"

"Yes."

By then, she was crying again as hard as ever.

"So, look at me, young lady."

She did. I'd never before seen such sorrow and hopelessness in a woman's eyes.

"What is your wish in this matter?"

"To wed Jame."

"I'll see what can be done. I make no promise beyond that."

I signaled my bailiff and instructed him to take the young woman and seat her on a bench at the far left side of the Great Hall, well away from the others. I told her to go and sit. I commanded the bailiff to bring the young man to me. His two guards accompanied him but I ordered them back to their benches near the back of the Great Hall. They obeyed and the bailiff went back to his place.

The young man sat on the bench and stared at his knees.

"Well, Jame —"

He looked startled.

"She told me your name. I have the story as told by Rubert Warren. I have Linda's version. Now, I want to hear your version."

"It was just as Mr. Warren said."

"I need for you to look me in the eyes, Jame, or I won't be able to see into your heart."

He glanced at me and glanced away.

"I can have you imprisoned. I can have you flogged. I can have you hanged. You should obey me in this little thing."

"I don't care what happens to me," he said gloomily.

I sighed.

"Jame, I have a great burden here. I must administer justice. I have great power to do ill if I am ill-informed. I can't do what's right if I have the wrong information. Please, look me in the eyes and tell me the truth."

"I cannot," he whispered, "for her sake."

"Ah ha," I responded.

"She is —, I'll not do her harm."

"Yet you raped her."

"I did not!" he declared and then looked stricken. "I mean, I did. I raped her, just as she said."

"Well, either you raped her or you didn't. Either you mean her harm or you don't. I don't feel as though I really have the truth out of you yet."

Again, he looked away.

"Look into my eyes," I commanded.

When he did I again ordered, "Tell me the truth of what happened," and I held his gaze.

"I was to ask her father for her hand, so we could be wed. He was busy. Then I saw a most mischievous look upon her lovely face and taking her hand I took her into the barn, behind a pile of hay. We pulled some clean straw onto some bags that were laying there. We thought to be alone and have our pleasure. Knew we not that the bags were of the barley to be sold. I even folded my britches upon that very barley and when her father and the merchants came to view the barley they saw us instead. I grabbed my britches, lacking them as I was, and was about the donning of them when to my horror I heard my lady declare me a rogue and worse. I thought to object but then I beheld the look of terror upon her face and understood her purpose. It was only to protect herself and in that instant I swore myself to cooperate in her protection, which I have done until now. May she forgive me, I have betrayed her."

And he wept. Right there where all could see it, he wept, with face in hands. Were I not a king I would have wept with him so great was his sorrow. Nevertheless, I assured him the best that I could. "Be quiet," I said. "I will see what can be done about this situation."

Then I instructed my bailiff to place the young man at the far right side of the Great Hall. The man's guards went to sit beside him but I told the bailiff to send them back to their places at the back of the Great Hall. Jame would be in sight of us all and we in sight of him. I didn't think that he would try to escape. His only reason

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for living was just across the Great Hall from him. Nothing would convince him to leave her.

I then sent my bailiff — who was certainly getting his exercise that day — for Rubert Warren and had him seated before me.

“The situation,” I told him, “isn’t as it seems.”

“How so?”

I looked at the young woman, just barely more than a girl, sitting heartbroken on her bench. She sat hopelessly staring at her hands in her lap, her life’s dreams and hopes destroyed. Such lovely hands. Such a lovely young woman. Why are we so cruel, to cause such grief? Maybe I could help.

I looked at the young man. He sat straight, looking at his lady, seeing only her. For him, at that moment, nothing else existed.

I sighed and looked back at Rubert Warren. “It seems,” I began, “that your daughter has a different problem than you think.”

“I’d say being raped is a sufficient problem,” declared Rubert.

“As I said, things are not as they appear. I have heard her story and Jame’s. They are in substantial agreement.”

“Then the rascal admits it!” declared Rubert.

“They are also very much in love,” I informed him.

“They —” He stopped speaking and stared.

“They —” he tried again.

“Yes,” I prodded, “Go on.”

“You mean she was, I mean, they were —”

“That’s what I mean,” I said. “This event that you interrupted was only one of many, for who knows how long.”

“But they aren’t wed!” he objected.

“Were you and your wife, at the first?” I asked.

He started from the bench and, remembering who he faced, sat back down again.

“Forgive me,” I said. “I don’t really need to know. The question was only to remind you of the passion of youth and of the lure of opportunity. The fact is that he did not rape her. She was quite as happy about events as he — that is, until you and the merchants intervened.”

“Well, I’ll be an heifer’s uncle!” he muttered. “But she’s just a baby.”

“Not recently,” I informed him.

I continued. “The fact is that he had intended to ask you, this very day, for her hand in marriage. You were too busy with the merchants to notice him. Their dalliance followed from frustration, from need, and from opportunity.”

"Well, I'll be...." He was still muttering and shaking his head.

Then, he exclaimed, "But why would she say such a thing, if she loves him?"

"She was terrified of punishment from you. She spoke quickly, in self-defense, without thinking. It's as if a man had blocked a sudden punch in defense. It's a woman's way, words instead of blows."

"Yes," he agreed, "That would be a woman's way. I can even say that her dear mother might have — ah well Your Majesty, none of that. If her mother was still alive none of this might have happened. I never did know how to raise a daughter. Ah well, what do we do now?"

"Let's bring the two of them here and speak to them of the future."

"A good idea," he agreed.

I called my bailiff who, at my command, brought Jame and Linda.

When the three of them were seated on the bench, Rubert Warren between Jame and Linda, I asked, "Well now, who has something to say?"

After a silence of a few seconds, the young woman glanced at her hero and then faced her father. "I lied," she said in a small voice. "I was afraid and I lied. He didn't force me. He has never laid a hand upon me but that I wanted both hands instead. I love him and I have said a terrible untruth. I pray forgiveness."

"What say you?" Rubert asked of Jame.

"Sir, only that I wish her hand in marriage."

"And that you may surely have!"

Then the two jumped to their feet and rushed into an embrace that would surely remind any man of his own youth. I noticed that they were ignoring proper etiquette before a king but I forbore to reprimand them. After all, a greater etiquette was being served. During that embrace, Rubert actually had to blow his nose. I can't be sure, with all of the activity that was going on in the space between him and me but I think that he actually wept. I, being a king, would of course never fall prey to such a weakness. No, I only got a bit of dust in my eyes. Probably, it was stirred up by the blast of wind from the speed with which the two young people came together. Only a bit of dust. A king doesn't weep.

After a brief time, I rapped the end of my staff upon the floor, gently, not wishing to startle anybody. The two jumped apart as if lightening had hit them.

"So," I asked, "when may we expect the blessed event?"

"I'd say in about six months," announced the young lady, panting.

Everyone looked suddenly at her, mouths agape. She, realizing her blunder, blushed and sat down again.

"It wasn't that blessed event that I had in mind," I said dryly. "I was referring to the seemingly overdue wedding."

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“Oh” she said, otherwise speechless.

Her father considered this new and unexpected information for only a few moments before deciding that it wasn't, after all, a cause for concern. For the first time since he'd entered the Great Hall, he began to look happy. “As soon as we can possibly arrange it!” he boomed, and then smiled like his face would split.

Again royal etiquette was forgotten. Everybody in the Great Hall jumped up, rushed from wherever they'd been, and started slapping everybody else on the back, or hugging everybody else, as gender would have it. Even the merchants were in the middle of it with the rest of us and then my bailiff began to usher the bunch of them back to their proper places and me back to my throne. During the commotion I finally got the last of the dust out of my eyes and by then my bailiff had rounded up some guards and had the bench removed from in front of my throne.

When we were all back in our proper places, I commanded “Bring the public and the other petitioners back into the Great Hall.” I rapped the end of my staff on the floor. I like rapping the end of my staff on the floor but the custodians do have to replace a lot of cracked tiles around the throne.

When the various people were back in their places in the Great Hall, I rapped the end of my staff on the floor again, just because I felt like doing it, and sounded off. “Rubert Warren, what say you?”

“Your Majesty, I hereby withdraw my charge against this man!”

I rapped the staff again and heard another tile crack. “This case is dismissed. Clear the Great Hall. Court is adjourned for today.”

Rubert, Linda, and Jame left with the others. I heard that their wedding was the most beautiful seen in the Kingdom for many a year. I heard, later, that their baby was hale and healthy, a rugged little boy. I didn't expect any favors. I was only doing my job. They really didn't have to name the little fellow Luther.

