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## Menagerie Pains

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# **MENAGERIE PAINS**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Rachel D. McClay

May 2023

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## **MENAGERIE PAINS**

English

Missouri State University, May 2023

Master of Arts

Rachel D. McClay

### **ABSTRACT**

In my creative thesis, readers follow Toddus as he accomplishes different tasks set out by the prince he serves, Prince Dinnax. My critical introduction examines the use of a hero in both my book and *Redwall*, by Brian Jacques, through the three steps of a hero's journey outlined in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's steps can be found in almost every book published, even non-adventure books. After following the steps, I examine my own choice of hero. Toddus is a personal guard to a prince, and as such does not carry a lot of power. Jeff Vandermeer's craft book, *Wonderbook*, gives instructions on how to determine and follow through with a main character. I compare the two princes in *Captive Prince*, by C.S. Pacat, and their autonomy or lack thereof with that of Prince Dinnax. Toddus is the hero setting out on his adventure because Dinnax is constrained by his title and duties attached to it.

**KEYWORDS:** hero, hero's journey, Joseph Campbell, Jeff Vandermeer, power, autonomy

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I would also like to thank all the other students who have helped with this project. This group includes those in my undergraduate workshop classes who read and commented on the original version. This project has taken many twists and turns since that first version, but the story line still holds true.

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Linda McClay. She has always been, and hopefully will be for a long time, my first reader. She neither criticizes nor gives unnecessary praises and this gives me the courage to continue and set my work before others.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Critical Introduction to *Menagerie Pains***

A book can take many forms and an extremely popular form is that of the adventure. A hero is called, dragged, or pushed onto a journey, and most of the time they complete it and return home, usually slightly injured but mostly fine. Almost anything can happen. Magic, going to the underworld and coming back, road trips, teenage spies; all are options. All you need is a problem, someone suitably upset about it, a solution to the problem, and you're cooking a brilliant adventure story. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell outlines the three major elements of an adventure story: departure, initiation, and return. While this book was originally published in 1949, the main parts still hold true, and though the examples are folktales, fairytales, and myths, the steps can still be recognized in almost any adventure or action story in circulation today. Whether I was aware of these steps or not, I have read them over and over again. I can point them out in almost every book on my bookshelf, and I write them as well. The Redwall series, my favorite children's book series, by Brian Jacques, and *Captive Prince*, by C. S. Pacat, were instrumental in creating the characters and plot of my book, *Menagerie Pains*.

Most adventures begin with a problem, and with the problem, comes the need for a solution. The need for a solution brings the call of adventure, and the person who answers the call becomes the hero, who must set forth on a journey to retrieve the solution. Campbell explains, "This first stage of the mythological journey—which we have designated the 'call of adventure'—signifies that destiny had summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown" (48). This does not mean the



hero's soul has been ripped out of his body and flung into space, but that would be a pretty entertaining story to read. This just means something in the hero's life has been upended. The hero has to be personally involved with what has gone wrong. If they don't have a personal stake, they don't have a reason to leave in search of a solution. Every book in my favorite adventure book series, the Redwall series by Brian Jacques, follows Campbell's model almost perfectly.

The first book in the series, *Redwall*, follows the adventure of a young mouse, Matthias. This mouse has always had the call of adventure simmering in his veins, but has not had the opportunity to show it his whole life. It is only when Redwall Abbey is threatened by an army of vermin and their leader, Cluny the Scourge, that he has the opportunity to show this. Matthias is ready: "Matthias sprang to the middle of the floor brandishing his staff in a way that surprised even him. / "Do?" he cried. "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll be ready" (Jacques 27). This happens very early in the book when the abbey mice are still reeling from Cluny the Scourge's threats. Matthias is personally involved in trying to free the abbey from Cluny's siege and starts his quest to find Martin the Warrior's sword and shield. He aims to protect the abbey and its inhabitants. The Redwall series has twenty-two books and when I read these books as a child, I didn't know about the steps in the hero's journey, but I did eternalize them from reading them repeatedly. I recognize them in my own writing, too.

In *Menagerie Pains*, the call to adventure is a little less striking. My main character, whom readers follow, is not directly linked to the problem. For many years, Toddus's only purpose has been to protect Prince Dinnax. He walks alongside the prince, stands in for the prince during events, and draws his sword in the prince's defense. Even his call to adventure revolves around the prince, who asks him to help. Toddus is used to Prince Dinnax's antics.

While in the prince's menagerie, Toddus realizes Prince Dinnax is intentionally leading a visiting king astray. At this point, the story's problem, the visiting king's daughters having run away from his palace, has only been hinted at, and Toddus is unaware Prince Dinnax has found and has been hiding one of the daughters for a few days. Yet, he doesn't state how his prince is making a fool of a king. His loyalty is unwavering, and he sets out on his quest to help the princesses in Prince Dinnax's place. No story is complete at this stage. In fact, it is just beginning and the first step is followed by the second step.

The second part of the hero's journey is the journey itself. The call to action involves deciding on a solution, and it is now up to the hero to find the solution and bring it back. They step out of their home and begin their journey. Upon entering the "land of adventure" the hero will be helped and accosted at different times. Campbell says the zone unknown is a land "of miraculous tests and ordeals. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region" (81). The hero's quest is usually not as easy as a short ride to a neighboring town for a vial of medicine. Usually, the hero has some ups and downs to his journey; he gets tricked into entering the ogre's cave and almost gets his head squashed under a boulder, but survives at the last moment because the special shoes his mentor gave him jerk him back a step. Sometimes there is a magical element, and sometimes the hero just got really good directions and didn't get sidetracked. The second is the case of Matthias.

Matthias of Redwall Abbey encounters both good and bad along his adventure to find the sword of Martin the Warrior. As he completes each trial of his adventure, he reports back to the abbey mice. After he disappears once again in search of the sword, one mouse says, "One thing you may rest assured of, wherever that young mouse is he'll be concerned with the survival of

Redwall in one way or another, I'm sure" (Jacques 276). Matthias is trusted to complete his quest. His main source of help and guidance is Brother Methuselah. Though he is helped by the other Redwall inhabitants to different degrees. On the other side, Matthias is hindered by the sparrows who stole the sword of Martin the Warrior from the top of the weather vane and by Asmodeus, the venomous snake to whom the sparrows lost the sword. Matthias is once again helped by friends, the shrews of the forest, who led him to Asmodeus's lair in the quarry. Like Matthias, Toddus has to navigate through both allies and enemies to complete his mission.

Toddus, after beginning his journey, runs into many problems. He has exactly two guides. These two happen to be the prince he serves, Prince Dinnax, and the prince's boyfriend, Prince Dorroch. Neither is as helpful as an adventurer might like. Both princes are bound by the laws of their lands, but attempt to provide aid when they can. Toddus's main obstacle is the Coulairn King's spies. Though it happens early in the story, Toddus realizes he is being followed, and loses the man following him at the earliest opportunity. This is the first instance, with many to follow, where Toddus is hindered by the other kingdom's spies. He is also hindered by the princesses themselves, whom he is trying to help. They had to use magic to escape their father, turning themselves into animals without the ability of human speech, which adds a slight comedic effect, but also adds stress and struggles for Toddus. Toddus's main goal is to help these girls return to their human forms. In the end, he does accomplish this, which leads to the last step of the hero's journey.

The third and last part of the journey is to return with the solution as the hero has managed his goal. He has stepped through all the hoops, tricked all those who stood in his way, grabbed the precious item and sprinted out of the danger zone, all in as little time as possible. Campbell says, "When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source,

or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy” (167). The hero must now return to his home and reveal what he has accomplished. Campbell also points out that the solution doesn’t always come in the form of an object. It could be a person, such as a spouse or a doctor. One thing remains the same; the object or person will solve the problem. For example, the hero’s new wife can heal anyone with just a touch or the magic staff will miraculously attract storm clouds to the drought-ridden farm lands.

Matthias changes from an overeager dibbun, a child, into a true warrior and protector. He has survived and mastered all the obstacles thrown before him. He discovered Martin the Warrior’s tomb and followed all the resulting clues to retrieve the sword. After all his adventures, he returns to the abbey to face Cluny. Cluny had been haunted in his dreams by a warrior mouse and when he sees Matthias with the sword and shield, he thinks, “There in the open doorway of Great Hall stood the Warrior Mouse!” (Jacques 324). Matthias outsmarts Cluny. He cuts the bell’s rope and crushes Cluny beneath its weight. By doing this, he frees the abbey from the threat of Cluny’s army and with this accomplished he fixes the problem. Sometimes the change is relatively small, like Matthias rescuing the Abbey inhabitants, and sometimes the change is on a much grander scale, such as the political change Toddus brings about to the entire continent.

Toddus begins and ends his journey as a personal guard to a prince. While his status and job do not change, he does change the world around him. The southern nation, which previously operated on a patriarchal inheritance pattern, now passes the throne to the eldest child regardless of the gender. This is a very large change, given the king was tremendously disrespectful to the queen and crown princess of Toddus’s country, saying Prince Dinnax should marry one of his

daughters, and she will become queen. However, Toddus's country operates in a matriarchal system and the eldest daughter will take the throne, not Prince Dinnax. He completely ignores the rules of inheritance of the land he is visiting. After everything is said and done, the southern nation's king is punished for his transgressions against his daughters, and his eldest daughter takes the throne. The relationship between Toddus's country and the southern nation is strengthened not only because the king is deposed, but because Toddus was the one to help the princesses. Though he does accomplish many feats, as a commoner who works as a prince's personal guard, Toddus is not someone who would usually be chosen as the main character.

I chose a personal guard as my main character to go on this quest because, for many years, I have thought being a king, queen, prince, or princess would be both dangerous and boring. Power is coveted by those of lesser power, and as the most powerful people in a nation, those four positions are at the most risk of assassination attempts. These four positions are also boring and tedious because they have so much work. They have to keep track of which noble families support them; keep the royal coffers full in case of emergency; track emergencies, such as floods, and be ready to send help to affected areas; make sure criminals are punished; and just keep society working as a whole. Yes, some rulers ignore this fundamental system of give and take, and tax their people to pieces while spending tons of money. That usually leads to revolts and uprisings, so it's not generally the preferred method of keeping the throne. In a fantasy book set in a monarchist society where one of the main characters is themselves royalty, one would expect that royal character to be the main character. They are in a position which has the most control over others. In his book *Wonderbook*, Jeff Vandermeer writes:

Traditionally, too, beginning writers are advised to pick the character with the largest stake in the story and potentially the most ability to take action. As a result, agency has been perhaps overemphasized, even if it remains of real importance in how readers identify or do not identify with characters. (187)

The royal character has much to lose: their position, their power, their money, their family. They also have, if they are trusted to use it, a lot of power. With power, a royal character can expedite solving some problems, but not all. They have to depend on other characters, who might also have their own agendas. These other characters can sometimes have as much influence and experience as the royal character. While both the main characters in a relatively new book, *Captive Prince*, are actually princes, neither has much power and must strive to survive on their own merits rather than depending on their families.

*Captive Prince*, by C. S. Pacat, is a monumental book for my thought process. The two main characters are princes, Prince Laurent of Vere and Prince Damianos of Akielos; neither has much power, but both affect and drive the plot forward. The book is written from a third person, close psychic distance point of view focalizing on Prince Damianos, also called Damen. He is an observant man, but also a straightforward one who does not link events together the way he should. Early in the book, Damen is given to Laurent as a slave and Laurent orders him to be beaten. The Regent, entering and seeing this, semi-publicly reprimands Laurent's behavior, calling him childish and unworthy of his position because he shirks his duties. This is followed by Laurent's answer, "It seemed for a moment as if Laurent would rebel, but he bit down on the reaction and said only, 'Yes, uncle.'" (Pacat 25). Laurent is a viper, quick witted and dangerous, but he only has a finite amount of power, while his uncle is still Regent. Laurent is a product of his uncle's court. It is a nest of vipers, each noble trying to decide if Laurent will reach the age of maturity and take the throne, or if his uncle, the Regent, will successfully assassinate him and become King. While Laurent has more autonomous agency, Damen also has some influence. When asked how a soldier would be punished for a transgression, Damen says, "He would be publicly flogged and turned off" (Pacat 79). Because Damen is observant and mentions more

than he concentrates on, the reader is privy to more of the world than Damen himself is. There is also a schism between what Damen understands about his situation and what readers can glean about it. As an Akielon in the Veretian court, there are many intricacies Damen ignores in favor of his own simple understanding of his own court. If you asked me to pick which prince is the Captive Prince from the title, I'd have to say both. Both Laurent and Damen are hindered, and neither has control over their own life, which is how I modelled my own prince.

In *Menagerie Pains*, Prince Dinnax is constrained in a similar way to Prince Laurent. Prince Dinnax has his duties to perform. While he will never be king because his country follows a matriarchal system, he does have a high amount of prestige in the kingdom. He was raised to support his younger sister as she learns; she will be the one to rule when their mother dies, while Dinnax will be her biggest supporter. One of his duties is to be a diplomat. After correcting how a visiting King had been addressing him, he indicates he waited to mention the correction until they were alone with only a few guards around because reprimanding the king in front of nobles could damage the relationship between their countries. A large element which affected who I chose to be my hero was the need for secrecy. Helping the southern nation's princesses in secret while pretending not to know anything about their whereabouts to their father is an act which could lead to a war between the two countries, and would therefore be frowned upon by Dinnax's mother. As Prince Dinnax's personal guard, Toddus is the person with the most ability to move unnoticed and unheeded. He is also not the son of a noble, so he does not have any responsibility except those revolving around the prince. Toddus can disappear and any other character would assume he was fired or has gone home to visit his family for a few days. If Prince Dinnax were to disappear without telling his mother his plans and rough location, rumors and doubts about his loyalty to his mother and sisters might begin to circulate. Prince Dinnax's

loyalty to his mother and sisters is absolute, but he also has a kind heart and refuses to leave the southern princesses in their animal states. By asking Toddus to take care of them, Dinnax circumvents both his mother's power and his own heart's softness.

