

B. D. KING



The Hief of
Central Park



The Fief of Central Park, an enchanting tale of three medieval knights thrust forward in time to fight a dragon, battle urban gangs and bring down a corrupt city government. The heroine they save from the gangs finds her true love, becomes a millionaire and is elected the first African-American woman mayor of New York.

It begins during a battle in 1417 when Brian, Merlin's inept apprentice, blunders and sends Sir William Fitzwalter, Geoffrey Fitzwalter and Sir Percy de Clare to the Bronx where they arrive in time to save Elaine Livingston from a vicious gang called the Stompers. After another confrontation with the Stompers, Elaine and the knights find themselves the targets of corrupt mayor Bertha Ruckzug, her crooked city bureaucracy and organized crime. Meeting these challenges, which include lawsuits, street battles and computer crime, the four prevail at every turn.

Alas, Brian's spell has upset the time-space continuum placing earth and the entire galaxy in danger. Merlin tells Brian to reverse the spell, but the numskull can't remember which spell he used...

The Fief of Central Park

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8879.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Enjoy your free excerpt below!

**The Fief
Of
Central Park**

B. D. King

Copyright © 2016 B. D. King

ISBN: 978-1-63491-736-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2016

First Edition

This book is dedicated to:

My wife Loretta for her love and support

My granddaughter Kristin for the hugs and smiles

The real Horace Virgil Fisher to whom I owe an incalculable
debt

Other books by B. D. King

The Card

Novels by Benjamin King

The Gruenwald Deception

The Loki File

A Bullet for Lincoln

A Bullet for Stonewall

Non-fiction by Benjamin King

*Victory Starts Here a 40 Year History of U.S. Army
Training and Doctrine Command*

*Victory Starts Here a 35 Year History of U.S. Army
Training and Doctrine Command*

*Impact, the History of Germany's V-Weapons in WW2,
with T. J. Kutta*

*Spearhead of Logistics, a History of the U.S. Army
Transportation Corps, with R. Biggs and E. Criner*

Once upon a time before cell phones, the Internet, PDAs and outrageously expensive coffee in a land not too far away known as the mythical city of...

New York

Chapter One

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

The Wizards' Lyceum

Brian listened apprehensively to the footsteps echoing in the hall. The tread was rapid and purposeful. No matter how hard he wished otherwise he knew they were headed for his austere little cell with its bare stone walls and sturdy oak furnishings. He closed his eyes trying very hard not to tremble in terror. He was about to undergo unspeakable torture and there was no way he could prepare himself for it.

The iron hinges squeaked loudly and the heavy door swung open hitting the stone wall with a bang. "Brian!" The voice at the door was loud, stern, unsympathetic and threatening.

Brian stiffened in the straight backed chair. He kept his eyes shut willing the dreadful shape at the door to go away. Rather than confront his terror he wanted to crawl under the table and hide but he had no choice. Slowly, he turned to face the figure dominating the Spartan chamber. Had the great man dressed in the dark blue robes with the thick gold trim as befitted his rank, Brian would have been much more comfortable, but there he was in a blue cardigan, checked shirt, chino slacks and loafers. His normally pleasant face was hard and his eyes glowered mirthlessly at him.

"Merlin," Brian tried to smile but his mouth just stretched. There was no secret as to the purpose of this visit. "It's so nice to..."

"You failed again," the wizard's voice boomed and his words echoed down the corridor. He dropped the failed exam on Brian's desk.

Brian winced and blushed. Now everyone would know even before the results of the exams were posted. Previously, Merlin had been sympathetic and encouraged him to do

B. D. King

better. This time the great wizard made no attempt to spare Brian's feelings. His words were cold, blunt and pointed.

"I - I know," Brian said sheepishly. He looked down to avoid the master's merciless gaze and then at the failed exam on his writing table. "I'm having trouble with astronomical philosophy," he whimpered as he glanced back at the greatest wizard of all.

Merlin's dark blue eyes bore right through the short man in the gray apprentice's robes. "You're a wizard's apprentice, Brian," he stated unsympathetically. "This is the second time you've failed astronomical philosophy. You can't become a wizard without it and you can't stay an apprentice forever. Some of your contemporaries are already third class sorcerers." Merlin's voice thundered in the confined space and Brian cringed.

Brian bowed his head so he wouldn't have to look at the master any more. "I - I'm sorry." It was a lame response and he knew it. Sorcerers and wizards were supposed to be beings of action who looked adversity in the eye and weren't afraid of responsibility.