A Tale Told by Merlin, Late At Night

Part One: The Apprentice

The Master had been at his task for several days and had finished it successfully. It had been long, difficult, and tiring, but it was done. He walked, nay, he trudged with head down and feet dragging, from the hills whereupon he had completed his task. He approached his quarters almost as if in a trance. There was little risk. Who would assault a Mage?

He stepped into the doorway, which was without a door. The Master had little need for doors. Who would enter, uninvited, the quarters of a Mage? He stopped within the doorway, leaned in exhaustion against the door frame, and closed his eyes in relief at his return. He looked forward to a hot shower, a thing that he had invented many centuries ago and had enjoyed regularly ever since. Having rested against the door frame for a few seconds, he drew a breath, sighed, and stepped into his quarters. And froze in place. Completely froze in place. Absolutely. He could not even move his eyelids. He could not even breathe.

There he stood, frozen in place in mid-step, unable to do the least thing. He saw a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision but he could not move his eyes. He waited and, in a few moments, the flicker of movement resolved itself into his apprentice. The apprentice walked, cautiously at first, into the full view of his Master. He looked carefully at the Master and then there appeared upon his face a most evil grin.

"Weeelllll," he said, in a whiny kind of voice. "What have we here? The great Mage? Stuck in amber? Or is it glue? What is it, great Mage? Why movest thou not?"

The Master did not say anything. He could not move his mouth, his throat, his lungs. He was beginning to turn blue.

"Aaahhhh," said the apprentice, "Is the great Mage having difficulty breathing? After all his tirades? After all his yelling? Calling me names? Criticizing my abilities? He never had any trouble at all drawing breath to castigate me, now he cannot breathe? Well," the apprentice made a small flicking motion with one hand and the Mage suddenly drew a deep breath, "I am not ready to stop enjoying his troubles quite yet, let us just let him breathe a little, just for a few minutes longer."

The Master could not speak at first because of trying to catch up on his breathing.

The apprentice strutted across the room and sat in the Master's favorite chair. He threw one leg over the arm of the chair in a negligent pose and, using just the tips of his fingers with his little finger extended, he delicately lifted the Master's favorite goblet and took a tiny, sophisticated sip of what was surely the Master's best vintage. He smacked his lips and grinned again his evil grin.

Setting down the goblet, suddenly serious, the apprentice said, "So! I have you at last, you filthy swine! What an evil task master you have been! Making me do all the hard work! The dirty work! The boring work! Do you have the least idea how

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tired I am of cutting your firewood when, with a single spell, you could have it done in an instant? Do you know how sick I am of the tedious preparations for your marvelous spells so you can show off before the yokels, while I do nothing but cure their stupid hives and dry their snotty noses? I am sick of it! Now, I will decide which spells to do and who to do them for and whether or not to charge anything for them. Things will be veeeeery different!"

Finally, the Master had his breath back, at least enough of it to speak.

"Marvelous," he whispered with a look of admiration on his face.

"What?" asked the apprentice.

"You did far better than I had ever dreamed!" murmured the Master.

"What are you talking about?" asked the apprentice.

"I am completely trapped," admitted the Master.

"But of course!" exclaimed the apprentice, with a return of his evil grin. "Do you think I would try something like this if I was not ready? Do you think I would give you an excuse to have me spend the next 10 years dissecting the intestines out of earthworms or extracting arsenic from creek water? Of course not! I have learned every possible thing that you might do to get out of this. I have studied every tome you have, while you were asleep or away on your tedious investigations. I have prepared for this moment for almost 10 years! Of course you are completely trapped. There is not even one little thing that I have missed. You are done, old man! No more lording it over the mere apprentice! Today, I am the Master and that is the way it will stay!"

The Master had a look of admiration on his face.

"You are going to make the greatest Mage this world has ever known. I will see to it."

"You will see to nothing, old man, and you cannot trick me into letting you go! I do not need you to teach me anything more. I will teach myself!"

The Master smiled and the apprentice yelled, "Enough!"

He flicked his hand again and the smile stuck on the Master's face. He was again locked in a total trap. He could not breath and after a few minutes he was dead. The smile of admiration remained upon his dead face.

The apprentice was a very cautious man. He left the Master standing there for several days before he released the traps. When that was done, the Master's body simply fell to the floor. He was dead. The apprentice dragged the dead body out into the lot behind his quarters, what used to be the Master's quarters, and lifted it onto the pyre that he had built. He caught his breath. The old coot was heavier than he appeared to be. Then the apprentice lit the pyre.

He attended the fire all the while that it burned, until the last hot embers had cooled. When the fire was completely exhausted, all of its own accord, with no slightest magical help from him, with no slightest spell to disrupt the cremation of

the erstwhile Master, then he carefully scraped all the ashes into a large skin bag. He worked on it until he got every particle whether it was of the wood or of the Master, without exception. He used certain magical principles to ensure that he did not miss even a single bit of the dead Master's body. He took the bag with him and walked for many hours to a high cliff overlooking the ocean. With the wind at his back, he dumped all of the ashes over the edge. He laughed hysterically as the wind carried the ashes out to sea where they would settle into the water and eventually mix with the ooze on the ocean's floor. He threw the bag after the ashes.

It had been long, difficult, and tiring, but it was done. He walked, nay, he trudged with head down and feet dragging from the cliff whereupon he had completed his task. He approached his quarters almost as if in a trance. There was little risk. Who would assault a Mage?

He stepped into the doorway, which was without a door. He had little need for doors. Who would enter, uninvited, the quarters of a Mage? He stopped within the doorway, leaned in exhaustion against the door frame and closed his eyes in relief at his return. He looked forward to a hot shower, a thing that his erstwhile Master had invented many centuries ago and had enjoyed regularly ever since. With the Master gone, he would enjoy it. Having rested against the door frame for a few seconds, he drew a breath, sighed, and stepped into his quarters. And froze in place.

Part Two: The Master

After his death, the Master's Awareness hovered over his trapped body for the several days during which the apprentice kept the body trapped. When the traps were released, certain gasses that had accumulated within the body escaped. The apprentice turned away and gagged but the Master's Awareness directed the escaped gasses to the Place that he had prepared many centuries ago and had used a few times since then. He followed along as the apprentice dragged the dead body to the pyre, and collected the few bits of skin or hair that were strewn along on the ground behind the body. He sent them to the Place that he had prepared. When the pyre was ignited, the Master's Awareness hovered overhead and separated the gasses of his body from the gasses of the wood. He sent the gasses of his body to the Place that he had prepared. He also intercepted the various particles of soot and whatnot that drifted up from his body. Those he also sent to the Place.

When the apprentice carried the ashes to the ocean, the Master's Awareness followed him. When the ashes were dumped into the wind, the Master's Awareness moved to intercept them. He sorted the ones that had come from his body and sent them to the Place. Finally, he cleaned from the bag where it rested on the rocks below the cliff those particles that had clung to the bag and had therefore not been strewn over the ocean. Having sent those final particles to the Place, he went there himself.

The problem of reorganizing the various gasses and solids back into their previous arrangement was a big one but the spells to do it had been ready for centuries. The energy needed to reverse the consequences of combustion was amply available to the Master. Indeed he had already reconstructed his body several times, for this

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was not the first apprentice that he had ever trained. Soon his body lay before him dead, but otherwise as good as new. It still needed two things. It needed life energy to animate it and it needed for him to re-enter it. The life energy wasn't a problem. The Master had lots of it stored in the Place. Let it be clearly stated here that the Master had never stolen life energy. He had never killed for it nor even allowed anybody to die to release it, if it had been appropriate that he should prevent the death. Yet, death occurred frequently and whenever such a thing had happened within the Master's vicinity, and it had not been appropriate for whatever reason for him to prevent it, then he had never been bashful about seizing the life energy that was released by death. The dying person did not need it any more and life energy is a very useful thing to a Mage. Furthermore, it does not matter who the dying person is. It does not matter if he was good or evil, hale or ill. It does not matter if he is dying of old age, or of murder, or of an accident. Life energy is life energy, ultimately pure and incorruptible. The Master had plenty of it stored in the Place. He tapped a little of his supply, sent it into his body, slipped easily back into place, and sent himself back to his quarters. He got there well before the apprentice completed his long walk back from the ocean.

Part Three: Celebration

By the time the apprentice returned from the cliff over the ocean the Master had conjured up a fine mahogany dinner table and loaded it with the finest food that he could imagine. When the apprentice stepped through the door and froze in shock, the Master was standing, waiting, wearing the finest of clothing and with a large dinner napkin folded over his arm. The Master had a few bad moments during which he was afraid that the apprentice might die of a heart attack but that passed off well enough. The apprentice was a sturdy young fellow, only about a century old, and he proved equal to the shock of seeing his dead Master returned to life and standing, waiting for him as a butler before a feast.