Who and why a character is chosen to be the hero has many elements. Some people start a book idea by creating a place, others create a dynamic main character. I started with an idea of a prince obsessed with animals. Toddus was not part of the big picture. He was there as a side character helping Prince Dinnax return the princesses to their human shapes after Dinnax found them hiding out in his menagerie. But as I was writing it, I came to dislike the character Dinnax was becoming. He wasn't carefree and jovial; he wasn't as caring towards his younger sisters. After reading *Captive Prince*, I realized I was pulling Dinnax into too many directions. He couldn't be a doting older brother if he was running through bogs and mountain caves to find ingredients to make potions. I changed direction and pulled Toddus to the front. By leaving Dinnax in the palace, I could return him to what he had originally been. Toddus became the hero. He follows the call, rescues the princesses, and returns home to a little fame and a little fortune.

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## PROLOGUE

The bed beneath him shook and Toddus tumbled off the side. The sheets twisted around his body, and he struggled as if held beneath the surface of a lake by a lolern eel. His thrashing created a small ruckus only he himself could hear. Toddus divested himself of the sheets and stumbled to his knees as a brilliant light lit the night sky to the south. He ran to the window and stopped, looking out. A door behind Toddus opened, and he whirled around.

Prince Dinnax stood in the doorway which connected their two bedrooms. His hair was flung in all directions and he strode over to stand beside his personal guard. He stared out the window and Toddus joined in his staring.

Far to the south, bright red and yellow lights danced together like fireflies, making the shape of flames. A figure shot high above the flames; green and blue, it spread its wings revealing itself to be a phoenix whose wingspan reached across the continent. It hung there, suspended in the sky. It blocked out the stars' light, and, for an hour, the phoenix and the flames remained the night's only light. Then the Phoenix folded its wings and dove back beneath the flames. Other figures emerged, but none rose as high as the phoenix had flown. Large parts remained obscured by the flames. Wings outlined in yellow rose; they looked like those of a swan. Blue pointed ears. A smooth, long, flexing tail twisted elegantly. The orangey-pink hurt Toddus's eyes.

Like the phoenix, each figure stayed for an hour. Toddus and Dinnax watched the sun rise after the third figure fell and the fourth emerged, but even the sun's light was dim in comparison to the dancing lights. An orange snout, slightly pointed at the nose, like a seal's or an otter's nose. The long, upright ears of light purple definitely belonged to a rabbit. A bushy,

pointed tail in dark purple. Small rounded ears in front of a hulking, shaggy back. The lights were red. Even when the sun had risen to its apex, the lights were still clearly visible, though they thought the show was over. They barely caught sight of small, light green paws with claws reaching upwards, just above the flames. They continued while the sun sank towards the horizon. The distinct face of a koala outlined in gold. A smooth maroon half oval. Little pink hands tipped with claws. A horn and mane made of black lights.

They realized the horned creature had been the last one when the lights of the flames slowly lowered and dimmed, then disappeared.

“What do you suppose that was?” the prince sitting across the table asked him.

“Magic, I believe, Your Highness,” Toddus responded.

Neither spoke again as they returned to their beds. It had been a relatively uneventful day, but it had been long and hopefully the reason behind the light show never came this far north.

## CHAPTER 1: THE PRINCE OF NACEDONIA

Toddus meandered his way through the main palace on his way to the kitchens. He trailed his fingers along the sweeping wall designs and stopped to study what appeared to be a deer immortalized on the wall. He touched where the blackness of the deer met the whiteness of the stone. He enjoyed the stark contrast. Toddus began walking again, stopping often to study the walls. The designs varied, depending on which artisan had been hired to conceal damage done to the wall. When a piece of stone chipped or broke off, an artisan and a stone mason would be paired up to fix it. The stone mason would watch over the artisan's shoulder as they carved their design, confirming the artisan wasn't compromising the integrity of the structure. Then the two companions would switch places, and the stone mason would be under the artisan's scrutiny as they filled in the new carvings with a mixture of black clay, tar, and pitch. The difference between the black filler and the white stone was startling, but the soft curves and swirls the artisans preferred softened the contrast.

He passed others in the hallways: a maid carrying a tray, another maid pushing a cart of linens, a patrolling guard who gave a nod to Toddus as they passed each other. After a while he didn't see anyone. Small, faint sounds filtered through the near silence which filled the air around him. He could hear the sounds of military training, birdsongs, and children laughing, among others. He closed his eyes and let the sounds of life wash over him. He sometimes missed the simpler life he'd had before coming here, missed falling asleep beneath the apple grove near his home, missed washing in the cold river, missed playing with his sisters. But that life was in the past, and the prince let him return home for a week every three months.

Smiling to himself, Toddus continued on his way. The prince had asked for a snack, fruit

and cream, and it was Toddus's current mission to make that wish a reality. He walked down hallways and around corners, making his way towards the kitchen. It was five levels down and across the entire palace. Toddus liked finding new routes, though after five years, he had found every single hallway and staircase combination to get from one place to another. The wall's decoration appeared to always be changing, but he probably just concentrated on something different every time he passed the same spot. He descended down a staircase and paused again. He looked around. He thought he'd heard footsteps.

He left the landing and turned around a corner and walked a little quicker. He stopped at random times, and changed his direction, turning towards the aviary rather than the kitchens. He stopped again. There it was again, the distinct drag of a boot on the stone floor. It came from around the corner that he had just turned, but nobody walked into the open after him.

Toddus grimaced. The palace was a madhouse on a good day; servants bustled around, guards patrolled the grounds and non-private hallways, soldiers stood on the outer walls' parapets, and nobles tried to persuade the Queen's children and in turn influence the Queen. That was normal, just as normal as nobles' servants approaching him in an effort to talk to his current master the only prince, Dinn-gorse-ax. But those people didn't hide themselves; they walked straight up to him and engaged him in conversation, trying to find something in common to bolster his friendliness towards them. Toddus thought them annoying.

Though, this was a different way of accessing the prince. This person wished to follow him to the prince's location. Toddus opposed this. The palace was hosting foreign royalty, shifting the palace's usual pattern of operation. Five days ago, an emissary had arrived asking permission for an envoy from Coulairn to visit the palace. Two days later, the King of Coulairn, King Aluxdashus, had appeared and taken up residence on the third level. The southernmost

nation on the continent was not the closest ally of Nacedonia. They weren't as welcome as the Jernonians would be and they were quickly wearing out the small amount of welcome they had possessed. It was hard to pass a hallway which didn't have a Coulairn guard or clerk walking around. They almost always apologized and let Toddus walk them back to their designated area, but they were sure to leave again, just to be discovered elsewhere.

The people of Nacedonia were those of a slow and plodding culture, and Toddus was no different. If the spy wished to follow him, Toddus would lead him on a merry chase. Toddus turned another corner and stopped at a window and leaned out of it. He was only on the second floor, and the first floor was half sunk into the ground. It wasn't a far drop. A strip of grass surrounded the entire castle; in this particular place, it stretched between the castle and the smaller training ground. There the grass had been trampled into oblivion many decades ago, and now many boys stood with wooden swords practicing basic movements and being corrected by older soldiers. There was also a small well for drinking during breaks. A short circular wall had been built around the hole in the ground, keeping people from falling in. It was just high enough to hide someone.

Toddus listened for the now-familiar dragging footsteps to retreat a few steps back from the corner's edge while he stretched his arms a bit. Then he slipped out the window to hang by his fingertips. Toddus planted his feet slightly apart on the rough stone, and looked between his heels, sighting his landing space. He let go. Toddus hit the ground feet first and let himself fall backwards into a roll. He went over his head and landed again on his feet, and didn't bother to look back at the window before he sprinted past the surprised boys to the well. Toddus couched behind the wall and smiled.

One of the instructors shouted something and the boys snapped into the next position.

Another instructor walked past him to pick up the well's bucket and rope. Toddus watched him drop the bucket into the well and let the rope slip through his hands until Toddus heard a splash.

The man gripped the rope more tightly and muttered under his breath, his lips barely moving. "Should I ask what reason you had for jumping out a window or just be on my way, young guard?" He began pulling on the rope.

"Had someone following me. Didn't like it. And my name is Todd-tansy-us, but it's Guard Tansy, if you're going to call me anything," Toddus responded.

"Well, Guard Tansy, your stalker appears to have found something more interesting to do."

Toddus watched the boys as they repeated the positions again. He jerked his chin in their direction and asked, "How many do you think will stay for the year?"

The instructor turned around. "Same as every year, about half. By the end of spring, we'll know who to send back and who we'll keep."

Toddus knew the process; he'd been through it five years before. As winter receded north, soldiers travelled from town to town recruiting boys between the ages of ten and fifteen. Some would be sent home immediately following a physical test, the rest would be slowly marched to the palace for training. Those who couldn't keep up with the class would be sent home with a small stipend to cover travelling costs, while those who passed would be assigned to specific jobs.

The man spoke again. "But you know all that, don't you, Guard Tansy?"

Toddus nodded. He had been ten at the time, the oldest child in his family, and a boy. Toddus suspected he would not have been the only child from his family released to the army recruiters had his next older siblings also been boys. However, his next four siblings were girls,

and the army refused girls. There had been a few exceptions throughout Nacedonia's history, but they had all been the Daughters of Nobles, and Toddus's family were far from that. His parents were the owners of a small inn which sat on the outskirts of a village, but they had also just had a pair of twins. The inn supplied a modest amount of money, but they couldn't afford all nine of their children.

"I think it's time for you to go."

"Thank you," Toddus said and walked purposefully back to towards the castle wall below the window he had jumped out of a few minutes earlier. These walls were a marvel unto themselves, created by giant white marble blocks which had been set in their places centuries ago. Over time, rain and wind weathered pieces away and a similar process used to fix the inside would be implemented; though, the artisans were not involved here. Many stone masons worked together to complete each project instead. The designs on these walls were geometric, smaller squares or rectangles cut out of larger ones to fit a block of the same stone, and the cracks filled with the same black mixture used inside. When he was below the window, he leapt and grabbed hold of the edge of a stone and pulled himself higher to reach another handhold. In a few minutes, he reached the windowsill and hauled himself through the opening.

Toddus continued along his way, sprinting to the nearest servants' staircase. His little adrenaline shock had done wonders for his lack of sleep; he hadn't slept well since the Coulairns had arrived. His small set of rooms connected to Prince Dinn-gorse-ax's through a door, and every sound at night had him jumping out of bed to open the door. The prince was almost always asleep, and Toddus would close the door and return to bed before the next sound had him repeating the process. Even while awake, he felt jumpy and jittery. Just that morning, one of the kitchen maids had refused to give him a cup of Daleree, supposing that he had already had a

couple cups. Sill-holly-ol, another kitchen maid had snuck him a cup after he explained he needed it to stay awake. He'd had to promise to sleep that night, but he didn't have much hope.

He went down a floor, and into the kitchen to pick up the snack Prince Dinn-gorse-ax had sent him to get. After he picked up the tray on which the kitchen staff had placed the fruit and sweet cream, he started back on his way up to the prince's personal library. The servant's way would be easier than the regular way.

“Guard Tansy!”

The booming voice brought Todd-tansy-us to a stop. He turned to face the man who had addressed him, General Benn-ramie-ok. The man was an imposing figure: salt-and-pepper hair, gray eyes, and a square jaw bisected on the left side by a scar, which started at his right ear and travelled down to the middle of his throat and disappeared into the collar of his uniform. The gold collar contrasted nicely with his darker skin tone. Some people swore he was carved from wood. He never smiled. He was considered an excellent strategist, though the last war had been over twenty-five years ago.

Toddus had seen little carved figurines of the General in the capital's shops, but he'd always thought the carvers had done it wrong. They should have used wood from walnut trees rather than from beech trees. “Yes, Sir?” Toddus responded.

“Where are you off to?”

Toddus glanced down at the tray in his hands. “The prince was hungry.”

“Bring him down to the main hall. The Coulairn King finally told the Queen's Consort why he's here,” General Ramie sneered.

Toddus smiled quickly, baring his teeth without any mirth. “He's talking to the Queen's Consort? Doesn't he know that's the worst way to get what he wants?”



“Apparently not. He wants a tour of the menagerie. Respectfully requests that the prince meets them at the main hall. Go!” The general turned and walked away.

Toddus smiled to himself, this time with mirth, and began walking up the stairs. He knew what was going on now. The Coulairns had their spies and the Nacedonians had their own, too.

Toddus reached the fifth floor and exited the staircase. He was halfway across the palace from the next staircase he needed to go up, but this was the fifth floor. It was hardly ever used and some people called it the servants’ level. The servants weren’t housed here. They lived in a different building, which connected to the palace by way of a long hallway. This was sunk into the land like the first level of the palace, and many people simply walked over the hallway’s roof, rather than go around it. It was called the servants’ level because they were the only ones to use it. The time to climb up the stairs, then traverse across this level and climb back down the stairs was shorter than going along on any of the other four floors.

The young guard stopped at a door and looked around. He couldn’t be too careful, and when he was sure no one else was around, he knocked on the door: tap, tap, tap, a pause, tap, tap, tap, a pause again, tap. The door opened, and Toddus stepped through the doorway. He nodded at his fellow guard, Guard Holly, who had opened the door and started up the stairs. This was the shortest tower, only going up two flights before Toddus reached the top. As he turned around the last curve, he heard the shink of a sword being drawn. He poked his head around enough to see another guard, who had a knife in one hand and the sheath in the other.

The guard was sitting on the top step. He sheathed the knife and leaned against the wall. Red hair peeked out from beneath his hat. “’ello, Tansy.”

Toddus nodded to him, “Just get here, Basil?” Guard Basil nodded, and Toddus stepped past him. He laid his hand against the door and looked down at his red-haired counterpart. “You

want a strawberry?"

"It's welcome."

Toddus passed him a strawberry and opened the door. He slipped through and closed it again. He faced the room. The curved walls were completely covered with filled bookcases. Slightly to the left stood a small circular table and two ladderback chairs, to the right sat a large fluffy sitting chair, and straight ahead, below the only window, lay a mattress on the floor. The mattress had been piled with twenty or so pillows and a few blankets. Amongst the pillows lay the only prince of the Nacedonian Kingdom, Prince Dinn-gorse-ax.

Toddus studied the prince out of the corner of his eye as we strode over to the table and set the tray down. He had reddish-brown hair which started curling in little ringlets at the crown of his head, a very straight nose despite having broken it twice, high cheekbones and a slightly pointed chin. He took very little after the Queen, looking much more like the Queen's Consort. The only thing he could boast about coming from his mother was his eyes. Many people hated that family trait, eyes as black as coal, giving the appearance that they either had no pupil or no iris.

At one time, Toddus had been afraid of the eyes the prince and princesses shared with their mother. The fear had come from his mother. The night before he had left home to travel to the palace, she had told him not to look any of the royals in the eyes, that their black soulless eyes could steal your soul. Of course, it had been a complete accident when he had looked Prince Dinn-gorse-ax in the eyes. It had been near the end of the summer in the first year of his training when he slipped and fell into a ditch. The prince had been walking by and offered him a hand up. Toddus had taken the helping hand and he hadn't seen black eyes; he'd seen a rainbow. It was only when the prince had turned his head that the black appeared. Toddus had been so surprised

that he hadn't had time to be afraid, and he got his assignment as one of the prince's personal guards the following week.

Now he spent most of his time trying to make that rainbow appear. No matter how stony their faces were, when Toddus could see the colors in their irises, he could see what the royals were feeling.

Toddus turned back to the prince. This library was his personal hideaway. It wasn't a secret within the palace; practically anyone could find him if they wanted to, but only those the other guards let past would make it up here. "Sir, I've brought the snack you requested."

"What did I tell you to call me, Toddus?" the prince asked from where he lay on his stomach, and across the back of his neck lay a cat. The cat's head and front paws hung over his left shoulder, while its tail twined around his right biceps.

"You requested I call you by your given name, but I refused unless we were alone. Propriety is more important in most situations."

Dinnax looked up from his book. "There is no one else here."

"Basil is right outside the door, Sir." Toddus gave the prince a blank stare.

"Yes, yes. Because I, as the one child who does not have the right to inherit the throne, must always have at least three guards watching me at all times." He shooed the cat off his shoulders and stood. He walked over to the table only in a pair of lounge shorts and grabbed the robe off the back of one of the chairs and put it on. He sat and gestured for Toddus to take the other. He picked up the fork.

The cat stretched and walked around in the sunlight streaming through the window.

Toddus sat. "Those are the orders. Also, you'll need to eat quickly."

"Why?" Dinnax stabbed a blueberry with the fork and dragged it through the cream.

“The Coulairn King finally disclosed why he asked for our hospitality.”

Dinnax stabbed a whole strawberry next. “And this concerns me because?”

Toddus leaned forward theatrically whispered, “I’ve heard some rumors.”

“But, do you know what they say about rumors?” Prince Dinnax poked the fork in Toddus’s direction.

Toddus leaned back, pretended to think, and watched the cat reposition herself and curl up into a ball. “They’re five steps away from facts, but they had to start somewhere.”

“What’s the rumor?”

“The soldiers are talking about the princesses and their magic –.”

“Magic is illegal in Coulairn,” Dinnax cut him off.

“Illegal or not, it appears as though they learned enough to turn themselves into animals and ran away.”

“Animals?”

“Which is where you come in. Your menagerie. The king wants a tour of it and all the animals you have.”

The prince grimaced. “I suppose we shouldn’t keep my father waiting any longer than we must. Eat some of this.”

Toddus grabbed a few pieces of fruit and stuffed them in his mouth. He’d never eaten better than after he gained the prince’s trust. When they had finished the fruit, Prince Dinnax set the dish of cream on the floor. He stood, and pulled the robe closed and tied the waist rope.

“Shall we?”

They collected Basil and Holly as they went down the stairs and walked unimpeded along the servants’ level. They all went down the staircase nearest the prince’s rooms, and Toddus

entered first, checking the drawing room, bedroom, and bathroom, before shouting, “All clear.” Basil and Holly entered and stayed in the drawing room, while the prince entered the bedroom and threw open his wardrobe.

Toddus looked more closely at the bedroom. It looked the same as it had when they left earlier in the morning. The four-poster bed stood against the far wall, a tall window on each side. The heavy curtains of both windows were open, but the lacy inner curtains had been left closed. The curtains on the bed were open as well, not that the prince actually closed them when he slept. The wardrobe, carved from dark wood, covered almost the entire left wall. The opposite wall was covered in book shelves, filled with books and the occasional trinket from Prince Dorroch, Prince Dinnax’s childhood friend.

“What do you think, Toddus, red or blue?” Prince Dinnax held up two tunics, one a mauve color and the other a gray-blue.

“Besides needing your eyes checked for color recognition,” Toddus said, smiling, “the gray-blue one.”

Prince Dinnax huffed and muttered something Toddus couldn’t hear under his breath.

Toddus ignored the prince’s childish antics and stepped up to the wardrobe himself. He pulled a pair of gray billowy trousers out of a drawer and tossed them at the prince. He heard rustling behind himself, and rooted through the sashes. When Toddus turned back to face Prince Dinnax, the prince had already pulled on the trousers and was pulling the tunic over his head. Toddus waited until the prince had smoothed the tunic down over his chest, before he stepped forward with the royal blue sash he had chosen. Prince Dinnax held one end at his right hip while Toddus wrapped the long length of fabric around his waist twice, tucked the fabric around itself in a loose knot and spread the fabric out a bit as he settled it on the prince’s left shoulder, and

brought the end back to his right hip, where he pushed the end through the knot he had made before.

“I suppose we are ready.” The prince began walking back to the drawing room.

“Your Majesty.” Toddus waited for the prince to turn back. “I believe you’ll need shoes as well.”

Prince Dinnax looked down at his bare feet. “Do you really think so?” He wiggled his toes.

“Yes, Sire.” Toddus opened a different compartment of the wardrobe and pulled out a pair of short boots and a pair of socks.

Prince Dinnax sat on the bench at the foot of his bed and slipped the socks and boots on. The boots reached his mid-calf and he laced them up, then stood. “Anything else?” he asked.

“No.” With that answer they were off again. They simply walked down the grand staircase in the middle of each floor to the second floor, where the stairs ended. To get to the first floor they would have needed to find a servants’ staircase, but that was not their destination. Instead, they turned right and strode along the grand staircase’s side until it opened up into a large hallway. Other hallways branched off this one, spreading through the palace out to the east and west. Each of these branching hallways had doors to numerous rooms along their lengths.

The main hallway ended in a single door. This door was taller than two men and wider than six standing shoulder to shoulder. It was made of a very light-colored wood with a large metal hoop welded to the door in place of a normal doorknob. Two castle guards stood on either side, and they stepped up to the hoops and grabbed them to pull the doors open as the prince reached them. After passing the door, Basil and Holly stepped to the left and stopped. Prince Dinnax and Toddus continued walking. Not many nobles of the court were present, though many

had houses in the capital. To put the visiting king at ease, Queen Carr-gorse-in had ordered all but those who had business with her to entertain themselves at their own homes.

Prince Dinnax led the way past the spattering of nobles and bowed to his mother, father, and the King of Coulairn. King Aluxdashus was sweating. Unlike the local nobles, who were wearing lighter free-flowing clothing to match the coming hotter months, he was wearing heavy fabrics laced tightly to his body from neck to boots. His pudgy cheeks had turned a dark red already and his hair was plastered to his head.

“May I present my son, Prince Dinn-gorse-ax,” the Queen stated, clearly enunciating her words and allowing absolutely no arguments.

King Aluxdashus smiled wanly. “A pleasure to meet you, Prince Dinnax.”

Toddus watched the Queen tense, her lips pursing together. King Aluxdashus, not seeing this, bowed slightly in the prince’s vague direction and turned back to the Queen’s Consort, Forrgorse-es. “For what reason did you call him here?”

“We called him here,” Queen Carr-gorse-in said coldly, “because he is the one who amassed the menagerie you wish to see. You must ask him for a tour, not me, nor my consort.”

Light laughter echoed around the room. King Aluxdashus’s eyes flitted around the few people present. Toddus didn’t bother to look around. He wouldn’t see a culprit, and no action would be taken regardless if someone was caught. It was well known to whom the menagerie belonged, and any humiliation was the result of bad intelligence gathering on the king’s part.

King Aluxdashus turned back to Prince Dinnax. “Would you be willing to give me a tour?”

“May I ask for what reason?” Prince Dinnax smiled, but with only the slightest upturn of his lips, and held out his hands in a disarmed fashion, as if everything was out of his control. “You

see, I try to let the animals I capture live as normally as possible in the habitats I create for them. I don't want to disturb any of them, if it can be avoided."

"I," the King paused. "I have lost my daughters. A wicked witch from the Petran Forest snuck into their rooms a fortnight ago and turned them all into animals. They ... they were very confused and ran away. I need to find them."

Toddus kept his face blank as he watched Queen Carr-gorse-in look skyward, close her eyes, take a deep breath and release it, before she opened her eyes again. He made eye contact with the Queen, and knew they had the same thoughts. The Coulairns operated under an inheritance rule which was opposite of their own. In Nacedonia, the oldest girl inherited the title, but in Coulairn the oldest boy did. That fact, added to how he deferred to the Queen's Consort even with the Queen present, painted a distinct picture of what female life was like under his rule. Toddus was absolutely convinced the princesses had run away using magic, like the rumors he had heard.

Prince Dinnax allowed his smile to widen, his eyes becoming slits. "Of course, if it is a matter of safety for your poor, defenseless daughters, a tour is a necessity." He gestured back towards the door. "In the interest of saving time, do you have a list of what we are looking for?"

King Aluxdashus stood straighter. "Yes, I do have that. It's up in my room. I'll have someone go retrieve it." He looked in the direction of the door, made eye contact with someone and nodded.

Toddus looked the king up and down. He had working legs from what Toddus could see, but he kept his mouth shut. There was enough uneasiness in the room already.

Prince Dinnax swept away towards the exit. "Let us begin, then. I haven't actually caught anything in the last fortnight, so this will likely be an exercise in futility."



Toddus, the perfect shadow, followed and ignored the huffing and puffing behind him as King Aluxdashus tried to catch up. Basil and Holly joined them, as well as four guards in the sweltering Coulairn uniforms. They turned right down the first hall and walked to the end. Holly stepped forward to open the last door on the right and bright light streamed into the hall. They all stepped out and King Aluxdashus squinted.

It was an hour's ride to the entrance to the menagerie, and the prince's personal guards knew it. Basil didn't wait for an order; he simply walked away towards the stables. Prince Dinnax stopped and turned his head in the king's direction. "We will need to ride to the menagerie. It's also outside of the perimeter walls. Are you still okay with the situation?"

"Of course, of course." King Aluxdashus smiled graciously. "I would not have come here if I wasn't expecting some sort of danger."

"Should we continue to the stables to retrieve our mounts, or should we wait here for your list?"

"I will leave one of my guards behind to show the messenger the way. Let us go now, Prince Dinnax."

They, minus one Coulairn guard, began walking in the grassy path around the palace. "That is another thing we should speak about."

"What is?"

"How you are addressing me. You see, you are addressing me with a sense of overfamiliarity. This is the first time we have met, so you should be calling me Prince Dinn-gorse-ax. Dinnax is my first name, so addressing me as simply Prince Dinnax is for people I have developed a standing relationship with." Prince Dinnax kept the pace brisk.

Toddus put his hand on his sword; watched the Coulairn Guards tense at their king being

reprimanded.

“Is that so?” the king murmured, his left eye twitching. “Why has no one mentioned this before?”

“Likely there are other people around. We may have very few of our nobles visiting the palace, but to correct you in front of even a few might have dire consequences to the relationship between our countries, wouldn’t you say?”

“An excellent point.” The king practically glared.

The rest of the walk lapsed into silence, neither prince nor king willing to rekindle the tense conversation. Toddus watched shadows move swiftly across the ground and looked up at the sky. The sun was reappearing from behind clouds and disappearing behind them again just as quickly, blinding one second and then covered with white fluff, then blinding again.

They reached the stable. Basil already stood with his steed and three others, one each for the prince, Toddus, and Holly. Four more were saddled, their reins wrapped around fence posts. While the Coulairns figured out to whom each horse belonged, Basil handed each horses’ reins over to their respective owners then led his horse a few feet away and mounted it. His blue-black gelding didn’t even blink from the added weight. Holly’s russet stallion reared and settled quickly. Toddus swung himself into the seat of his saddle. His white and brown spotted mare tossed her head and sidestepped away from Holly’s stallion. The stallion stepped forward as if to follow, but Holly pulled the reins back and forced the horse to a stop. Prince Dinnax’s auburn mare chewed on her bit, but stayed still as he mounted.

They watched the Coulairns mount their steeds. As the king mounted his horse, two people hurried up. One was the guard told to wait at the palace door; the other was also dressed in a Coulairn uniform. He was slower than the first, and dragged his left leg lightly. He held a

piece of paper to King Aluxdashus. He started walking back to the palace, but looked over his shoulder and stared at Prince Dinnax.

Toddus didn't like the look of him, but he especially didn't like the limp. He imagined the limp would force the man to drag his leg regardless of the terrain; he would be very clearly heard on evenly laid stone. Toddus supposed he could have been the man following him earlier and committed the man to memory: narrow face, thin but wide mouth, straight nose, light gray eyes under heavy drooping lids, blond scraggly beard, lighter blond hair cut at the collar of his shirt, black boots with the left one's sole being worn more heavily on the inside on the account of his limp.

As everyone who would be visiting the menagerie was mounted, they set off. The ride was silent. Holly and a Coulairn guard rode in front followed by King Aluxdashus and another of his guards. Technically, Prince Dinnax should have been riding beside the foreign king, but neither man was willing to follow the rule of politeness. Instead, Toddus rode next to the prince. Basil and the last Coulairn Guard brought up the rear. Toddus had been on this path many times before, every day the prince went to the menagerie in the past five years, Toddus had been with him. Though it wasn't every day, sometimes it did feel like it.

Toddus looked right and left, keeping an eye on what was happening along the forest's edge. They rarely had a problem riding through, but sometimes a deer would startle the horses or a rabbit would lead a fox on a chase past them.

They dismounted at the gates and Basil and a Coulairn guard took the horses to a small fenced pasture to await the men's return.

Prince Dinnax unlocked the high gate, then Holly and Toddus pulled one side open. "Please, come this way," Prince Dinnax said.