The apprentice stared, gulped, quivered, and tried to talk. He said, "Uh."

"Welcome back!" hailed the Master.

"Uh," said the apprentice, still frozen in the doorway.

"Please," said the Master, holding a chair for the apprentice. "Be seated. I have prepared a feast for you and surely you deserve it!"

"But —" replied the apprentice.

"Sit," instructed the Master, pointing to the chair.

As if in a trance, the apprentice groped his way across the room and sat in the chair. Fumbling a little, he picked up a goblet of fine wine that the Master had placed there for him and tossed it back in a gulp.

The Master frowned at that and, muttering about the waste of such a fine vintage, he refilled the goblet. The apprentice again drained it in a gulp.

“Well,” said the Master, “if that is the way you are going to drink the stuff then I might as well just give you stout!” Converting wine into stout wasn't much of a trick for the Master.

The apprentice threw that one back in a gulp, as he had done the previous two, and choked on it. At least it seemed to give him back a little of his wits.

“But you are dead!” he wailed. “You are supposed to be dead!” he amended. “I thought you were dead!” he finally decided.

“Ah, but I was!” affirmed the Master. “Thoroughly dead! Absolutely dead! No tricks! I was totally dead!”

“But how, what, I do not...” blathered the apprentice.

“Ah, you wonder at my mysterious and unexpected reappearance!” declared the Master. “Well, you certainly do not think that you are the first apprentice to kill me, do you?”

“But, but you were dead!”

“And I have been dead several times before. Tell me, how do you think I can decide who is good enough to keep training him to be a Mage and who do I send off to be a doctor, anyway?”

“Well, I,....”

“If an apprentice cannot even kill his own Master, then what kind of a Mage would he make? Might as well just spend his time delivering babies which the woman can usually do without his help anyway so he probably will not bungle it!” declared the Master. “It takes determination, persistence, intelligence, skill, and a lot of other things to be able to kill your Master. You have to plan it for years. You have to learn how to circumvent all of the things your Master might do to thwart your plans. You have to cover every possibility. In other words, you have to have the kinds of skills and persistence that you will need if you are ever going to be a Mage! Once you are a Mage, you will not have your Master to help you any more! You will be on your own! If you cannot do that, then you will never make a Mage. Killing your Master is your first real test and you have passed it beautifully. I do not think I have ever been so thoroughly trapped. You are going to make the finest Mage the world has ever known! Now dig in! Eat! Drink! You have passed a milestone! Tomorrow, the REAL training begins!”

“But, how did you manage to come back?” asked the apprentice with a quiver in his voice.”

“Ah, do not worry about that. You will learn it all in good time. I have been a Mage for more than a thousand years! You are scarcely a century old! Give yourself time! If you have learned this much in a few decades of study think what you will know after a few centuries! Some day, you will be a Mage yourself and you will have to mistreat your apprentice so terribly that he will hate you enough to kill you. Before I turn you loose on a apprentice, I will be sure that you know how to protect yourself. And besides that, I could not tell you now, could I? You still hate me. You still

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have centuries of training ahead. Why, your training has just barely begun. You might try to kill me several more times before you learn to love me!”

Time to Go To Bed, The Story's Over

Merlin smiled a wistful smile, remembering old times, and took a delicate sip of my best vintage. Merlin always handles goblets with precise delicacy. I've noticed that about him. He handles everything very carefully.

“So,” he said, “that is the story of the Master and the apprentice.” He rose and headed toward the door, but stopped and turned when I spoke his name.

“Are you really more than a thousand years old?”

He looked startled and then he laughed.

“Me? You thought I was the Master? I was the apprentice! Indeed, I am still only an apprentice!”

I was momentarily speechless. Here, all of these years I'd assumed that he was a Mage. He'd netted me from all of time and space. He was my royal magician. My only royal magician. He did all that I required of him. I depended on him and he was still only an apprentice?

So, I sat and pondered. Merlin, still only an apprentice. He had a whole room full of apprentices who worked under him. After I thought about it for a while I realized that I'd never heard him refer to any of them as apprentices. He called them students. I thought some more and decided that I'd never heard of a Mage having more than one apprentice at a time. It's always singular. Never apprentices. Always apprentice. Merlin didn't have an apprentice. He had students. I supposed that teaching them was the current phase of his training.

And then, I sat long into the night wondering who, and where, and what was the Master who was training Merlin.

The Great South Road

One morning when I walked into the Great Hall for court, I was met by a delegation of caravaneers. They were seeking relief from a gang of bandits that was causing a problem along the Great South Road.

The Great South Road was the main route between Camelot and Ebon, the kingdom to the south. There were, of course, many paths and byways through the hinterlands but for anyone engaged in commerce a straight, smooth, and direct route was much preferred. The problem with the Great South Road was that, for a distance of about 20 miles, it passed through a section of deep, dark forest. It was a section of forest that had reached maturity about a generation ago. However, the Forest Rangers intended to let it deepen for at least another 20 years. Part of their reason had to do with the health of the forest. Part of the reason had to do with building new fire breaks between that section of the forest and those adjacent to it. Building fire breaks where none existed was a long and difficult job for men who had only axes, hand saws, picks, and shovels. However, the bandits had taken up residence in that section of the forest and were preying upon the caravans that traveled the Great South Road. The caravaneers complained that if they had to wait another 20 years for relief, then they'd all be bankrupt or dead. It wasn't a problem just for the caravaneers. Camelot got most of its manufactured items from Ebon and supplied a lot of raw materials in return. There was a lot of trade between Camelot and Ebon. There was also some trade between Ebon and Umberland, the kingdom to the north. All of the Umberland trade went through Camelot and passed along the Great South Road. Thus, Camelot had a lot of inns and taverns that catered mostly to travelers. A lot of people were starting to be affected by the bandits.

I sympathized with the plight of the caravaneers. I asked them if it would be cost-effective for them to hire guards. They said that the guards were shot with arrows by snipers hiding in the forest. Any guards who pursued their assailants into the forest never returned. Word had gotten around and, nowadays, there weren't any guards to be had.

The army of Ebon had sent a few patrols north from Ebon along the Great South Road (in Ebon, they called it the Great North Road) as far as the border with Camelot but they hadn't found any sign of the South Road Bandits. Some people had even claimed that the Forest Rangers were behind the robberies. Most others viewed such talk as nothing more than a search for scapegoats.

I told the caravaneers that I would consider the matter and see if there might be something that I could do about it. I admitted that I didn't have any ideas and that they'd have to continue to endure their losses as well as they could until me or somebody else came up with a solution to the problem. One of the caravaneers suggested burning the forest ahead of schedule. I commanded him to go and talk about the idea to one of my merchants, a certain fellow named Gates.

After they left, I got to thinking about merchant Gates. He'd once served a stint with the Forest Rangers under a sentence from me involving certain misbehavior on

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his part. I thought that a conversation with him could be useful. I instructed my bailiff to have merchant Gates invited for supper at the merchant's convenience.

Merchant Gates showed up that very evening. After the formalities of royalty were satisfied, we retired to my private refectory where we could be a little less formal.

"So, Your Majesty," (not too informal) "how're things?"

"Good in some ways, not good in others."

"Something tells me," he commented with a grin, "that you didn't ask me here to discuss the ways in which things are good."

"How right you are."

"So, how're things not good?"

"It's the Great South Road."

"Ah yes. People've been complaining about the bandits."

"Several years ago," I said, "you lived and worked with the Forest Rangers."

"Indeed I did!" he exclaimed. "And though there are lots of things that I could say about them, one thing that I'll say in all truth is that anybody who doesn't feel gratitude for their work is a fool or worse!"

I smiled, but only to myself, remembering his attitude toward that "gang of thieves and gypsies" before I'd sent him to live with them for a year.

"So, why are you asking about the Forest Rangers?" he asked.

"I was wondering if they might help me clear out that gang of bandits."

Merchant Gates shook his head. "Never," he said. "They don't involve themselves in such affairs. They maintain the forest for our benefit but they won't involve themselves in our business otherwise."

"Even though the bandits live in their forest?"

"If the bandits interfere with the forest then the Forest Rangers will put an end to it. They don't care a whit if the bandits interfere with commerce."

"That's too bad," I said. "I'd really like to clear those thieves out of there. You know, it's just going to get worse. The cost of shipping goods between Camelot and Ebon will some day be prohibitive. There won't be any more commerce to the south at all."

I made as if to concentrate on my steak and watched him covertly. I could see that, while he dawdled with his peas and carrots, he was thinking about the long term effect of the South Road Bandits on his own business. We both knew that it probably wouldn't get as bad as I'd just predicted. No gang of bandits can ever stop commerce completely, but they can make it very expensive to do business.

"Uh, Your Majesty, I have an idea. It's not much, you understand, just a thought that occurred to me. I'll need to think about it before I'd be willing to actually plan anything."

"What's your idea?" I asked.

"I'm not a true Forest Ranger nor ever will be but I learned a bit of forest lore from them. Probably, I know a bit more than those bandits do. With a half dozen good men to train and six months to do it in, I could probably roust the scoundrels out of those woods and get rid of the lot of them for good."

"An excellent suggestion. I hereby appoint you Sheriff of the new Woodland Scouts of Camelot...."

"But Luther!"

"...and your first project is to rid the forest along the Great South Road of bandits."

"But my business, what of the mercantile?"

"Isn't William, your erstwhile Forest Ranger, doing most of the work anyway? I hear you treat him almost like a son! I'm surprised you haven't given him your last name!"

"William? That wastrel? That refugee from a band of thieves and gypsies?"

"Now Gates, I've heard you speak very highly of him."

"Only when I was drunk and not just assigned to a suicide mission!"

"Oh, it won't be nearly as bad as that. Why, I expect that fully ten percent of your deputies will escape with nothing worse than major debilitating amputations."

Merchant Gates looked at me sheepishly. "Well, my shipping costs have been rising and I have been wondering if something might be done about those scoundrels. You'll provide the men?"

"Volunteers from General Herman's forces. And all of the funding and weapons."

"Excellent! I'll begin training them at once. I'll need a bit of forest for it."

"I'd suggest the near edge of the forest along the Great South Road. It's where you'll be working. Why not train there?"

"Your Majesty, this must be done in the utmost of secrecy. The bandits must not know of it."

"Hmm." I thought about it for a few seconds.

"Isn't there a little village near the river about five miles west of the Great South Road?"

"Not really a village, Your Majesty. That's the home of the family Notting. They're very clannish, call the place Nottinghome.³ Raise cattle for food and trade.

³ Editor's Note: This is another of those times when translation was a problem. The name *Notting* is, of course, taken directly from the language of Camelot, as are all proper names in this translation. However, the word used in that language that sounds like *home* in English, making *Nottinghome* sound like *Nottingham*, doesn't mean home in English. A better translation of *Nottinghome* into English would be *Notting Between the Trees*. However, that translation doesn't sound like *Nottingham*. The author believed that the similarity in the sounds of the names was important. He insisted that the name, when translated into English, had to sound like the *Nottingham*. To accomplish that, I had to use an incorrect translation.

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"How do you know so much about them?"

"My wife, Marion?"

"Yes?"

"I've known her since she was a maid. She's a daughter of the family. I got to know her because of them driving their cattle into town to do their trading. They got a lot of their supplies at the mercantile. Marion always came with them because she didn't like staying home with the womenfolk. That was back while my father was running the place. I was just a youngster. Marion and I got to know each other because of them coming there. During Fair Week, we'd sneak off together."

"Where did you find a place to hide?"

"Hide?"

"Well, you can't really do that sort of thing in public!"

"What sort of thing?"

"Well, you know...."

"Your Majesty! Not at all! It was archery!"

"Archery?"

"Of course! We went to the tournament during Fair Week and played at archery. She could pass for a boy them days and she was the best shot in the kingdom! Disguised herself as a boy, entered the contest, and won the trophy every year. Why, more than once, I saw her split an opponent's arrow endwise with one of hers at a hundred yards! They never did figure out who the mystery lad was!"

"Gates, why don't we get her into the Woodland Scouts?"

"Your Majesty! Surely you jest! A woman? I'd never allow it!"

"I thought you said she didn't like woman kinds of things."

"Fortunately, she settled down after we were married."

"Oh well, at least you know your way around Nottinghome. The place is remote enough. Do your work from there."

"Yes, but I'll do it without Marion."

"OK. You probably need her here to protect the mercantile for William, anyway."

"Your Majesty," said Sheriff Gates dryly, "since she grew up her shape gets in the way of the bowstring."

We finished our meal talking of other things. By the time we were finished, it was dark. Sheriff Gates went home to start planning his operation at Nottinghome. I went to bed.

News in the Night

The longer I stayed in Camelot, the more I appreciated sleeping. Maybe it had something to do with the lack of electric lights. When it got dark, I went to sleep. When it got light, I woke up. If nothing else, it saved on lamp oil.

One night, I was dreaming of a lovely damsel. She was of goodly build with a lovely round face, long flowing red hair, and she was clean. Clean. In the reality to which I'd been transferred, clean wasn't the normal condition. The damsel and I were just getting to know each other in my dream. Her name was Guinevere and she was a most gracious lady. Suddenly, my lovely dream suffered an interruption. I was being shaken, gently but persistently. I tried desperately to cling to the dream. The shaking persisted.

"Waaa...."

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!" he whispered urgently. It was Arnold, my chamberlain.

I groped for my dream and for Guinevere. Both were gone.

"Your Majesty!" It was dark. It was the middle of the night. What the Hell did Arnold want in the middle of the night?

"Your Majesty!", he whispered urgently, "You must wake! It's General Herman!"

What the Hell did General Herman have to do with anything?

I opened one eye and squinted at Arnold. He held a candle whose flame definitely trembled. Arnold's hand was trembling. OK, I'm the king and waking me in the middle of the night isn't usual but I don't think that my reputation would have made him that afraid of the consequences. Maybe something was wrong.

"Your Majesty, it's General Herman! He needs to see you! It's urgent!"

"Sheneral who?"

"General Herman! Our general! The army, Your Majesty!"

"Oh, yeah." I rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. It was cold and I shivered. Arnold had my robe handy. He sat the candle on my little bedside table, beside my crown. I stood up and he placed the robe on one arm, around me, and then on the other arm. Then I held my arms out to the side so that he could tie it in the front. Actually I can dress myself but my various underlings feel a lot more useful if I let them do things for me. I wasn't that way at first but you learn with experience. Allowing Arnold to dress me was a decision that I'd made a year or so after my Coronation.

"So," I said yawning, "Where's General Herman?"

"Just outside your door, Your Majesty."

"Send him in."

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General Herman wasn't completely in uniform. He looked like he'd also been roused out of bed.

"What is it, General?"

He went to one knee, head down, and said, "Bad news, My Lord."

"Please rise." He did.

He glanced uneasily at Arnold and I said, "Arnold, please wait outside."

We both knew that Arnold would eavesdrop but the forms must be maintained. Besides, how was Arnold to know when I needed him for something if he didn't listen at the door?

"What news, General?"

"My Lord, I just received a rider from the North Marches where I have a few scouts posted. He said the UMBERLAND army is coming our direction."

I didn't think to ask, at the time, but I learned much later that it'd been Brillig and the Slithy Toves who'd made the initial observation and reported it to General Herman's scouts. Thank God for men like them.

"And their intentions?"

"My Lord, it appears to be a full scale invasion."

"Why would they invade us?"

"I can only speculate. They have a new king, they are a much larger nation than us in population, but smaller in land. Maybe they want our land. To farm, My Lord."

"These rocks? They must be badly informed. Well, as often as not an aggressor doesn't need a reason. He can imagine one. If he's a new king then he's probably just feeling his oats."

"Feeling his oats, My Lord?"

"Don't worry about it, General, I suppose that it loses something in the translation. So, they're coming. When will they be here?"

"Two days, My Lord. We have tomorrow, well, I guess we have to call it today since we're up, and the next to prepare."

"How many are they?"

"My scouts estimated about two thousand men, My Lord."

"And how many men are there in our army?" It was a matter that hadn't occurred to me before as being important.

"About two hundred."

"Why so few?"

"My Lord, the Regency Council was loath to spend funds on the army and you, in your wisdom, never saw fit to reverse their policies."

"General, I just never thought about it."

"Well, My Lord, I've sacrificed numbers for quality and done the best that could be done with the funds that were available. My men are as well trained and equipped as can be, given the funds."

I raised an eyebrow, "Your men, General?"

"Uh," he hesitated, "Your men, not mine, My Lord."

"So, we're outnumbered ten to one but not outclassed?"

"Not at all, My Lord. My scouts keep an eye on such things. I know the UMBERLAND army to be mostly conscript farmers. They're armed with sticks and clubs. Don't know much about fightin'. Our men are full-time army, volunteers, want to be in the army, trained night and day, armed with swords, pikes, —"

"OK," I interrupted. "That's good to know. Can we defeat them in an open fight?"

"No, My Lord. We'll be overrun by sheer numbers, but we'll die valiantly in your service!"

"Nonsense, General. Neither you nor my men will be of any service to me if you're valiantly dead. We'll avoid open contact with the enemy."