## CHAPTER 2: THE MENAGERIE

King Aluxdashus stepped inside and stopped, looking around. Toddus knew what he saw. The large natural basin in front of their eyes had formed centuries ago, but hadn't been used until Prince Dinnax had become interested in studying animals. Many people could still remember the beginning of his fascination, when he had wandered out of the castle grounds and into the wilderness. There, he had met the Jernonian Prince, Dorroch. The other boy had been too young to shapeshift into a human, so Prince Dinnax had walked back home with a small dragon by his side. They had nearly started a war. In the years since that instance, Queen's Consort Forr-gorsees had indulged his son's interest and funded the construction of each section of the menagerie. The menagerie stretched from where they stood all the way to the base of the Jernonian cliffs. A small section of the cliffs had generously been gifted to Prince Dinnax for cave and cliff dwelling creatures. Between where they stood and the cliffs, was every habitat imaginable; beaches, grasslands, forests, swamps.

Prince Dinnax began explaining the process. "I research and watch each animal. I want to know all of its habits and needs before I bring one here. I oversee the construction of a new habitat, or the alteration of an existing one, then go capture the creature. We bring it back and get it settled." He faced the king again. "I don't like just letting anyone in here. It's not a power move. I just like to see them often, more than if I had to travel to see them."

"How long will this take?" King Aluxdashus asked, still staring out at the miles and miles of pathways between habitats. "Can we not take the horses?"

"Well, you see ...." Prince Dinnax paused.

Toddus stepped forward and said, "Many of the animals hide when they hear horses, but

they don't when humans are simply walking around them."

"And you are?" The king stared at him.

"This is Todd-tansy-us. He is my main personal guard and you may call him Guard Tansy," Prince Dinnax explained quickly.

"I see."

"May I see the list? I will be able to lead you anywhere, depending on what you are looking for, the types of animals, I mean." Dinnax looked at the king with a slight smile.

King Aluxdashus pulled the list out of his pocket. "You can read Petran, yes?" At the prince's nod, he handed over the list.

"Let's see here. We don't have this first one; they are a fire hazard and I have not had the opportunity to study them through their entire life cycle. But we do have gryphons here. We also have tame ones we have bred to ride. Have you been shown the aviary in the third palace tower?"

The king looked perplexed. "An aviary for gryphons in the palace? Are you sure? Those are usually for messenger birds, or perhaps a lady's hobby of raising doves, are they not?"

Prince Dinnax glanced up. "Well, yes, I am quite serious. My great-grandmother had the idea to train the gryphons, and we had to put them somewhere close but high up. And we do have a normal aviary in the soldiers' grounds."

"Who would I ask to see the gryphons in the aviary?"

"General Ramie, Your Highness," Toddus said. "His wife is in charge of their care."

"I see. What of the others on the list?"

"We have wolves, and a few types of monkeys. Otters, yep. No, too common; I can walk through the forest and see those. Same with that one." Prince Dinnax paused. "This one here."

He held out the list to King Aluxdashus, his thumb next to one of the words. “Is there a particular type?”

“Medium-sized with red-auburn type fur.”

Prince Dinnax pulled the list back to himself. “A red bear?” The king nodded, and the prince continued, “I think all mine are brown and black, but we can check.”

“No, too common. These are cute; I have two. No, way too big to catch, also completely confrontational.”

King Aluxdashus said, “I am aware the second-to-last one is a pest which eats trash in towns and cities. I have men combing through the capital’s streets every night.”

“Well, I would not call all of them pests, but cities do seem to have large populations of them. Also, this last one. I do not understand it.”

“One-horned horse. Yes, it is strange, but it is what I saw; a horse with one horn coming out of its forehead.” King Aluxdashus sighed.

“That one is a no, as well.” Prince Dinnax smiled. “So that means we have ....”

“Six enclosures to look at, I believe, Your Highness,” Toddus said.

“That is right; the gryphons, the wolves, the monkeys, the otters, the bears, and the koalas.” Prince Dinnax smiled. “This should only take a few hours. “Shall we?” He gestured down the path. “We will start with the monkeys. They are the closest.”

King Aluxdashus watched him for a few seconds. “Guard Tansy.”

“Yes, Your Highness?” Toddus bowed to the king.

“Does he really mean to go traipsing along this path for the rest of the day?”

“Yes, he does, Your Highness. It is something he does often.” Toddus thought for a second. “May I ask a question?”

“Ask it.”

“Red is not a usual color for a bear. Are the rest unnatural colors?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I suppose we will be able to see them much easier, as they will not have the ability to camouflage themselves.” Toddus smiled kindly and pointed at the prince, who was already halfway down the entrance path. “You should probably follow him, before he gets too far ahead.” Toddus looked at the Coulairn King, watched him sigh and begin walking. He hoped this didn’t affect the nations’ working relationships and walked along the path after them.

They stopped by the monkeys first. There were five kinds and they were separated due to the possibility of serious injury. All five kinds were very territorial.

King Aluxdasus walked past the first two, simply saying, “Too big.” He stopped at the third.

Toddus looked into the first enclosure. There were five of the monkeys, a two count up from the original three the prince had captured. If they walked upright, they would be as tall as a man. They had thick and coarse black hair, and the skin exposed on their faces, the palms of their hands, and the bottoms of their feet were black, as well. They were the most dangerous, and one bared its very large fangs at Toddus.

The second also held a large type. They liked to sit in the trees and watch the humans walk around. There were only two, one brown and one gold-yellow. The gold-yellow one had tried to bite Toddus on a few memorable occasions. Toddus watched them silently as he listened to Prince Dinnax tell King Aluxdashus about the third kind. They were small, only the length of a forearm and tailed, and started to point them out, high in the trees. The king cut him off and continued to the fourth, then the fifth type, but returned to the fourth.

The fifth, was also a small type, only as big as Toddus's hand. He liked them, tiny and cute with tiny and cute teeth which only did minimal damage when they bit down. Toddus had gotten worse wounds from training. All of them were light brown and he had attempted to name them, but kept getting the seven mixed up. He was only ever sure of which one Leaf was because she carried a leaf around with her.

The fourth type was a medium-sized. King Aluxdashus spoke then, "If I had to pick a size, I would say this, but with a tail."

"I suppose we will have to move on." Prince Dinnax said. "The otters are closest. I think they are absolutely adorable." He led the way down a path and the king followed.

Toddus did as well, but stopped after about ten steps. He nearly groaned out loud but caught himself. This was the long path. It wound down though the large cat and turtle areas before it circled back to the otters. He rubbed a hand across his face and began walking again. The two Coulairn Guards accompanying them glared at him. Prince Dinnax prattled as he walked, pointing out the different animals, even as he kept a slightly faster than normal pace; "Tigers, do you see them? Easy for us to see, but not so easy for their prey, and I have not figured that out. Ooh, the turtle is out. I think its shell looks like a craggy stone."

King Aluxdashus stopped and leaned against the low stone wall along the pathway, not caring about the turtle. He breathed hard and stared at the otters, perhaps a little too intently. When his breathing was under control, he stood again and licked his lips. "I think we should move on."

"Oh, not here, either. Perhaps the wolves?"

When they arrived, King Aluxdashus barely looked at the wolves, shook his head, and asked, "Where to now?"



Prince Dinnax stared at a tree and counted on his fingers.

“Bears, koalas, or gryphons, Your Highness,” Toddus muttered from a few feet away.

“Ah, yes. The bears and gryphons are close together. To the cliffs.” Prince Dinnax marched away.

King Aluxdashus looked at the top of the cliffs.

“Don’t worry, Your Highness,” Toddus assured him. “You’re not going up the cliffs, just to the base.”

The king’s disbelief showed clearly on his face, before his forehead furrowed and his entire face turned red. “Only to the base! Do you know how far that is? I don’t care what you have to say; your prince is crazy!” He swept his hands all around himself, gesturing to the enclosures. “This entire place is a horrible idea. Absolutely horrible! And dangerous!” His voice grew higher in pitch with every sentence. “If just one of these creatures gets out, anyone in this area would be dead.” He began walking after the prince. “*Only ... only to the base.*”

Nearly an hour later they reached the cliff base. The enclosure was rather big, as both the bears and gryphons shared the same space. Neither type of animal bothered the other. The gryphons nested on the cliff ledges and the bears hid in the lower caves during winter. The bears each lived rather solitary lives, usually only converging at the river or small lake in twos or threes. And the gryphons tended to watch for an empty time to swoop down to catch fish and drink.

They stood there. King Aluxdashus walked to the right, trying to see far into the enclosure. Prince Dinnax sat on the wall.

“Anything?” Prince Dinnax asked after the king had walked past them three or four times.

“No,” King Aluxdashus spat out.

“Unfortunate. We will need to walk almost to the front again to look at the koalas.”

Prince Dinnax stood up, brushed the back of his tunic off and set off down the path towards the entrance.

The king followed, silently. He became slower and slower as they plodded along, glancing at the animals randomly. King Aluxdashus stopped and stared. “What are those birds?”

“Oh ...” Prince Dinnax hurried back to the king. “These are swans. I saw them in the Petran Forest a few years ago, but they hate humans. I only just got them settled seven or eight months ago because it took so long to learn their needs.” He stopped and stared for a few seconds, then bounced on his feet. “Toddus, Toddus, come here.” He waved Toddus over, and Toddus obliged his prince, going to stand next to him. Prince Dinnax wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pointed, “Look, look, they have a baby.”

Sure enough, Toddus could spot a smaller, featherless bird crouching in the reeds near the pond Prince Dinnax had included in the enclosure. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Coulairn King sneer at them. Prince Dinnax tensed.

Toddus grit his teeth but spoke calmly, “Perhaps, it will be less scared and you will get a better look in a few days, Your Highness.”

“Oh, yes, of course. To the koalas,” Prince Dinnax said. He marched off, not checking if the rest would follow.

King Aluxdashus stared at the little bear-like creatures as they munched slowly on leaves. They barely moved as they grabbed more leaves and shoved them into their mouths. He shook his head at everyone’s questioning looks.

They trudged back to the entrance. Outside the gates, Basil was still watching the horses

with the third Coulairn guard.

“Well, as beautiful as that was and very informational, unfortunately, I didn’t see any of my daughters.” King Aluxdashus bowed to Prince Dinn-gorse-ax, as the guard brought him his horse. “Prince Dinnax, I think I shall retire for a bit of rest before dinner.”

Prince Dinnax ground his teeth together, but smiled. “Prince Dinn-gorse-ax, if you please.”

Toddus sent a prayer to Lady Eileen that the prince didn’t act on any thoughts of murder.

The king looked like he’d bitten into a lemon, but he smiled and said, “Prince Dinn-gorse-ax, thank you.”

They mounted their horses and made the long ride home. Queen’s Consort Forr-gorse-es greeted them in the back courtyard after they left the stables. “Did you have any luck?”

“No, but thank you for your gracious hospitality.” King Aluxdashus dismounted and bowed to both Nacedonian royals. “I think I shall go lie down.” He looked up sharply as a giant shadow passed over them.

Prince Dinnax smiled and stepped away from the group.

“No, we have guests. Who are leaving tomorrow. We must have one proper banquet while they are here. Do whatever you had planned tomorrow after they leave.” Consort Forr-gorse-es gestured towards the palace.

Prince Dinnax continued to back away. “I have already been as much help as I could have been. What is the use of me sticking around for a party?”

“What is going on?” King Aluxdashus asked.

The air buffeted around as a red dragon beat its wings to slow its decent. It alighted on the ground and opened an immense paw and grabbed Prince Dinnax around the waist, then used

its strong back legs to launch itself back into the sky before it opened its wings again. Silence filled the courtyard.

“Forgive me,” one of the Couairn guards spoke up, “but did a dragon just kidnap your prince?”

“No,” said Toddus, shaking his head right and left.

“Yes,” said Basil, nodding his head up and down.

“Sort of,” said Holly, shrugging his shoulders.

Silence fell again while all the Couairn guards stared at them, mouths gaping open. King Aluxdashus fell back against the nearest wall, still staring at the sky.

“Please, do not worry.” Queen’s Consort Forr-gorse-es helped the foreign king to stand. “Every thing will be alright. That was just Prince Dorroch from the Jernonian kingdom. Please, Dinnax is no danger.”

“That was Prince Dorroch?” King Aluxdashus hesitantly asked.

“Yes. My son and Prince Dorroch have been friends for many years. Sometimes they agree to meet at less opportune moments.”

“They are friends ....” The king took a deep breath. “I suppose that makes sense. Prince Dorroch was the one to suggest looking for my daughters here.”

“Please, come inside. I believe you said you wished to relax until dinner, yes?” Queen’s Consort Forr-gorse-es led the king back into the palace

The guards closed their mouths, then looked up at the sky.

“There is no danger from the skies,” Basil said.

“How do you know that? A dragon just swooped down, grabbed your prince, and flew away. Surely, there are other things to worry about, as well.”

“Think what you want to.” Holly shrugged again. He walked away. “Hey, Tansy, Basil. Want to come down to the hot springs with me?”

Toddus looked at Basil and Basil looked back at him. They smiled, then took off running, passing Holly. He yelled after them and ran, too.

### CHAPTER 3: A ROYAL DINNER

Toddus relaxed in his own rooms after his bath. Holly, Basil, and he had used the time in the springs more like a swimming pond.

A knock on his door startled him from a light doze. Toddus stood up and walked barefoot over to the door. He opened it and found Sill-holly-ol, his fellow guard's younger sister, standing in the hallway. She worked in the kitchens and Toddus saw her there occasionally.

"Hello, Guard Tansy." She looked at Prince Dinnax's door, about ten feet to the left of Toddus's. "Uh ... well, you see ... we're, I mean, the kitchen staff ... we're—"

"He's not there so you don't have to worry about disturbing him. He's out with Prince Dorroch," Toddus told her.

She smiled and relaxed. "That's good, I suppose. We're missing a few small dishes and forks. Someone said you had taken something up to the prince, and we're wondering if you brought it back down?"

"Oh." Toddus sighed. "I know we didn't."

"Well, that's an easy fix. I'll just go get it." She turned to leave.

"Wait!" He grabbed her arm. "I'll go get it. I forgot about it; it's my responsibility. Go get some rest."

"I should say the same to you! I heard you jumped out a window today, and after that you had to go all the way to the menagerie. You've had a long day."

Toddus thought about pointing out that the sun had yet to set, and the prince hadn't returned, either, so he would be awake for a while. "The perks of belonging to the prince's entourage, he sleeps in late, so we do, too. The kitchen staff don't get that luxury."

“Okay. But be quick. Callan is in charge of the dishware this month. She has to wait in the kitchen until everything is found.” She watched him suspiciously.

“Straight up and then back down again. Promise.”