"But My Lord, it's the honorable —"

"General, you heard me. There won't be any open contact with the enemy. Send couriers immediately. Bring all of my men and weapons into the castle from wherever they are. Right now. Go and come back here the instant those orders are issued."

"Yes, My Lord."

General Herman left in a hurry.

"Arnold."

"Yes, Your Majesty" he said, appearing immediately.

"How long can we stand a siege?"

"That depends, Your Majesty."

"On what?"

"On who's in the castle."

"Assume those of us who live here and the army."

"I'd say about two weeks, Your Majesty."

"How about if we let all of the townspeople into the castle?"

"Until about this time tomorrow, Your Majesty."

"That's what I thought. Arnold, have the castle sealed immediately. No one in or out without my command. Go see to it now. Come back as soon as it's done."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

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While Arnold and General Herman were about their business, I dressed myself. Under the circumstances, Arnold would forgive me. General Herman returned first.

“My Lord?”

“Come in, General. I've ordered the castle sealed.”

“Yes, My Lord. I heard. What of the townspeople?”

“Assemble a team of twelve soldiers, the best that you have for that particular duty. Equip them appropriately and send them into town as soon as they're ready. Have them wake the townspeople. Have them advise the townspeople to take all that they can carry, food, tools, any weapons that they might have, whatever they might need, and go into the forest. I want the town to be empty when the enemy arrives. Tell the twelve that they're to escort the people and give whatever assistance they can. Hunt for game, build shelters, protect them from the dangers of the forest, and I have another job for them to do. Consistent with supporting the townspeople, as much as that duty will allow, they are also to harry and harass the enemy. Tell them that their first priority is to avoid injury or capture. They can't help my people in the forest if they're caught or killed. But do what damage they can to the enemy. Hit and run. Understand, General?”

“My Lord, it hardly seems honorable.”

“Nevertheless, in my reality small or poorly armed peoples have sometimes defeated much stronger opponents using similar tactics. A general for a little country called Vietnam said something like, in a war, the first priority is to win.⁴ So, that is my command.”

“Yes, My Lord. It will be done.”

“Select the twelve. Bring them here. I'll give the orders myself so you won't have to do it.”

“My Lord, I am proud to issue any orders that you command. I'll do it myself.”

“As you wish, General.” He left just as Arnold was returning.

“It's done, Your Majesty, the castle is sealed.”

“Good. Send a courier into town. Find all of the construction people that can be found. Bring them to me.”

“What?” Arnold seemed taken totally by surprise. “Construction people?”

“Yes, Arnold. People who build things.”

“Yes, of course Your Majesty.”

“Good. I want them all here as soon as possible. Tell them to bring their tools.”

Arnold seemed truly puzzled. “Yes Your Majesty. At once.”

⁴ Editor's Note: I looked up the quote. It is, “One of the fundamental rules, if not the most fundamental rule of Vietnamese military science, is that in war you must win.” The statement was made by General Vo Nguyen Giap, of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. I didn't discover the date on which he made the statement.

I had a few minutes to think before General Herman returned. "The men have been dispatched, My Lord."

"Good. What about the towns between us and the enemy? Can they be saved?"

"No, My Lord. They'll be taken before we can get forces into position and we haven't the numbers to face the Umlerland army in the open."

"OK. How many towns are there?"

"Two My Lord, actually little more than villages. Morris and Pine."

"Pick six more men. Three to a team. Send a team to Morris and a team to Pine. Tell them to avoid the enemy except for harassment. Tell them to use their best judgment in helping the people of Morris and Pine. If they can evacuate the people, then do so. If they can defeat whatever garrison the enemy leaves behind, then do so. If they can disrupt the supply lines of the enemy, then do so. Kill the men bringing him supplies. Kill his messengers. Kill his scouts. You get the idea. Make life Hell for him but avoid direct contact with his army. Understand?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Go select the men, give them their orders, and send them on their way. Come back when it's done."

"Yes, My Lord."

When Arnold returned, I told him that I was hungry. He went to rouse the cook.

While I was waiting for food, I went out to one of the castle yards and strolled over to the wall. I could see some soldiers up on the walk near the top. There didn't seem to be very many of them. I'd never paid any attention to that before. I went up there and from that elevation, I could see a lot of the town. There were a lot of torches. There was a lot of activity. Good. The townspeople were awake and heading for the woods. While I was watching, I noticed a few people walking toward the castle by ones and twos, carrying tools. That would be the construction people arriving. I went back to my chambers and found Arnold fidgeting, wondering where I'd gone. I ordered him to have someone send the construction people to the Great Hall as they arrived.

Later, when I entered the Great Hall, which was cavernous and gloomy in the dark, they were all there. Each man went to one knee. When I was seated, I said, "Please take your seats." They did.

"I want you to hide the ends of our sewer main."

Blank stares.

"I want it to be invisible. I want to hide it from the enemy. I want them to be able to march right past the ends of it and not even know that it's there. However, I don't want it blocked. I want for men to be able to go in and out of it. I just want it hidden. Can you do it?"

There was a little muttering as they discussed it among themselves.

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"Well?" I asked after they'd had a little time to discuss it.

Nat rose to speak for them. "Your Majesty, we could put rocks around the low end where it comes out of the edge of the bluff right above the swamp. There are lots of rocks there anyway. It wouldn't look much different than the rest of that bluff."

"How about the end right up here under the castle wall. How do you hide that?"

"We could build a frame and cover the hole with turf. It'd look like the rest of the lawn at least for a few days."

"Can you build it so it'll open and close?"

He consulted briefly with some carpenters. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Just then, the bailiff arrived. Somebody had finally thought to awaken him.

"Your Majesty, what's happening?"

"Ask Arnold. He'll bring you up to date on the situation."

"Yes, Your Majesty." He and Arnold left the Great Hall talking rapidly to one another but Arnold ran back into the Great Hall after a few seconds. "Your Majesty, your meal is ready."

"Send it to my chambers. Have somebody stand by and watch it. I've had a real problem in there with mice lately."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"OK," I said to the construction people. "You men get started. I want that sewer main completely hidden by dawn. I want every one of you to crawl through it from end to end, both directions. If you can't get in and out at either end, either direction, then fix it so you can. Make sure that it's well hidden. Go."

The went.

General Herman was hanging around. I asked him, "Are the teams away?"

"Yes, My Lord. All away."

"OK. Pick about six more teams, three men each. Send them out to hide in the forest along the enemy's route. Tell them to harass the enemy, kill his messengers, scouts, supply teams, and any other members of his force that they can find."

"Yes, My Lord."

"Once the enemy's camped here, they should keep it up."

"Yes, My Lord."

"Arnold?"

He appeared immediately. Apparently, he and the bailiff were having their discussion right outside the door. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"I'm going to my chambers to eat and then go back to bed. Don't wake me unless it's an emergency."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The UMBERLAND Army

When I awoke, I ate breakfast and then wandered out into one of the castle yards. Soldiers were drilling and practicing with various weapons. I noted an unusual number of men on the castle walls. Eventually, I ran into General Herman.

“Well, how goes the war?”

“My scouts report the UMBERLAND army moving steadily this way. They’ve left small garrisons in MORRIS and PINE. Our team has destroyed the garrison in MORRIS.”

“Any losses on our side?”

“No, My Lord. Two of the enemy were killed. The others headed back toward UMBERLAND. One of our men is following them, out of sight, to let us know if they turn around. There’s been some fighting in PINE. Since we chased them out of MORRIS, we hold the road behind them, between PINE and the border. So they’re not getting any supplies. They have only what they carry or what they can steal.”

“Good. Pick nine more men. Send them out today, before the siege is laid. They are to prevent the enemy’s scavengers from obtaining anything. As soon as a scavenger team leaves the main body of the army, kill them all. Otherwise, stay hidden. After the siege is laid, burn the enemy’s supplies. Also, kill the horses, especially the draft horses.”

“My Lord!”

“Do it, General. Those animals will move supplies and equipment. Maybe siege engines. They’ll be used to kill our people. Kill the horses!”

“Yes, My Lord.”

That day I spent at leisure, thinking. The morning of the next day, I ate a good breakfast and went up onto the wall. We had about 150 trained soldiers plus about that many volunteers on the wall. By noon, the UMBERLAND army began to arrive, about a half-day ahead of the first prediction. The army wasn’t as well organized as I’d expected but the officers did manage to get their men into position. By evening they’d encircled the castle and established their bivouac. An hour or so before sunset, I was on a parapet with General Herman, watching the enemy. Since we were at war, I was accompanied by a young soldier who’d been assigned to bear the king’s personal flag. I was also accompanied by three archers and two men with full-length shields. While we were watching, a group of men on horseback broke from the enemy’s camp and, hoisting a white flag, rode toward my position. Presumably, they were homing on my personal flag.

“Parlay team,” muttered General Herman.

The parlay team approached to within about 30 yards of the castle wall and stopped. Their bugler sounded a fanfare. General Herman looked to me for instructions.

“They wish to talk, My Lord.”

“I don’t want to talk to them.”

Merlin's Net

“What? But it's customary to talk of terms, conditions, ultimatums, and so forth”

“Tell them to leave. I won't bargain with someone who threatens me, my people, or my kingdom. Send them away.”

General Herman signaled our crier, who was waiting nearby. The crier received his instructions from the General and yelled at the members of the parlay team to leave. They stayed and, again, their bugler blew his fanfare. I personally commanded our crier to tell them to leave. He told them. Again, the bugler blew his fanfare. I spoke quietly to an archer who was standing near me. “Put an arrow through the arm of the man holding the white flag and then another through the throat of that man in uniform, behind the bugler.” The archer did as I commanded and so quickly that the flag had not yet fallen to the ground when the second arrow found its mark. He was a very skilled archer.

The parlay team got my message. They left their white flag and their negotiator laying on the ground and galloped back to their lines.

“Well, My Lord,” General Herman said with a sigh of resignation, “We'll get no mercy from them now.”

“I don't expect any mercy and I don't give any,” I replied. “Those men came here to kill us. I intend to kill them instead.”

The general shook his head but he didn't reply.

“General,” I continued, “War isn't a gentleman's game. I'm not bound by somebody else's idea of chivalrous combat. I intend to win.”

Later in my chambers, I sent for General Herman.

“General, I want you to select your three best fighters and bring them back here with you. I want men who can fight up close, hand-to-hand.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

In about ten minutes he returned with three soldiers.

“You men know where the sewer main is?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Fortunately for us the enemy doesn't. As I'd hoped, they're avoiding the swamp. Thus, the low end of the sewer main lies outside of their siege lines. We can use it to go in and out unseen. So, wait until after dark. Dress yourselves in black. Make your faces black. Wrap your weapons for silence. Go out the postern. Crawl through the grass. Enter the high end of the sewer main. Crawl its length. Emerge at the low end. Sneak around the enemy camp. When they're all asleep, sneak into the general's tent. Kill the general's guards. Kill any of his aides and officers that you can find. Kill the general.”

They didn't have any comments or any questions.

“Go,” I commanded them.

They went.

"Arnold, I'm going to bed. Wake me when they return"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

I awoke at daybreak. When I strolled up onto the wall, I was happy to see that more than half of the enemy's supply wagons had been replaced by piles of ashes. I could also see just beyond their camp what looked like several dead horses. There were a lot of men standing around. They didn't appear to be doing anything. It looked like it might have been a difficult night for the enemy. I didn't find out just how difficult it had been until later that day.

My assassins hadn't returned. General Herman looked like he hadn't slept for a week. The castle was on full alert. All of our available soldiers as well as my guards from the Great Hall were on the walls. Rocks were piled on the parapets, for dropping on soldiers trying to scale the walls. Anything that would hold water was filled with water, against the likely use of fire arrows by the enemy. All available volunteers were running a bucket brigade, wetting combustible structures within the castle walls with water from the well. Everything that could be done had been done or was being done. We waited.

The expected attack didn't happen, so we waited some more. Everyone on our walls could see that the level of organization in the enemy's camp appeared to be deteriorating. Most of the men in the camp appeared to be milling around in confusion. As that was going on, General Herman wandered around inspecting his soldiers and reviewing his preparations for the siege. I sent a nearby soldier for Arnold. He arrived in about a minute.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Arnold, is anybody fixing food?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then please arrange to have some furniture brought up here and then send up my breakfast."

"Your Majesty?"

"I'm want to sit up here and watch the enemy's camp, and I'm hungry."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

So, I nibbled at my breakfast and watched the enemy's camp. By midmorning, it was obvious that something was seriously wrong down there. After it was all over, we got a pretty good idea of what had happened by examining the remains of the camp and by questioning some of the enemy soldiers who'd decided to stay behind. Here's the story as we deduced it from the conditions in the camp and from the answers given to us by the remaining soldiers.

My assassins had successfully entered the generals command tent. Apparently, the general and most of his top officers had been there at the time. We found one guard dead just outside of the tent flap, with a slit throat. We figured that he'd probably died quietly. Just inside of the opening were two more guards and signs of a fight.

Merlin's Net

One of my assassins had died there. My remaining two assassins had surprised the officers. The general was dead in his field cot. My two remaining assassins must have turned into wild men because there were five other members of the general's staff dead in the tent. It appeared that a few of them had been able to arm themselves. The other two of my assassins were dead among them so, possibly, at least one of the general's staff and maybe more, had escaped alive. After the fight in the command tent, various of my soldiers had been in and out of the enemy camp during the remainder of the night, burning things, killing horses, and creating whatever other disruptions they could. They'd killed all of the draft horses and most of the other horses, as well. They'd also managed to disable the enemy's only catapult.

We never learned how many officers had escaped from the command tent or what their condition had been. However, it was evident that they couldn't command the army. Enough of the command structure was gone that the army of conscripts had reverted back to a bunch of demoralized farmers who just wanted to go home and plant potatoes. By afternoon, the enemy soldiers were leaving by ones, twos, and small groups. I sent for lunch and continued to watch. By evening, there were only a few stragglers wandering out of the camp and a small number of men who hadn't left yet. They were lighting cook fires and, apparently, they intended to stay. I sent for General Herman and asked him what my people were doing.

"Awaiting your orders, My Lord."

"Send a team into the enemy's camp and round up the enemy soldiers who've remained. You might as well let them finish their supper first but keep a watch on them until they're done. Be courteous with them. Tell my men to defend themselves if attacked but otherwise be courteous. Don't hurt anybody if it can be avoided. Keep a full force on the walls for now but feed them by shifts. For now, keep all weapons and other preparations inside the castle handy, just in case. Send couriers along the road and order our men, especially those in Morris and Pine, to stand aside and let the enemy soldiers return home. If there's any indication that the enemy might regroup, then report it at once."

"Yes, My Lord."

"Send our volunteers inside the castle back to whatever they'd normally be doing at this time of the day. Also, send a couple of men into the woods. Tell the townspeople that they can start for home in the morning. Also, instruct our soldiers along the road to render any aid that seems appropriate to the retreating soldiers."

"My Lord? Help the enemy?"

"General Herman, those are just people now. All they want is to go home. If any of them try to fight then our men can defend themselves. Otherwise, give whatever help seems appropriate."

General Herman seemed skeptical, but he went to issue the orders.

It took the erstwhile army several days to get back to UMBERLAND. During that time, a few enemy were killed when some of their surviving officers rallied small groups of the retreating farmers. Mostly the retreating men weren't interested in

fighting. Most of them just kept walking home. One group actually lynched one of their own officers when he berated them as cowards. A few of my soldiers watched but didn't interfere.

By the time that the townspeople began to arrive back from the forest the next day, I'd had the various dead soldiers buried and the dead horses removed. The townspeople spent the next week or so combing through the debris that'd been left in the enemy's camp. After they'd taken everything that they wanted, I had General Herman send some soldiers out to collect everything that remained. If there was anything that they wanted, then they could have it. They stacked the rest of it into a big pile and burned it.

The few soldiers who'd remained in the camp all wanted to become citizens of Camelot. I gave each man two weeks to find some way to support himself. Those who failed to do so were escorted back to the border with whatever possessions they could carry. Thus ended the war with Umberland.

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South Road Bandits

By the time of the UMBERLAND War, my Woodland Scouts had been opposing the South Road Bandits for about six months. It had been a difficult fight. It had turned out that the South Road Bandits were, indeed, a bunch of disaffected Forest Rangers. I never learned what had caused them to break with the main group or why they'd chosen banditry as their vocation. However, their skills as Forest Rangers made them particularly difficult for my Woodland Scouts to defeat. They blended very well into the background, having adopted the practice of wearing green. Casualties among the Woodland Scouts had been much higher than expected. Sheriff Gates had been forced to spend most of his time at Nottingham, training replacements. His Forest Ranger skills, sorely needed in the forest, were spent mostly on training new recruits to maintain his force of Woodland Scouts in the face of ongoing casualties.

After the failed invasion from UMBERLAND, I tried to give additional support to my people at Nottingham. However, it was a big forest and there weren't enough people in all of Camelot to saturate it. Numbers were pretty much irrelevant anyway. I just needed for my people to be as skillful in the forest as the South Road Bandits were. Such a thing was possible but it would take a lot of time and a lot of dead Woodland Scouts before the survivors were on a par with the bandits. Meanwhile, I needed another tactic.