With his promise she left and he shoved his feet back into his boots and laced them up. He grabbed a light overcoat and shrugged it on as he closed the door behind him. He made it up to the library without any problems; no dragging footsteps haunted his path.

The tray and fruit dish were on the table along with the forks. The other dish was right where Prince Dinnax had left it, sitting on the floor next to his chair. The chairs were made of a white wood, which glowed orange in the sunlight. The cat from earlier was curled up on the chair cushion. Toddus bent down to pick up the little dish and the cat lifted its head. He reached out to it, rubbed his hand over the top of its head and scratched behind its ears. Toddus’s hand blocked the sunlight and he stumbled back, dropping the dish. It didn’t break, but rolled away from him. The cat stood up and stretched its front legs, popping out its claws. Toddus stared as it sat back and licked its front paw, showing off its paw pads, which were the color of limes.

Toddus sat there for a few more minutes as the cat cleaned itself, then stood. He picked the dish up from where it had fallen and set it on the tray with the other dish. The cat had unusual coloring, just like King Aluxdashus had said of his daughter’s animal forms. He looked down at the cat and said a single word, “Aluxdashus.” The cat immediately puffed up and hissed at him.

Toddus stepped back. “You understand me?”

She stopped hissing, then bobbed her head.

“Are you from Coulairn?”

She bobbed her head again.

“One of the princesses?”

Another bob.

“Does Prince Dinnax know?”

Again, a bob.

“Alright, just stay here until I can talk to him.” Toddus took the tray and left the library, closing the door behind him. He gave the tray to whom he assumed was Callan. He was halfway up the last flight of stairs on the way back to his rooms when another of the royal guard caught up to him.

“Are you Todd-tansy-us?” he asked.

Toddus didn't recognize him, but his dark red uniform indicated he belonged to the Queen's guard. “Yes, I am.”

The other guard took a breath. “Queen Carr-gorse-in would like you to take Prince Dinn-gorse-ax's place at the banquet.”

Toddus looked down at what he was wearing: a light-weight see-through shirt, the light overcoat, slightly too small pants, and scuffed boots.

“I would suggest changing before coming down, but they expect to start eating soon.”

“Understood.” Toddus nodded, then took the rest of the stairs two at a time. He sprinted down the halls, and nearly overshot his door. He pushed it closed behind him and threw open the doors of his wardrobe, searching for his single set of good clothes. He'd bought them just a couple months ago with a little extra money Prince Dinnax had gifted him at the winter solstice. Toddus pulled off his less than stellar outfit, and slipped on the light blue pants and pale-yellow tunic. The sash was light blue as well, but he didn't have a high enough status to throw it over his shoulder or add pins or broaches, so he just wound it around his waist three times and tied it in a simple knot. Toddus rubbed his boots with the shirt he had just taken off. It took off most of the



dirt, but not the scratches. Toddus slid his feet into them, then laced them up. They were his only pair.

As ready as he could be, he raced back to the second floor and across it to the dining hall. He stopped to catch his breath and was pushed roughly aside by someone else. Toddus kept his feet and looked up into a pock-marked face. He didn't recognize the man, though he wore a Coulairn guard's uniform.

"You are one of the prince's men, are you not?"

Toddus did recognize the voice and turned to face King Aluxdashus. He bowed.

"You came with us to the menagerie today," the king stated.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"And your name was ...?"

"Tansy." Toddus already wished he could go back up to his room to await the prince's return.

"Right. What are you doing here?"

"I was invited to the banquet since the prince is still out of the palace," Toddus said.

"I see." King Aluxdashus stared at him for a few more seconds before he moved on and walked through the doors to the dining hall.

Toddus followed behind the king's guards, and, once inside, looked for a place to sit. More people would have been invited, if the main guest wasn't of such high importance. While a bigger banquet would generate more gossip and excitement, any increase of the invite list could increase the danger to the foreign king. Furnishings had been changed to reflect the smaller get together. The usual long tables and benches, which normally would have been set in long connecting rows up and down the hall, were missing, causing almost all of the floor to be

exposed. Originally made of pale blue tiles in twelve-foot squares, it was now a mix of every color of the rainbow and many geometric shapes of different sizes. Among the shapes were diamonds, triangles, rectangles, squares, and trapezoids, all grouted with a mixture of lime, fine sand, and water. The floor shined from the hot thin wax applied regularly to the floor's surface to protect it from the thousands of shoes that trod on it daily. The wax was scuffed in a few places where the table and benches had been removed.

The dais at the end of the hall was hidden behind large curtains, rich red ones which stretched from the rafters to the floor. They were usually hung against the wall behind the dais. Torn and worn in various ways, these, like the walls, had been mended, pieces sewn together, and new patterns joined the old ones, both the originals and those precious added to the fabric. The Head Table, usually up on the dais, had been positioned right in the middle of the hall. As it was positioned now, the short end now served as the head of the kingdom position. Queen Carr-gorse-in sat there. She stood as the herald announced King Aluxdashus's arrival, and she seated the king immediately to her left. She also told him he could seat one of his guards in the neighboring seat, as a buffer to the noble sitting in the next seat. On her right, her consort was standing next to the chair across from King Aluxdashus. Next to the consort stood the Crown Princess, Lann-gorse-in. She was twelve, but she would take over when her mother died.

The next chair was empty, set aside for Prince Dinnax. The Queen stared at Toddus and pointed to the empty spot meant for her son.

Toddus bowed and followed her unsaid directions, going to stand next to the Crown Princess. He sat when everyone else did. The evening kitchen staff came through the doors as though they had been signaled. To his right, Princess Coss-gorse-et stared at one of the visiting king's guards. It was the one who had shoved Toddus just outside the hall. The little girl, only

eight years old, had already taken the knife from beside her plate and held it in both hands in her lap. The guard sneered at her, and her hands shook. Beside her the last two princesses, six and five years of age, were oblivious to the atmosphere. One played with the cloth napkin spread over her lap, while the other had taken the hairpin from her curls and was making the horse carved on it gallop across the tablecloth.

Toddus swallowed. He was just a guard playing a proxy of a prince. He didn't have the prince's power or authority. Even the prince's power wasn't all encompassing. It was a gift from his mother, a gift which could be revoked at any time.

The Coulairns would be leaving the next day, but Toddus didn't like Princess Coss-gorse-et's reaction. He searched the rest of the guests until he found who he wanted, General Ramie. The large, infallible man sat about halfway down the table, paying attention to the conversation between his wife and his sister. When a bowl was placed in front of him, General Ramie picked up a spoon and ate, still engrossed with the conversation happening next to him.

Toddus looked down at the bowl on the table in front of him, but kept his hands in his lap. There were two spoons set around his place setting, one on the far right next to two different knives and the other above the bowl next to a small fork. A quick glance to either side revealed he should use the spoon next to the knives, so he picked it up and dipped it into the soup. It was red and watery. Toddus filled the spoon and lifted it to his mouth. He tried to imitate how the princesses ate, sipping the soup from the spoon. His manners were far from perfect, he knew. Prince Dinnax didn't insist on him practicing them, either, when they ate together. And the only other party Toddus had been invited to was the youngest princess's fifth birthday, which had been more of a garden tea party in the back courtyard rather than a formal banquet here in the dining hall.

Between bites, Toddus looked down the table at General Ramie. Conversations, which were boisterous at the other end of the table, finally seeped to their end of the table. The noble nearest King Aluxdashus asked how he “found the weather,” to which the king replied that it was “warmer than he thought it would be.” Another noble agreed that “another country’s weather pattern could be hard to predict,” and they continued such idle prattle about the weather in Coulairn, when the best time to travel was, and if the King had found any goods he liked.

Toddus continued to look down the table at General Ramie and finally the man looked up from his family’s conversation. He looked at the Queen, then began scanning the other people in attendance. Toddus stared at the older man, and General Ramie’s gaze finally drifted over him, then came back and stopped. His eyes narrowed in question. Toddus flicked his eyes to Princess Coss-gorse-es, back to General Ramie, to the guard who frightened the princess, and then back again to the General. General Ramie leaned back against his chair, rolled his shoulders, and cracked his neck in both directions. When he was facing to the right, he stared. He turned back to the table and caught Toddus’s gaze again and nodded.

Toddus relaxed and glanced around the room. He hadn’t meant to look directly at the Queen, who smiled only on one side so he could see, then she resumed eating. Toddus finished his soup and awaited the next course. The kitchen staff brought out salads, and the princesses each picked up the fork immediately to the left of the plate. Toddus followed suit, stabbed a piece and put it in his mouth, but was startled when his name was called.

“Guard Todd-tansy-us.” It had been said by Consort Forr-gorse-es. “How did the visit to the menagerie go?”

Toddus chewed and swallowed a large green leaf and then responded, “Not as well as His Highness had hoped, I believe.”

“Oh, how so?”

“Well, Prince Dinnax only had about half of the animal types in the menagerie. The other ones were too common for him to collect.” Toddus heard a rhythmic tapping and looked across the tablet to see both King Aluxdashus and the guard sitting next to him glaring at him. The guard tapped his fork against his plate. Toddus continued, “We checked all the enclosures and didn’t find anything and then we came back.”

“Of course.” The Consort turned to talk to his wife.

“King Forr-gorse-es—,” King Aluxdashus began.

“Consort, actually.” Consort Forr-gorse-es cut him off.

“What?”

“My proper title is Consort, not King. Nacedonia has never had a King.”

“Consort Forr-gorse-es, I would like to thank you for your hospitality. Though, I did not find a single one of my daughters, I believe we have strengthened the ties between our kingdoms. Perhaps we could strengthen those ties further.” He raised his wine glass in a toast.

The empty salad plate was whisked away, and replaced with a small plate containing a fillet of pink-fleshed fish drizzled with a dark liquid. Toddus grabbed the other small fork on the left of his place setting, and he stabbed part of the fish and twisted the fork roughly. The fish had been cooked to perfection and flaked apart. He shoved it into his mouth in an attempt to ignore the conversation consuming the head of the table, but found himself unable to do so.

“You have made me curious,” Consort Forr-gorse-es said.

“Me as well, King Aluxdashus,” Queen Carr-gorse-in said. She gave him a small, polite smile and began eating her own fish.

Toddus glanced between the two ruling royals.

“You have a son. After I get my daughters back, he could have his pick of the older ones, besides the eldest, because her husband will become king, and we cannot have your son inheriting both kingdoms.”

“Ah, I see,” the Queen murmured. The smile flipped. “We will have to refuse.”

“What would be the problem? I see it as a very neat solution. I have thirteen daughters. Any one of them would make a great Queen to stand by your son’s side when he is King.”

As the Queen finished her fish, the plates were taken away. Toddus barely managed to take the last piece before his own plate disappeared. The movements of the kitchen staff were now jerky, and a little loud as they set down the main dish, a large piece of cooked meat on a bed of long quickly seared green beans. A small plate with yeast dinner roll was placed to the left of the small fork and spoon at the top of his place setting.

The Queen icily said, “Firstly, not a single one of your daughters will ever be Queen of Nacedonia because the titles here are passed from mother to daughter. My eldest daughter Land-gorse-in will be my successor. Secondly, our son’s tastes to not go that way. I was told you saw him with Dorroch today. Thirdly, it is not in our history to arrange marriages. We will not begin now with either Dinnax or Lannin.”

During the Queen’s scathing speech, Toddus switched to the biggest fork and knife and ate as quickly as possible. Even with the current, less than pleasing company, this was the best food he had ever tasted. The kitchens didn’t let the guards or any of the staff go hungry and food made in the kitchens was made with high-quality ingredients, but it didn’t usually have this much flavor.

To his left, Princess Lannin had stopped eating. Toddus bumped his elbow against her arm and smiled when she looked at him. This wasn’t the first time he had heard of the Couclairn’s

opposite inheritance style, but he had never thought anyone would bring it up in such a way, or in such a place, for that matter.

King Aluxdashus snorted. “That child is not fit to rule right now.” He glared at Princess Lannin.

Out of the corner of his eyes Toddus saw Princess Cosset’s grip on her knife tighten, her knuckles turning white. Toddus pulled his own knife into his lap, and she glanced at him, then relaxed her grip.

“The same could be said of any son you could have, until they turned eighteen,” Toddus said, “according to what I know of your laws, in any case.”

“Stay out of this, boy. You don’t deserve the position at this table you’ve been given.”

“I deserve it because it was given.” Toddus picked up his roll. “You see, you are very close to being kicked out of this kingdom rather than just escorted to the border. You have not only insulted almost every Nacedonian royal sitting here, but barged in here unannounced with barely any reason to do so. If I were you, I would return to such subjects as the weather and the scenery you saw on your travels up here. Remember, you are on foreign soil with a limited number of guards. I wonder if your brother is so attached to you that he would barter for your life if you were taken hostage.”

The Coulairn guard jumped up from his seat. He shouted, “Is that a threat?”

“I was simply pointing out the possibilities,” Toddus responded. He took a bite from the roll. It was light and fluffy and melted in his mouth, no butter needed.

“Well said, Todd-tansy-us.” Queen’s Consort Forr-gorse-es bowed his head at Toddus.

The guard sat back down at his master’s urging, but continued to glare. Both he and King Aluxdashus stopped eating. Silence descended on the head of the table, but conversations slowly

picked back up at the other end. The Nacedonians ate again, and Toddus watched the Coulairns as he finished his roll.

A small delicate cup filled with fragrant coffee was set to the right of his place setting. Both the main dish's plates and the roll's plates were taken back and replaced with one small dish, the dessert. It was a piece of cake, topped with whipped chocolate. Toddus picked up the last fork, the one at the top of his place setting, and poked the top of the chocolate. New little peaks appeared in the whip, and he smiled. He did it a few more times. It reminded him of a painting he had seen, of waves crashing against the shore. After his initial curiosity and wonder, the oppressive atmosphere once again brought his mood back down. He picked up the spoon, which had been with the dessert fork and stirred some sugar into the coffee. Toddus took his time cutting small pieces of cake with the side of his fork and daintily stabbing them. Between bites he took small sips of the coffee, allowing the coffee and chocolate flavors to meld.