There was one town on the stretch of the Great South Road where the South Road Bandits operated. The place was called Faramoor. I had a hunch that the South Road Bandits might have some contacts there. They probably needed a place to get things that didn't turn up in their plunder. They probably needed a place to sell or trade stolen items. It just seemed likely that they'd need contacts of that sort and Faramoor seemed the most likely place for those contacts to be. I needed some eyes and ears in Faramoor but it was a small town. A newcomer would probably be noticed. Therefore, I decided that the best tactic would be to hide my spy right out in the open. All that I needed was some other plausible reason for him to be there. So, I sent for General Herman.

"Yes, My Lord."

"General, I want you to build a small fortification at Faramoor."

"Of course, My Lord."

"You want to know why?"

"Yes," General Herman replied, "but I'll build it in any case."

"I've been thinking about that invasion from UMBERLAND. What if something like that happened with Ebon? It wouldn't hurt for us to have some soldiers in Faramoor."

"My Lord, the king of Ebon might regard such an installation as provocative."

Merlin's Net

“Yes,” I replied. “If any hard feelings develop then I’ll want you to send an envoy and arrange a meeting with him. Meanwhile, get some men down there to begin surveying and setting up the plans. Begin construction at your convenience.”

“Yes, My Lord,” he replied, getting up to leave.

“Oh, General Herman,” I added. “One more thing. Contact Nat, the brick layer. Take him along. I want the place to be made of bricks.”

General Herman looked puzzled. “My Lord, stone would be stronger.”

“Yes, General,” I replied, “but I want bricks.”

“Yes, My Lord,” he replied, and left.

Next, I had my bailiff send for Nat. When he arrived, I told him of my plan for construction at Faramoor. He was delighted. When I told him that I wanted him to go with the first crew and to remain there for the entire project, he seemed suspicious.

“Your Majesty, is there more to this than you’re telling me?”

“Yes, Nat, there is. While you’re there, I want you to find out for me if the South Road Bandits have any contacts in Faramoor. If they do, then I want to know who the contacts are. I want to know how the deal works. Since you’re going to be involved in a big construction project down there, you’ll have good reason to talk to just about everybody in town at one time or another. You’ll be able to get familiar with everything that goes on. Don’t let anybody know what you’re up to. Even General Herman doesn’t know about this. All he knows is that I want a fortification at Faramoor and that you and Jon are to do the job. However, I don’t really need the fortification. The project is just a gimmick to get you down there to find out about the South Road Bandits for me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I’ll do it.” He got up and left.

The construction took several times longer than it should have. I managed that by frequently giving General Herman other assignments that forced him to temporarily transfer men away from the construction project at Faramoor. I dragged out the negotiations to get bricks from Jon, delaying the availability of materials. I found every way that I could to delay project. The delays gave Nat a lot of free time to poke around. Finally, however, General Herman began to doubt my intentions and I decided to let him in on the secret. He was offended that I hadn’t told him right up front and he was probably correct. However, I was the king and he was the General so he accepted the situation silently. However, I could see his point.

Throughout the long, drawn-out construction project, Nat was ever-present in Faramoor. He got to know everybody in town and all of their businesses. Eventually, he found an excuse to come back to the castle. He had some information for me.

“Your Majesty,” he told me, “only about one caravan in ten stops in Faramoor. The others just go past without stopping. Here’s the thing. The ones that go past might get robbed. The ones that stop in Faramoor never get robbed. Never. I’ve been watching and I’m sure of it. The South Road Bandits must have some kind of a deal

with some of the merchants in Faramoor. I haven't been able to find out which merchants but it looks like maybe most of them. Maybe all of them. I don't know and nobody's talking. Different caravans that stop there deal with different merchants, so I don't have any way to tell who's working with the bandits and who isn't. I just know that if a caravan stops in Faramoor then it doesn't get robbed. For the life of me, I can't imagine why the caravaneers haven't noticed it."

"People can be pretty stupid, sometimes, Nat. Anyway, thank you. That's all that I needed to know. From now on, just build the barracks and whatever else the General has planned. If you discover anything else that will be useful to me, then tell me. Mostly, though, just finish the project."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

I had my bailiff send for Sheriff Gates.. He arrived from Nottingham after a delay of about a week. He came with bad news. Before I could even discuss my plans with him, he informed me that Nottingham had been coming under attack by the South Road Bandits.

"Look at the bright side," I said, "as long as they're attacking you they're not robbing the caravaneers."

He thought about it for a few seconds and decided that it wasn't funny. He chuckled anyway because I'm the king.

"So, you must have had a reason for calling me here," he commented.

"Yes. I want you to stage a few raids."

"Raids?"

"Yes. Attack the caravans that stop in Faramoor. Steal what might seem useful to the South Road Bandits. Burn the rest. Shoot anybody who resists. Make it look convincing. They have to believe that it's the South Road Bandits who are doing it."

"Your Majesty, that seems like a low-down thing to do."

"It has to be done."

"And the reason is?"

"I believe that the South Road Bandits have friends in Faramoor."

"Why do you think that?"

"Caravans that stop to do business in Faramoor don't get attacked. They must have some kind of a deal."

"You want the people in Faramoor to get mad at the South Road Bandits? Think they broke the deal? Stop dealing with them?"

"That's right. Attack only caravans that stop in Faramoor. The South Road Bandits are already taking care of the others for us."

"And I have to kill innocent caravaneers? Seems like a pretty mean thing to do."

Merlin's Net

“Ask your wounded Scouts or the wives and children of your dead ones how important it is. Don't pull any punches, Gates. This has to be convincing. Make it look exactly like what the South Road Bandits would do.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

He got up to leave. As he was walking toward the door, I stopped him. “Oh, one more thing. Can you give me descriptions of any of the Bandits?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. We've killed a few.

“I want descriptions of live ones who're still on the loose.”

“Oh,” he said, “yes, we've got close enough to get a look at some of the ones that got away.”

“Those are the ones that I'm interested in. Injured or not. Before you leave, describe them to one of my scribes.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

He left. He didn't like the job that I'd given him, but he'd do it. That's one of the advantages of being a king. You can give any order that you want and people will do the job. It's also one of the dangers of being a king.

The next day, I had my bailiff send a messenger to summon Nat for a visit. I had in mind another rather large project that I wanted to discuss. I was thinking about a major expansion of the castle. I still intended that the outer walls would be of stone but I thought that brick might be a superior material for buildings within the outer wall. Nat was delighted at the prospect of such a large project. He and Jon were getting by well enough but Camelot was still primarily a region where stone was the preferred building material for permanent structures.

Before Nat left, I had a few other questions for him.

“Nat, I want you to do something for me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“One of my scribes will give you the descriptions of some of the South Road Bandits.”

“You have descriptions of them?” he asked in surprise.

“A few of them,” I replied. “What I want you to do is mention, just casual gossip you understand, mention to some of the merchants in Faramoor while you're down there that those men have been seen getting supplies in this area.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Be sure you have a good story so it's convincing. Maybe mention that you heard it from Jon. Think of something.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

I knew that, within a few weeks, rumors of South Road Bandits buying supplies in Camelot would be flying thick and fast among the merchants in Faramoor.

The next day, I called General Herman to my private refectory.

“I have another job for you to do.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“One of my scribes is going to give you the descriptions of some of the South Road Bandits. They're people who are still alive and, presumably, active.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“I want you to have some of your men in Faramoor memorize the descriptions. Then start asking about them in Faramoor. Make up any story that you like, maybe the men stole forest equipment from merchants in this area and were last seen on the Great South Road.”

“My Lord, may I ask why we are doing this?”

“I want to capture those men. I think that some of the people in Faramoor might be willing to help us.”

My scheming didn't work as neatly as I'd hoped it would. Sheriff Gates killed some innocent caravaneers and mourned it for the rest of his days. I didn't like it either but I couldn't think of any other way to get to the South Road Bandits. I had to do something. They were killing people and destroying trade to the south.

The merchants in Faramoor didn't all turn against the South Road Bandits but some of them did. If nothing else, it created divisions among them. They weren't sure, after that, who to trust. Also, enough of them cooperated with General Herman that his men were able to capture a few of the South Road Bandits when they came into town for supplies. Rather than sentence those captives myself, I turned them over to the custody of Sheriff Gates and his Woodland Scouts. I don't like to say what happened to them but I expect that it gave the ones who were still on the loose something to think about.

In the end, I wasn't able to completely destroy the South Road Bandits but I did reduce the size of their operation. I also made it more difficult for them, and less profitable. Under pressure, they eventually moved further south where they became a problem for the authorities in Ebon. They still preyed on the caravans but it was out of my jurisdiction. Also, the forest wasn't so thick down there and it was less dangerous to chase them into the woods. Their survival rate wasn't as good as it had been in Camelot. People who went into the woods after them were more likely to get back out alive.

I kept my Woodland Scouts active in the part of the forest within Camelot, north of the border with Ebon. After about a year or so, the authorities in Ebon offered to let my Woodland Scouts operate across the border. In the more open forest, further south, the difference in forest skills between the South Road Bandits and my Woodland Scouts wasn't quite so critical. The Woodland Scouts were more effective there than they'd been in the thicker forest, further north. The authorities in Ebon were impressed and offered to supply some volunteers. Gradually, the Woodland Scouts became a joint venture between Camelot and Ebon.

Merlin's Net

I was careful, after the South Road Bandits moved further south, to foster good relations with the people in Faramoor, lest the bandits should ever decide to move north again. General Herman kept a small and well behaved garrison in Faramoor, so the fortification there turned out to be useful after all. The merchants in Faramoor were generally happy with the situation because the Mudnecks spent more money there than the South Road Bandits had been spending. The local townspeople were happy because the Mudnecks were better drinking buddies than the South Road Bandits had been, and lost more money at Seven-Card-Bluff. I didn't really solve the problem of the South Road Bandits but, at least, I reduced its severity and converted it into somebody else's problem. Sometimes that's as close to a permanent solution as you can get.

All Good Things

The years were good to Camelot and to me. Once I got the hang of things, I settled down to running the kingdom. I tried to make a start toward improving the slum conditions in which most people lived but something like that takes more than just pipes and bricks. Ultimately, it's a cultural thing and cultures take a long time to change. I tried to arrange things so that those of us who lived in the castle would set an example but I think that a lot of it was lost on the commoners. They just viewed it as how the royalty lives. Eventually, I completed the expansion of the castle. It took a lot of bricks but by then Jon had quite a brick operation going and I used him as my sole supplier. By the time that job was finished, he and Nat had enough tax credits accumulated that their descendants would enjoy them for several generations. Some of the local potters had finally figured out how to make clay pipe with bell ends so we installed a sewer system in the new construction as part of the original design. We even installed a windmill and overhead tank, dug a second well inside of the castle walls, and installed a gravity-flow system of running water. The water and sewer systems were viewed as wonderfully trendy by the royalty in Ebon and Umlerland. Before long, most people who had a castle were imitating my innovations. It was a small industrial revolution of sorts. I'm afraid that it didn't have much of an effect on the commoners, who continued to live in squalor.

Anyway, as the 20th anniversary of my Coronation approached, I'd developed a tendency to reminisce. Somewhere along the way, I'd acquired a wife. Her name was Guinevere. She was of goodly build, with a lovely round face, long flowing red hair, and she was clean. Clean. In the reality to which I'd been transferred, clean wasn't the normal condition but Guinevere managed to stay clean. She was a most gracious lady. We had some kids, so the kingdom had an heir and several extras, just in case.⁵

I'd taken to sitting by the fire in the evenings and sipping tea. Guin sat with me, usually playing her lute. Over the years, I'd hummed a lot of the music from my previous reality and she'd adapted it to her lute. We hadn't mentioned that to anybody and, consequently, she was viewed as a genius of musical innovation. Much of the administration of the kingdom was being done by my oldest son Arthur, the young but capable crown prince. Yes, I'd named him Arthur. It was kind of a personal joke that I never explained to anybody, not even to Guin.

That brings me to something that I haven't covered yet. It's something that you really need to understand. This place where I lived, I called it Camelot. I called the wizard Merlin. My wife was even named Guinevere. However, I've never believed for an instant that I went back into our own history and created the place in our King Arthur legend. For one thing, Robin Hood, Sherwood Forest, and Nottingham are at odds with the Camelot legend. For another thing, I called the place Camelot,

⁵ Editor's Note: I've wondered a lot about why the people in Camelot and the people from our reality could interbreed. They'd have to be genetically identical. That suggests some minimum amount of travel of people between the two different realities and a certain minimum amount of interbreeding, to maintain the genetic compatibility over time. More than that, it suggests that both groups of people originally came from the same place. Maybe that's a clue to some of the mysterious disappearances in our myths, legends, and folklore.

Merlin's Net

using the correct pronunciation from my own reality. If my Camelot had been the source of our legend, then the pronunciation of the name in our legend would have changed over time, maybe beyond recognition, before I was even born. It wouldn't have been called Camelot in our legend. The name in the legend would have been some corrupted version of the word. Same for all of the other names. Even my own name and that of my son, Arthur. Not only that, in our version of the legend, Guinevere didn't marry Luther, or Uther. She married Arthur. In my Camelot, Arthur was her son, not her husband. So, none of my Camelot matches the legend. I just used those names because they were familiar to me. They helped me, in the beginning, to function in a place that was unfamiliar and strange to me when I first arrived there. I threw in the Robin Hood stuff and the thing from Lewis Carol mostly as whims or improvisations at the time. As far as the Camelot-style names are concerned, it just sort of became a habit for me to use them for things, places, and people. Other names that were already there, like Nottinghome, well, I don't know. They're a mystery. The way the Sureawood Forest got its name is probably just a fluke. Anyway, there isn't anything more to it than that.

So anyway, there I sat, sipping tea. Guin and I heard footsteps running down the hallway and I remember wondering, "Now what?" As the person running got closer, he yelled, "Merlin's dead! Merlin's dead! Something blew up in his face and he's dead!" I recognized the voice as that of my youngest son, Frodo (don't ask), who'd been studying under Merlin for several years by then. I started to get up but it became increasingly difficult to move. By the time that I was standing, I couldn't move at all. Frodo ran into the room but I happened to be facing Guin just then, so I didn't see Frodo. I saw Guin. She was staring at me with a look of growing horror on her face. I realized that I could see right through her. Not just Guin. I could see through everything. It was all fading. She screamed my name and jumped at me but before she could get to me she was completely gone. I was standing on the beach at Santa Cruz. I was looking toward the boardwalk. I could hear people yelling on the roller coaster.

I almost died of shock. I stood there on the sand looking frantically around me. I saw the ocean, the beach, a few other people who were looking at me with shocked expressions on their faces, and one dog that barked once and ran away. I learned later that I'd screamed when I'd first appeared. To anyone who might have been seen that, it would have been a very strange sight. A man walking on the beach suddenly, between one footstep and the next, aged 20 years, gained 40 pounds, lost all his hair, instantly changed his clothes, and screamed. Quite a sight. I didn't think about that at the time. I just stood in shock for a timeless moment or two, trying to believe that it hadn't really happened and then, with a moan of despair, I collapsed onto the sand and began to cry. Later, some policemen came and took me away to a hospital somewhere.

I was wearing a period costume of amazing authenticity and there were some professors from UC Santa Cruz who marveled at it. They wanted to know where I'd gotten it. I wouldn't tell them. They took my clothes away to study them and I've never seen them again. I had difficulty, at first, speaking modern English. After

all, I'd spent 20 years in Camelot. I couldn't even remember my address although I did manage to come up with the English pronunciation of my name. Nobody believed me, of course. The identity that I claimed was that of a 30-year-old man. I didn't have any ID at all and I was obviously more than 30 years old. At first, I refused to give any account of myself, knowing that nobody would believe it. Eventually, I told a very short version of the story to a court-appointed psychiatrist. He subsequently assured the court that I had a most peculiar delusion but that I was probably harmless. He also assured the court that I was probably not competent to stand trial, at least not for a while. Nobody could think of anything to charge me with anyway. Aging 20 years, gaining 40 pounds, going bald, and changing clothes between one footstep and the next isn't a crime, not even in California. Of course, if a few more people do it then they'll make it a felony. After all, that's the way that things are done in California. Eventually, I was released.

My friends didn't know me. My family wouldn't accept me. I knocked around for a few years, mostly doing odd jobs here and there. I finally made a meager success of writing medieval adventure yarns, although I was careful to stay away from my actual experiences. Eventually, however, I decided to give that a try. After I got started writing, I realized that there just wasn't much that I really wanted to write. I picked a few anecdotes, added the beginning and this conclusion and that's about it. I've given my manuscript to a fellow that I met who writes various things, a newsletter, some fiction, and so forth, and he can do whatever he wants to do with it. We've gone over and over the manuscript to his satisfaction, so it's up to him now. I even told him that he could use it as fiction if he wants. This short account is all that I plan to reveal. The rest of it, all of the 20 years of my beautiful adventure as the king of a medieval wonderland, I'll take with me to my grave.

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