Throughout dessert, Toddus watched the Coulairns. They sat stiffly in their chairs. Neither of those seated ate or drank anything more. Toddus didn't like this situation. The whole point of Prince Dinnax showing off his menagerie and this dinner was to keep a cordial relationship between the two countries. Toddus didn't understand what the need was, or what the Queen hoped to gain from it. The Coulairns contributed nothing of importance to the trade system. They weren't the Teiznooks, whose farms provided food. They weren't the Petrans, whose writings were known throughout the continent.

He set his fork back on his plate when he was done, finished the last of his coffee and sat back against the chair back. He got comfortable and waited. The faint sound of a horn drifted in from the open window. Toddus stood up quickly; his chair overturned. He looked to the Queen. She was deathly pale and Toddus didn't wait for an order. He ran for the exit and once in the



hallways sprinted for the nearest staircase and took them two at a time. When he reached the sixth level, he dashed through the halls as fast as he could until he hit the door to the gryphons's aviary. He pulled the door open just enough to slip through it and grabbed his mount's reins from an aviary worker and off he went through the large archway built into the wall and into the air.

Toddus listened. Through the wind rushing past his ears, he heard the horn again, and turned his gryphon, Mittan, in that direction. At the other end of the sound, he would find his prince and whatever trouble that had found him.

## CHAPTER 4: THE PLAINS BETWEEN THE RIVERS

Toddus glanced around and saw other riders on their gryphons. They travelled south. In half an hour, they covered what would have taken two weeks on horseback. The horn continued to sound every couple of minutes, steadily growing louder. They passed the southern border as the sun began setting, turning the clouds above them various hues of red, orange, pink, and yellow. It blinded him. Toddus leaned forward, putting his face next to Mittan's neck, to block the sun out.

They flew over the Teiznook Plains, vast amounts of land between the continent's two largest rivers. Though the Teiznooks were famed for the produce they farmed farther south, in the deltas around the rivers ends, the plains were still their domain. The northern Teiznooks farmed near the rivers in flats where silt gathered every year, but they also cared for herds of animals: sheep, deer, horses, and others.

The horn grew louder and Toddus finally spotted what he was looking for, Prince Dinnax and Prince Dorroch. Toddus blinked, surprised. Prince Dorroch was still in his human form and Prince Dinnax was still on his feet. Both were fighting, and neither was taking the time to stop and blow a horn. From what Toddus could see from the air, they were fighting back-to-back against a larger force. It wasn't the best formation, but it protected each of their blind spots. Toddus directed Mittan into a downward spiral, getting closer and closer to the middle of the fight. He checked his sword's position, then tried to spot a place to drop to the ground. As he got closer, he realized the opposing force had formed itself into a ring around the two princes. The ring had three layers, and they didn't pause when someone in their first row fell to the princes' defense. They pushed someone from the second row into the empty space.

Toddus guided Mittan into a smooth glide parallel to the ground. He slipped one foot out of the saddle's stirrup and threw that leg over Mittan's neck, then twisted his body so that his stomach faced towards Mittan's body. He slid down slightly until his ribcage rested on Mittan's shoulder. They were nearing the clustered fight. About twenty feet away, Toddus slipped his remaining foot out of the stirrup and, just as he had earlier in the day, he dropped through the air and rolled onto the ground. Mittan, as he was trained to do, flew straight up into the air after his rider's weight fell off. Toddus knew the gryphon would find a place to land and come back when summoned with a unique call. He bounced up onto his feet and drew his sword. He, and the other soldiers who had made it to the ground, approached the backs of the attackers.

Toddus drew his sword. He knew it made a small swooshing sound as it was freed from the scabbard, but he couldn't hear it through the clatter and din happening in front of him. The sword came free and he raised it. He studied the backs of the men before him. They wore light leather armor. It was pieced together haphazardly, roughly buckled together. There was a gap between the chest and waist pieces of one. Toddus stepped closer to him and slashed with the sword. His aim was almost perfect, striking slightly higher than he had anticipated, but it still struck flesh. Toddus jerked his sword back and his opponent yelled. He turned towards Toddus; the man on either side finally noticed something was amiss and turned around, as well. All three already had their swords drawn and stepped out of their spaces in the outer ring.

The middle one swung at Toddus wildly, and Toddus dropped into a crouch, letting his opponent's sword slice through the air above him. Still in the crouch, he slashed at the right most man, who backed up clumsily blocking Toddus's blow and was immediately set upon by another Macedonian soldier. Toddus overbalanced. He fell forward onto his right knee and kicked out with his left foot, accidentally kicking a different opponent on the left ankle. The man stumbled

back, tripped over his own feet, and fell to the ground. Pain sliced up Toddus's arm and he jerked back away from his original opponent, whose sword shone red. Toddus jumped up and slashed at him. Already injured, he was too slow and Toddus's swing caught him in the shoulder. He dropped his weapon, but pulled out a dagger with the other hand. He blocked Toddus's next swing.

Toddus smiled. He had expected and hoped for more of a fight. As one of the prince's personal guards, he didn't have many chances to test his own skills; many held back during sparring and training, afraid of seriously injuring their fellow soldiers. This man's strength was already failing, but Toddus needed to finish this fight. He struck again, stabbing instead of slashing. His opponent attempted to block it again, but only succeeded in redirecting the blow away from his body. Toddus's sword went over the man's shoulder, and Toddus followed the momentum, stepping closer and exposing himself to the dagger's edge. He grabbed the man's wrist and squeezed. The man dropped the dagger and Toddus jerked him forward. The man stumbled and Toddus kicked his legs out from beneath him. He crashed to the ground and Toddus stabbed downwards. He left the man bleeding from where his shoulder met his neck, and turned to the rest of the fight.

Toddus stood still a few moments. Around him, men yelled. He took some deep breaths and glanced around. The Macedonian soldiers had peeled away the outermost ring of attackers but there were still two rings around the two princes. A Macedonian soldier near him fell and the man above him raised his sword to stab him. Toddus stooped and grabbed the dagger his opponent had dropped. He threw it. It imbedded itself into the man's chest, just above his right collar bone. His hand flew to it, and he forgot about the Macedonian on the ground, who slashed him across his shins. He fell and the Macedonian stood.

Toddus watched the other Nacedonian approach the circle. He followed suit and chose his next opponent from the ring of attackers. He attacked. This time, the men were a little quicker, and Toddus fell into his training. He slashed. He dodged. He backed up into someone else and whirled around, clashing swords with that someone, only to realize they wore blue and no leather armor. There was someone else behind this man, stabbing down with a short sword, and Toddus pushed the other Nacedonian to the side and stepped up beneath the attacker's reach and stabbed him through the stomach. He pushed the soon to be dead man away and turned back to the fight. His sword hilt was slippery and he paused to wipe it off with the edge of his tunic. Something hit the left side of his head and he slammed into the ground.

A sword flashed in the setting sun's light and Toddus rolled away from it. The sword buried itself into the ground where he had been lying, and slashed his own sword at the hilt. He caught the attacker's wrist and he fell backwards. Toddus scrambled to his feet. His attacker didn't try to do the same. A fallen sword had pierced him through the side and he grasped at it, cutting his hands on the blade. A blow between his shoulder blades, sent Toddus to the ground again. He got to his knees and looked over his shoulder. The blow had come from another Nacedonian who was losing to his attacker. Toddus stood and joined the fight. While the other Nacedonian slashed with his sword and the attacker blocked the blow with his own, Toddus stabbed the man in the arm. His grip was jostled when he hit bone, but he kept a hold of his sword and pulled it free. The man's grip on his sword slackened and the other Nacedonian attacked again, slashing through the man's neck. Blood splattered across Toddus's face, and he spat the little bit that had landed in his open mouth out.

There was no one near him, besides the other Nacedonian, and Toddus studied the attackers. The second ring was mostly gone. The ten or so men who remained were staying close

to the inner most ring, blocking the Macedonian soldiers' strikes from their cohorts' backs. The inner ring had gotten smaller than Toddus had seen from the air. It was becoming harder for the two princes to protect themselves and whatever they had tucked between their backs. A Macedonian found an opening and stuck one of the men in the inner ring, bringing him down. The inner ring paused their attacks and looked around. There was some jostling and about half of them turned around to face the Macedonian soldiers closing in around them. The other half stood their ground against the princes, but didn't close ranks.

Toddus jumped into the battle again, swinging his sword. The sounds of fighting and dying slowly faded, and Toddus finally made an opening with his opponent. Stepping forward quickly, he kicked the man in the groin. To his credit, the man did not drop his sword, but Toddus easily batted it away with his bare hand. He stabbed the man in the stomach and watched him fall.

The battlefield was suspiciously quiet, and Toddus looked around. He was slightly dizzy, and he tried to remember why. He remembered getting hit in the head and he brought his left hand up to his head. He rubbed around, and spread the blood over his face and into his hair. Toddus flinched, then pressed against the knot he had found again. He gritted his teeth and pulled his hand away. It was sliced open and bleeding heavily from his last fight. On the same arm were multiple slashes and his back and ankle throbbed.

Toddus wiped his sword on a mostly clean patch of clothing and slid it back into its sheath. He stumbled over bodies towards the princes, who still stood back-to-back, watching everything around them. Toddus approached them. The rest of the Macedonians stayed farther back, a few glanced at Prince Dorroch. Toddus glanced at him, but he didn't think he needed to be overly cautious. Prince Dorroch wasn't a mean man, but he could be unpredictable, especially

when his dragon blood was riled up. As he got closer, Toddus noticed the scales shifting in and out of focus on Prince Dorroch's skin. Toddus tensed. There were a few ways to tell a dragon in human form apart from a normal human, the first three being their skin, hair, and eyes. All dragon's human skin took on a slight overtone that matched their dragon scale colors. A green dragon might always look like they were about to throw up, a white one might look like a ghost, a black one might look like they had been rolling in ashes. Their hair was always the same vibrant shade as their scales, and their eyes were golden with upright slit pupils. Though, the pupils sometimes became circles in very low light. Thus, Prince Dorroch had golden eyes, bright red hair, and really pinkish skin.

The appearance of scales meant Prince Dooroch might be close to shifting unexpectedly. But the man was smiling, turning around and crouching in front of the bundles on the ground which he and Prince Dinnax had been protecting. Prince Dorroch spoke quietly in his low rumbling voice. The bundles moved and little shaggy heads popped up. Toddus realized with a start, that the bundles were children. He stepped closer. The children stared open mouthed at the man before them. Prince Dorroch grinned wider, showing off the fourth easiest dragon identifier: his triple canines. Instead of having four flat, square teeth in the front like a human, the dragons had four more sharp canines in their place. It was a left-over facet from the shift, and Toddus had never seen a dragon in human form without them.

The children didn't seem to be afraid, even with the scales appearing at random. They smiled back at the prince. Toddus smiled, as well. Prince Dorroch really was one of the nicest people Toddus knew, but a lot of people became startled by his appearance and gave him a wide berth. Toddus, himself, had been witness to much of the court refusing to dance at the same time as the princes. Prince Dorroch held out his hands, and, one-by-one the children took a hand and

pulled themselves to their feet.

Toddus studied the children. They weren't Nacedonian. They all wore similar clothing: billowing skirts which fell to their mid calves, a piece of square cloth over their fronts kept on only by ribbons crisscrossing over their backs, and thin sandals attached to their feet by more ribbons. It was the typical Teiznook clothing for both genders. The clothes were in earthy colors, made from dyes derived from the plants found in their territory, so the flash of bright coral was very noticeable. He stepped forward and saw one child clutched a monkey, who was almost as tall as the child, to their chest, but was stopped from doing anything else by Prince Dinnax.

"Toddus!" Prince Dinnax shouted. "Took you a little while. And you wore your good clothes to a fight?" He stopped talking to stare.

Toddus looked down at his clothing. He had spent hours arguing with the tailor to get the pale-yellow material, and now it was covered in muck and blood. Some of it might be salvageable, like the body part of the tunic, since it was just dirty. The sleeves, on the other hand, were sliced to ribbons in some places. And his own blood had soaked it, too. "So much for my good clothes," he said.

"Yes," Prince Dinnax responded.

Toddus looked back at the prince. He, too, had not been spared in the fight. His formal wear would need to be either thrown out, or small pieces salvaged for collective cloth. His hair was much redder than it should have been, and Toddus reached out to touch a curl. His fingers came away bloody. He frowned.

Prince Dinnax assured him, "It's not my blood."

Toddus scanned the prince. "That might not be your blood, but this is." He reached out to the prince's side and squeezed the skin around a gash. "And this." He went farther down to three



slashes on the prince's outer thigh. "And—." He had been about to point out the prince's right shoe had been cut, and that blood was bubbling up through the gap in the leather when yells and screams ricocheted around him and a shadow fell over him and Prince Dinnax. He looked up and instantly recognized Prince Dorroch in his dragon form. Toddus stepped back when the massive head arched down towards Prince Dinnax.

Prince Dorroch pressed the tip of his nose against Prince Dinnax's chest. He breathed in and out, and Toddus held his breath. He'd never been this close to the dragon's mouth, but he knew from previous experiences that the dragon's breath smelled like fire and sulfur. Prince Dorroch then arched his neck backwards, pointed the tip of his snout towards the sky and blew out a fireball. The ball of light illuminated everything for a few moments before it dimmed and began to fall. It didn't hit the ground. Prince Dorroch crouched closer to the ground, muscles bunching. Toddus braced himself, but was still slightly under-prepared when Prince Dorroch launched himself into the air and unfurled his wings. Toddus stumbled, but kept his feet. Prince Dorroch took to the sky, beating his wings, and broke the ball of embers and ash apart on his thick skull. Ash rained down on the battlefield, and Toddus closed his eyes.

Toddus heard thrilled screams and laughter. He opened his eyes and looked around. He realized an important fact. The Teiznook children were gone, riding a dragon into the last rays of the sunset.

"Toddus," Prince Dinnax said. He watched his personal guard like a gryphon hunting a rabbit.

Toddus stared back for a few moments before he dropped his gaze. "We should return to the palace," he said. Toddus looked around. Mittan would not like landing on top of the bodies. He turned back to the prince. "Can you walk?"

“Why would I not be able to walk?”

In answer, Toddus looked down at the prince’s bloodied boot.

Prince Dinnax looked down, as well, then said, “You know, I did not feel that until you pointed it out. And now that I know it is there, it really, really hurts.”

“But can you walk, Your Highness?”

“Walking: putting one foot in front of the other in an effort to move oneself from one point of space to another.” The prince took a step and began to fall over, his knee buckling.

Toddus grabbed his arm and jerked him back upright against his chest. He held the prince there until he could stand on his own. Toddus switched sides and put the prince’s right arm across his shoulders and his own cut hand around the prince’s waist. They slowly began moving over and around the bodies.

“Toddus,” Prince Dinnax asked, “do you know what this reminds me of?” His voice was quieter, and the amount of body weight he was leaning against Toddus increased.

“No.”

“It reminds me of that first month, just after I had you assigned as my guard. Do you remember? When we took that fishing boat out into the Aloser Ocean and accidentally got swept out past the reef?”

“Are you talking about when we almost got spit roasted and cannibalized, eaten by one of the Roehen tribes when we managed to get to shore to find fresh water and food?”

“Yes, that.”

“How does this remind you of that?”

Prince Dinnax looked around. “There’re bodies. We’re hurt, both hurt. And we’re leaning against each other.”

“I was the one hurt worse then.”

“Yes, but it still feels the same.”

They were about ten yards away from the edge of the battlefield when Toddus stopped them both. He put his uninjured hand to his mouth and whistled; three high notes, two low ones, and three middle notes. They leaned against each other for a few minutes.

“Sir, Todd-tansy-us.” Another Nacedonian approached them.

“Guard Tansy, please. I’m not a noble or a knight.” Toddus said tiredly.

“Guard Tansy. We believe these men were Avarnian.”

“Wonderful,” Toddus tiredly said. “Go tell your highest ranked superior here.”

“You are the highest ranked here,” the soldier stated. He shifted uneasily under Toddus’s stare.

“I’m what?” Toddus finally found his voice.

“Don’t be so disbelieving, Toddus.” Prince Dinnax lifted his head. “They’re all low-ranking riding soldiers. They were probably the only ones available on such short notice. You rank over them, several times over.”

Toddus sighed then attempted to stand straighter. “Make your report,” he ordered.

“We think they’re Avarnians. The leather they are wearing matches the Avarnian designs, including the emblems for their sun and water goddesses. We might need to talk to those children, because all of these are ... they’re all dead ....” He trailed off, watching the prince fall more heavily against Toddus.

“Sun and water. So, they’re probably Western Avarnians. We usually have a pretty good relationship with them. Why would they attack our prince?”

“Could they have a grudge against Prince Dorroch or the Dragon People, the

Jernonians?” the soldier suggested.

“Perhaps. After I get Prince Dinnax back, I’ll send a message to Prince Dorroch.” Mittan landed next to Toddus as he finished speaking. “Help me get him on, in the front.” The two of them juggled the prince onto the front part of the saddle, and Toddus climbed up into the space behind him. Toddus turned back to the soldier. “Lay them out in rows of ten. Fold their arms like we do for our dead. And wait. I’m sure someone will come. When they do, just state that you came to rescue Prince Dinnax. They died because they attacked him. Nothing else, got it.”

The soldier nodded and said, “Yes, Sir.”

Toddus picked up Mittan’s reins and directed the gryphon away from the battle and back north. He squeezed Mittan’s side with his calves and Mittan ran. After he gained a bit of speed, he stretched his wings and flapped. He lifted off the ground and came back down on his wings up beat. He kept running, not missing a single footfall or wing flap. He slowly rose into the air, foot by foot, flap by flap.

Toddus looked over his shoulder at the battlefield, then focused on keeping Prince Dinnax on Mittan’s back. They flew through the air as the sun finally sank completely below the horizon. Mittan coasted most of the way back to the palace, flapping his wings occasionally when they sunk lower than he liked.

They arrived back at the palace more than an hour after the sun had set. Prince Dinnax had roused somewhat in the cold rushing air. Toddus slipped off Mittan’s back and stood by the gryphon’s side so the prince could do the same. They both heard the pandemonium happening outside the aviary at the same time. There was indistinct yelling and shouts, and something crashed. Prince Dinnax hopped off Mittan’s back, hit his bad foot on the ground, and promptly fainted. Toddus dropped Mittan’s reins and jumped forward to catch the prince’s head before it

hit the stone floor. He sat there for a few moments with the prince's head in his lap.

A small scuffle near the door made him look up. He locked eyes with the second princess. She stood in the opening of the partially open door. "Hello, Princess Coss-gorse-et. Do you know if the palace physician is in the medical wing already?"

The princess's eyes dropped to her brother, and Toddus took a better look at her. Her hair had fallen out of its comb, her dress was stained on the front, and she still held the knife from the banquet. Toddus realized he wasn't going to get a response from her and called into the hallway, "Hello, can someone help me?"

The yelling continued, but Crown Princess Lann-gorse-in appeared in the doorway. Her eyes widened and she whirled around and ran back from where she had come. As she ran, she yelled, "Mother, Father! Toddus brought Dinnax back! Dinnax is back and he's hurt! Dinnax is back!" Everything else quieted and then there were running steps coming to the aviary. The door burst open, slamming against the wall. Mittan reared back on his hind legs and screeched. The Queen and her Consort nearly ran over their third child, but the Crown Princess steadied her younger sister as their parents fell next to their eldest.

"What happened?" the Queen demanded as she tipped her son's face towards herself.

The Consort picked up his son's wrist. He sighed and sat back, smiling slightly.

"They were with some Teiznook children. Prince Dinnax and Prince Dorroch were protecting them from a contingent of Avarnian warriors," Toddus explained.

"Avarnians? Why would they go after Dinnax and Dorroch?" the Consort asked.

"I don't know. They had the sun and water goddesses' emblems on their leather armor. I left soldiers there to give an explanation to whoever comes looking for them."

"Good," the Queen said, stroking her hands through her son's hair. After the first stroke,

her hands were covered in blood. Her voice rose in pitch, “He has blood in his hair! Does he have a head injury?” She stroked her hands fast, as if to find it.

“He said it wasn’t his,” Toddus assured her. “And the medical unit is here. Perhaps, they could take him now, because he is bleeding from other places.”

The Queen looked over her shoulder and she paled, as if she was just realizing where she was kneeling and how much she was reacting to the situation. She stood quickly and stepped back. She turned her face towards the outer aviary entrance, though her eyes stayed on her son as the medical unit laid down a stretcher and loaded the prince onto it. She swallowed and put a hand over her mouth when they lifted the handles and the prince’s head lolled to the side. The Crown Princess pulled her younger sister farther to the side and they watched the men take their older brother past them. The Consort still knelt on the ground.

“I’ll need to send a message to the Jernonians, at my first opportunity,” Toddus said as he stood. The world tilted to one side, then the other. A hand grabbed around him around his biceps, and world stopped spinning. He slumped a bit and strained his shoulder. The Queen, her Consort, and the two princesses stared at him. He looked to his left and up, and found a medic holding him up just by his arm.

“Guard Tansy, are you alright?” Princess Coss-gorse-et asked in a quiet, shaky voice.

“Well, the prince didn’t get hit in the head, but I did,” Toddus responded.

The Queen smiled, just a twitch of her lips, and turned to the medic. “Please take him to the medical wing.”

“I had planned to do so, y Queen,” the medic said. He shifted his grip on Toddus, throwing his arm over his own shoulder, and supporting him the way Toddus had supported the prince over an hour earlier.

“Before you go, what is the message for the Jernonians?” the Consort asked.

“Just to ask if they have any grudges against the Western Avarnians, or vice versa,”

Toddus murmured.

“We will ask,” the Queen said. “We are more likely to get a quick response.” She muttered the last part as she swept out the door and into the hallway.

Toddus looked down at his feet and opened his eyes as wide as they would go, trying to keep the black around the edges at bay. His vision narrowed continuously and the last thing he saw was Princess Coset’s upturned face and the knife still clutched in her hands.

## CHAPTER 5: MISTAKES AND CONSEQUENCES

Sunlight hit his eyelids and Toddus tried to shut his eyes tighter. It didn't work. The amount of sunlight didn't change. He opened his eyes. He stared, uncomprehending of what he saw for a few moments. He turned his head, which brought a sharp stabbing pain radiating up from his neck, but he confirmed he was on his bed in his room. His head throbbed again, and he relaxed into his bed. He stared at the ceiling. He began making small movements, testing his body's abilities. He could move his toes perfectly well, but when he rolled his feet around testing his ankles, piercing pain flared in the left one. He stopped and took a deep breath. He rolled the right ankle: no pain; rolled the left: instant pain. He stiffened the muscles in his left ankle as much as possible and bent that knee. Nothing happened and he bent it higher towards his body, then shifted it outward, towards the edge of the bed. His hip seemed fine, though the constriction of the bedding shifted his ankle's position and sent pain shooting up his leg. He repeated the movements with his right leg and found it surprisingly easy to move.

Toddus relaxed and closed his eyes. He was tired and hungry. He opened his eyes, then squeezed them shut while he yawned. He blinked them open again and frowned. The sunlight had shifted, no longer shining in his eyes. He'd lost time. He resumed his body inspection, flexing and releasing his fingers. His left hand hurt, but it wasn't the fingers. He pulled his hands out from beneath the blanket. The right one was fine, that side's elbow bent easily, and he attempted to roll his shoulder. His upper back muscle seized, and he immediately tried to go limp, relaxing everything he could. Toddus gritted his teeth, baring them at the ceiling, and screwed his eyes closed against the tears trying to get free. His next few breaths rattled between his teeth, until the muscle slowly released. He opened his eyes. The ceiling was blurry. A tear



escaped and followed gravity across his face and towards his ear. He didn't dare try and wipe it away. When the throbbing had stopped, he barely lifted his left hand to see the bandage wrapped around his palm. He let it drop back onto his stomach and listlessly stared at the ceiling.

Time passed. Based on how far the sunspot on the wall had moved, it wasn't more than half an hour before the hallway door opened. Several people entered, the frontmost walked directly to the side of his bed.

"You're awake," Basil stated and smiled.

Toddus opened his mouth to say, "yes," but barely croaked.

Someone else plunked a tray on the bedside table, then shoved Basil away. Sill-holly-ol sat down on the bed, then leaned out of his field of vision. She returned with a cup. She leaned closer to him and put her hand behind his head to tilt it forward. It didn't help. The water in the cup was too low.

Rougher hands bushed against his neck, removing Sill-holly-ol's, then grasped him under the arms and pulled him back against the pillow, then shoved another pillow behind him. Basil let him go, and Toddus winced but relaxed. Sill-holly-ol held up the cup again. Toddus slowly reached for it with his right hand. She let him have it and he cautiously brought it up to his lips. His back and shoulders twinged, but it wasn't the excruciating sensation from before. He drank some, then lowered the cup to his lap. He didn't let go of it.

"What day is it?" he whispered.

Basil answered, "It's been four days since the banquet."

"You have had a fever for a quite a while." An older man stepped closer. He bowed his head slightly to Toddus. "You have woken a few times but we only got some water down you. We need to figure out what else truly hurts and needs attention now. We stitched and bandaged

your obvious wounds. But others do not show up as easily.” He smiled kindly. “We can send for some broth to be brought up as soon as I’ve done a proper examination.”

Sill-holly-ol stood up. “I can go get that started now. It will be done by the time you are finished,” she said. She snatched the tray and left the room.

“What about Prince Dinnax?” Toddus looked at Basil.

“He’s still going in and out of consciousness,” Basil said. “We haven’t been able to rouse him fully yet.”

“Has Prince Dorroch been able to come by yet?” Toddus asked, his voice slightly stronger. He lifted the cup to take another sip.

Basil smiled widely. “No, but the Queen did receive a message from his father. He said no to your message—”

“What is with you soldiers?” someone else interrupted. He was younger, dressed in the medical unit’s uniform. “You should be worried about yourself, not your job. You were hit pretty hard on the head. Some people would have died!” He took a breath. “You are barely fifteen from what General Ramie said. You shouldn’t be getting yourself halfway killed on a battlefield.” He ended with a glare.

The physician stepped in front of the younger man. “What my trainee means to articulate is that since you are hurt, perhaps you should focus a little more on yourself, rather than your job. You will, after all, need to be fully healed to return to your post.”

“I already know what is wrong with me: sprained ankle, the left one; the cut on my left hand, already stitched under the bandage; the knot here.” He lifted his bandaged hand and touched the bump. “Which doesn’t hurt much; and some muscle strain in my upper back. Anything else was just superficial cuts.”

“Well, I still need to look you over to make sure,” the physician said.

Toddus stared blankly at him and the physician shifted his weight slightly.

“Let him do his job, Tansy,” Basil said. “Until the prince is up on his feet and walking around, you don’t need to be.”

Toddus looked at him, sighed, and relaxed into the pillows. He nodded.

The physician stepped forward, and pulled the blankets back. “I’m just going to run my hands over you with slight pressure, and when you flinch, we will take a closer look.”

Toddus blinked. He decided the physician would be better suited to treating children rather than soldiers. He waited, flinching at the places he had mentioned, plus at a few slightly deeper than skin-deep cuts. The physician walked back to his trainees and picked up a pen. He dipped it in a small inkwell and wrote on the paper.

Sill-holly-ol walked in with another tray and set it on the bedside table. “Hot broth.”

The physician stopped writing. “Hot broth? I said warm broth. He will hurt himself if you give him that.”

“Lady Eileen,” Sill-holly-ol muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes. “I will help him eat.” She picked the bowl up from the tray, along with a spoon, and sat down on the edge of the bed. She dipped the spoon into the broth and filled it halfway, then held it towards Toddus. His face burned and he glanced at Basil out of the corner of his eye; thankfully, Basil wasn’t watching. Toddus leaned forward and took the spoon in his mouth. The broth was barely lukewarm. Sill-holly-ol smiled and handed him both the spoon and bowl. Toddus took it gratefully and slurped a few more bites.

“My Gods, girl! What do you think you are doing, giving that to him?” The physician-in-training shot forward, arm outstretched.

“Oh, leave it alone,” Sill-holly-ol snapped. “It’s barely warm.” She glared at the man.

“He is not to have hot things!” the idiot stated, his voice rising at the end.

“I will give him what I wish.” The girl didn’t back down.

“We have to reintroduce foods! After not eating for four days, we cannot just give him anything.”

“It’s warm broth. It won’t do anything to him.”

“Enough.” The physician walked over to the bed and looked into the bowl. “That is fine, but don’t give him anything more than broth today.” He returned to his writing.

Toddus finished his broth and handed the bowl back to Sill-holly-ol. She put it back on the tray. She, Basil, and Toddus watched the physician. He nodded to himself while laying the pen down.

The physician turned back to Toddus. “Now, listen to me. I will check on you tomorrow, but I feel safe allowing you to have some cooked vegetables in your broth tomorrow; no meat, it may cause you indigestion.” He turned to his trainees. “Starting slow at this stage is best. Also, since his back and ankle are strained, we should keep his movement at a minimum.” He glanced down at his notes. “Guard Tansy, I suggest you stay in bed a whole week. The prince is well guarded, the visitors have left; everything is how it should be.”

The room descended into silence.

“Vegetables and bed rest?” Toddus asked quietly.

Basil’s eye twitched, before he began arguing about the food and physical restrictions.

Toddus didn’t listen. He closed his eyes, tried to tune out the noise. It didn’t matter to him what the physician said. Until he could go see Prince Dinnax, and confirm the older man was safe, he wouldn’t rest easily. The trainees joined the argument. Toddus growled to himself

and opened his eyes.

“I can walk!” Toddus shouted to the room in general. He didn’t know at whom he meant to yell: perhaps the palace physician who was recommending that he stay in bed for a week at the bare minimum; maybe Basil, standing at the foot of the bed without a scratch on him; or maybe Sill-holly-ol, who still sat on the edge of his bed, looking very concerned but just as angry. He definitely wanted the physicians-in-training to leave.

Everyone turned to stare at him. The physician was the one who finally broke the silence. “Young man, I would be extremely surprised if you could sit up by yourself without pain.” The middle-aged man looked over the tops of his glasses at Toddus.

“I will be able to walk soon,” Toddus said. “I will listen, in consideration of the food, but I need something to do. And sitting here is not it.”

“You will either follow my directions, or I will assign someone to this room to make sure you do.” The physician stared down his nose at Toddus.

Toddus thought quickly. He couldn’t demand to be carried to the next room over. Not only would the suggestion be overruled, but it would have been embarrassing. He couldn’t have one of the trainees watching like a gryphon for the next few days. He glanced at Basil and pursed his lips. “How ‘bout this? Basil or Holly watch me when I’m awake, but when I’m asleep they can leave.”

The physician stopped to think. “I believe that will work.”

One of the trainees approached him and whispered quite loudly, “I don’t think that is a good idea. He doesn’t seem to understand how injured he is, and he’s likely to pretend to be asleep to get his way.”

The physician whispered back, “That is the trickiness of compromise. Taking too much

choice from a patient will make them resent you and less likely to ever listen to you as a physician. Giving them too much choice means they will likely hurt themselves more.” He faced Toddus again. “I will concede to your idea, under one condition: If you worsen your injuries, I will not be blamed.”

“I agree.” Toddus smiled. The physician and his trainees left, but Toddus called out right before they exited, “When can I have fruit, again?”

The physician stuck his head back into the room and flatly asked, “Fruit?”

“Yes, fruit: apples, oranges, maybe a peach.”

“After you eat and keep down the vegetables.”

Toddus let the door close before he turned to Sill-holly-ol. “Miss Holly, is there any chance the kitchen will be making a cobbler for dessert tomorrow?”

Sill-holly-ol laughed. “I think I can arrange something.”

Toddus relaxed back into the pillows. “Sorry, Basil.”

“What for?” the other guard asked.

“I got you stuck watching me for the next few weeks.”

“A few weeks? I give it two days before Holly, you, and I decide on a schedule, one that makes it appear that we’re watching you while we’re off doing something else entirely. You, of course, will be here trying to get yourself back on your feet before the week is done. And if you hurt yourself, we’ll have deniability.”

Sill-holly-ol gasped theatrically. “How dare you bring my brother into this scheme of yours.” She held her head up high, widened her eyes, and frowned, though the effect was ruined by the slight upward tick of her lips after a few seconds. The three of them laughed. Slowly, they stopped and the other two said their goodbyes. The sun was close to setting and both of them still

had things to do before bed. Alone in his room, Toddus's eyes drifted to the door which connected his room to Prince Dinnax's.

Basil was almost right in his prediction. It took three days until the physician's trainees stopped coming by to check their compliancy. Basil and Holly stayed an extra day, and those four days were hell. He had exactly two options for entertainment: watching the sunspot travel across the wall and listening to Holly and Basil tell an ever-changing story about the fallout that happened the night of the fight. In one version, King Aluxdashus and his guards had drawn hidden weapons and threatened to attack the princesses, only stopped by General Ramie's fighting prowess. A different version stated the king flung himself under the table in fear for his life. Yet another said, which probably the closest to the truth, the Queen had stood up at the head of the table, announced dinner was over and that everyone should return to their rooms, and then the royal family had walked to the gryphon's aviary. Apparently, the arguing he had heard that night upon his return was the chancellor advising the Queen and Consort to go wait in their room to preserve their dignity, versus the royal parents insisting they would wait until all their children were back at the palace.

The first day he was left completely alone, Toddus started small. When no one was in the room, he sat up, then leaned back into the pillows, which grew into him sitting on the edge of his bed. The second day after Basil and Holly stopped sitting in his room, he wound a small towel from the nightstand around his hurt ankle. It hurt to wrap, but the throbbing stopped and he relaxed. He practiced standing, using the nightstand for balance, and sitting down again. As the pain in his ankle decreased, he increased the amount of weight he put on it, until he could take a few steps on his own. Then he returned to the bed. He made slow shuffling steps, adding half a step almost every time. It made him more tired each day, but he also slept deeper each night and

felt fully refreshed.

Toddus finally made it to the door to Prince Dinnax's room. He eased the door open and a dagger sank itself into the door jamb near his head. He froze. Footsteps approached the door and it was ripped from his hands. General Ramie stood before him. He reached out and yanked his dagger from its wooden prison. He nodded at Toddus. "Guard Todd-tansy-us," he said, and turned and walked away.

Toddus studied the old general's retreating back. The general sat down at the table and looked at Toddus. They watched each other for a few seconds. Toddus looked at the bed and frowned. He couldn't see the prince. He stumbled forward, forgetting about his slow shuffle. He nearly fell, but grabbed onto the wardrobe for balance. He took a few deep breaths and began again, one foot in front of the other in an effort to get from one place to another. Toddus stood over the bed. Prince Dinnax was there, his face flushed and sweat rolling down his temples and into his hair, amid a mountain of pillows.

"If he wakes up even a little bit," General Ramie's voice startled him and he looked at the older man, "give him more water." The general grimaced. "It has been fourteen days now, and the fever is just getting worse."

"Do we know what's causing it?" Toddus took the towel from around his ankle. It was relatively clean because Sill-holly-ol brought him a new one each day. He dunked the towel into the water pitcher and waited while it soaked up the water, then pulled it out and squeezed a good amount of the water out. He laid the wet towel across the prince's forehead and eyes.

"They think a cut on his side." The general coughed but stayed silent after that.

Toddus pulled the blankets back and inspected the injury. It was tightly wrapped in bandages, but the bandages held a slight yellow tinge in a peculiar pattern, a slash from the



prince's right pectoral down to his right hip. Toddus pressed on the discoloration and the prince violently twitched. Toddus looked around, and saw a pair of scissors on the prince's desk. He retrieved them and sat down again.

“What are you doing?” General Ramie had stood up.

Toddus cut the bandages. One overlaid strip at a time, and by the time the general had come to his side he had uncovered the wound. If it had been deeper, the prince would have been gutted, and dead already. It was relatively shallow, but long, and the cut edges of flesh were red and swollen. Yellow and brownish pus seeped out. The general gagged behind him, and Toddus turned to look. The general held his hand over his mouth. His eyes flickered away from the prince and to Toddus.

“I can cut people up all day in a battle, but festering wounds have always disgusted me.” He turned away, but called over his shoulder, “I’ll be back with the physician so that he can explain how the hell no one noticed that infection.” He left the room and shouted something at someone else.

Toddus stayed next to the prince. Two guards from the Queen's guards stepped inside the room and watched him.

The door burst open and the physician and a trainee entered. “See,” the trainee shouted, “I told you he wouldn't stay like we told him. You should have had one of us stay with him.” Before the physician could admonish the younger man, General Ramie boxed his ears. The physician stared at him in surprise, mouth half open in an unvoiced protest.

“You should not be yelling at Guard Tansy. He is the one who discovered your error. How did you not notice the prince's wound had become infected and began festering?” The general looked down at the young man.

“Festering?” the physician nearly yelled, forgot all protests against the general’s treatment of his trainee, bolted to the bed, and shoved Toddus off the bed to get a proper look at the prince. “Damn, Damn, Damn!” he muttered. He prodded the edges of the wound.

General Ramie came around to the edge of the bed and held out his hand. Toddus grasped the hand and pulled himself up. He leaned against the nightstand, and looked over the physician’s shoulder. The physician stood and turned around. “General Ramie, would you be so kind as to have your men arrest my trainee, as he has threatened Prince Dinn-gorse-ax’s life?”

The general didn’t even need to voice his order. He looked at the two guards still at the entrance, and they stepped forward and seized the trainee by the arms. He was forced to drop the medical supplies he had been carrying.

The trainee jerked against the men holding him. “How can you do this do this over a simple mistake?”

“You call this a simple mistake?” the physician shouted. “There are many stages between freshly cut and severely infected! I cannot believe you made it this far in your training without learning that. This is the simplest thing to notice, and the first thing you’re supposed to look for, the first thing you should expect in a wound after a sword fight, yet you didn’t treat it. This is not something you should be able to miss, which leaves me with only one assumption: You ignored it on purpose.”

The trainee was dragged away still protesting, but the physician had already turned back to the prince’s wound. He returned to where the trainee had dropped his supplies and returned to the bed. “I will need a new trainee to assist me.”

“You will get nothing of the sort,” General Ramie stated. When the physician turned to face him, he continued, “I do not trust them at this point. Guard Tansy can help you with what

you require.” He pushed Toddus forward, then stepped away. Toddus kept his feet, though he swayed slightly.

“Okay, come here.” The physician waved him over. “I need hot boiling water, too. This will take a while.”

General Ramie took the metal traveling tea can and placed it in the fire. “Please, continue.”

With the physician instructing him, Toddus pulled the remains of the soiled bandages from around the prince, and stuffed them down along the prince’s side at the seam of his body and the bed. He picked up the scissors and cut carefully through the stitches. The sides of the wound sprang apart, nothing having started to heal.

“That is good, very good. It will be easier to purge. Hold him down for me.”

Toddus climbed over the prince to his other side. Toddus sat on his heels and placed his hands on the prince’s chest. The physician began prodding the wound and more pus oozed out. The physician smiled, and Toddus decided he looked a little manic. The physician pressed on the upper side of the wound expelling more colored liquid. It filled up the open wound like a river after a rain, then fell over the lower side of the wound. It slid down the prince’s side onto the already soiled bandages.

As the physician still had him on a broth with vegetable pieces diet, Toddus didn’t have much in his stomach. A fact he had been cursing during the past week, but was now immensely grateful. The prince didn’t struggle so much as he wiggled, as if he were being tickled, but Toddus kept him as still as possible.

When the top side was done, the physician asked for the water. He had the general pour it into the handwashing bowl on the nightstand and requested more towels. He took the towel off

the prince's head and submerged it in the boiling water, keeping hold of just a corner. He used this corner to pull the towel out of the water, twisting it slightly to force excess water out. He took the towel and dragged it along the wound, forcing more and more pus to tip out of the wound and down the prince's side. Toddus swallowed. The prince struggled more and Toddus ended up lying next to him, hugging the older man to him with both arms and legs. The physician muttered, "Effective, I suppose," but continued working. He took the towels one of General Ramie's men brought him and repeated the process. With his view obscured, Toddus had to guess what was happening based on the physician's face. A frown: another pocket of pus had been found; a blank stare: nothing; a small smile: maybe he would be done soon.

The prince stopped struggling, and Toddus sat up again. He looked over the prince's side. The wound was clearer. The physician was expelling less and less pus with each pass of a new towel, but the wound was still and angry red. The physician stopped with the towels and carefully pressed down on each side of the wound. A few dribbles of discharge escaped and the physician grabbed a new towel to clean it up. When he seemed satisfied that he had gotten all he could, he pulled a needle and thread from his supplies. He stitched the wound's side together lightly. He took the thoroughly soiled bandages from the prince's side and cleaned the entire area with yet another clean, wet towel. Then he removed a roll of bandages from the bag. Toddus helped him rewrap the prince.

The physician stood. He spoke to Toddus, "I will be back to check on him in the morning, and I will tell the kitchen to add meat to your meals now." He turned away and yelled, "Now where the hell did you take my trainee? I have some more things to tell him."

General Ramie tensely walked up the prince's side. He glanced down and relaxed. "Perhaps you ought to go to bed, Tansy? You look like you will fall over at any second."

Toddus sighed and looked down at the prince's sleeping face. He pulled an extra clean towel from the pile left behind and dipped it into the cool water in the pitcher, and laid it across the prince's head. "I meant to just check on him and go back, not wrestle him into submission while someone else tortured him."

"Back to bed then," General Ramie softly ordered.

Toddus crawled back to the edge of the bed, slipped his legs over the side, stood, and promptly fell on his face when his legs gave out. General Ramie grabbed his collar and dragged him back to his own bed and dumped him onto it. He left.

Toddus slept fitfully, and twice in the night he got up and shuffled over to the door to the prince's room, just to look in. Each time, General Ramie, from his chair near the fire, raised his eyebrow at him, and Toddus slowly closed the door and returned to his bed. In the morning, just as the sun was cresting the horizon, Toddus returned to the door and opened it. General Ramie still sat in his chair, but made no dissatisfactory movement, so Toddus shuffled over to the bed. He took the towel from the night before off and replaced it. Toddus sat there until the physician once again pushed him away, albeit less violently. After the thorough cleaning the evening before, the physician touched the wound pressing against the edges. A little bit of colored liquid welled up and the physician cut the few loose stitches he'd made the night before and cleaned the wound again, then stitched it. Toddus sat by Prince Dinnax's side, took his meals in the prince's room and was the last one to check on him at night, putting a cool, wet towel over his forehead each night.

On the fourth day, Toddus took the towel off the prince's head and Prince Dinnax blinked up at him, and, for a moment, Toddus did not comprehend the difference in the prince's pallor, or the clearness of his eyes.