"Sorry?" Merlin's voice roared in disbelief. "By all the sacred beings, I can't believe you said that! How do you expect to become a wizard with an attitude like that?" To keep from losing his temper, Merlin turned away, looked at the heavy planking of the door and took a deep breath. He couldn't remember the last time one of his apprentices failed. The entire concept was unthinkable. He turned back and looked at the round pink face surrounded by a scraggly blond beard. Brian's expression was doleful and the soft brown eyes peered mournfully at him. It made Merlin angrier but the master wizard would not admit that one of his students was a failure. Brian had barely passed some of his other courses and a few of his instructors had even suggested erasing his memory and returning him to his former life. Merlin refused. He was going to show them all that Brian could be turned into a first class wizard. Merlin's tone softened slightly. "I'm going

The Fief Of Central Park

to give you one more chance," he stated flatly while holding up one finger for emphasis, "just one!"

Brian managed a pathetic little smile. "Th-thank you, master," he stammered.

Merlin thought for a moment, then looked around the room. It was plain and grim. "Perhaps a change of scenery will do the trick," he said on the spur of the moment.

"Change of scenery?" Brian was puzzled. If Merlin was going to give him another chance he was going to take it and not ask any questions.

Merlin stroked his beard then his face brightened. "I know," he said brightly. "You will go to Le Moineau in Normandy. It's quiet and pleasant so you will be able to concentrate on your studies without the distractions here at the Lyceum. I will give you a list of assignments which you will have a year to finish."

Brian hesitated. He had no idea wherewhen Normandy or Le Moineau was but if it promised salvation, he would go. "Thank you master, you are, as ever, most kind. Uhh..." The question was unasked.

"Yes, Brian," Merlin demanded impatiently. "What is it?"

Brian managed a polite smile. "Wherewhen is Normandy?"

"Earth," Merlin stated flatly. "It's where you're from, remember?"

Brian flushed. "Oh," he said, remembering. It had been a long time since he had been there and planetary geographical philosophy was another subject he had not done well in.

Merlin continued. "After you complete your studies, you will be re-examined and if you pass you will proceed to the next phase and become a third class wizard." There was a slight pause and then the dreaded words came. "If not," Merlin said flatly, "you'll be made a permanent acolyte."

Brian swallowed. There, it was out, permanent acolyte. It was the fate every wizard's apprentice dreaded. Unable to become wizards and too far along to return to their previous

B. D. King

lives, they became immortal coffee boys and girls who ran errands for the great sorcerers, straightened up their papers and swept their offices. Brian had met some of them. They were pitiable beings who were forever downcast and morose. That, if nothing else, was enough to motivate him. Merlin was right. A change of scenery would do the trick.

"Pack your things, Brian." Merlin instructed. "A scribe will bring the list of assignments within the hour."

"Yes, master," Brian replied.

Merlin turned on his heel to leave the cell but stopped and turned back. "Brian?"

"Yes, Master?"

Merlin's expression was extremely solemn. "Whatever happens," he said gravely, "you must never interfere."

Brian didn't understand and admitted it. "Master, I don't..."

The great wizard continued in the same tone. "You will be among humans and you may witness some violence or cruelty directed at an innocent person. You have a good heart and will want to help but you must not. Their destinies and ours travel along separate paths. If it's an emergency you may disappear in front of them but you must never, ever intervene. Is that clear?"

Brian stood and blinked as Merlin's words sank in. "Yes, master, I understand."

Merlin's expression softened with a fleeting smile. "Good, now get on with your packing." He walked through the door and strode down the corridor. Halfway the wizard stopped and looked back at Brian's door. I hope I'm not going to regret this, he thought.

Brian stood up feeling much better. With the fate of permanent acolyte peering over his shoulder he was determined to do well. He packed underclothing, his gray apprentice robes, floppy gray hat and a few personal possessions into a small chest. In a larger chest, he packed the astronomical instruments, mathematical texts and philosophical treatises that were on the list the scribe had

The Fief Of Central Park

given him. He smiled as he closed the lid. In a year he would be a third class wizard.

A soft knock came at the door and he stiffened at the thought of Merlin's return. Then he relaxed. Merlin didn't knock. He turned and smiled at Jeanette standing in the door. Of all the other apprentices, she was his best friend. Jeanette was slim with long brown hair, deep brown eyes, a straight nose and a full mouth that smiled easily. She was younger than he and very brilliant. In a few months she would be taking the exams that would make her a third class sorceress way ahead of her contemporaries. They had little in common but enjoyed each other's company immensely.

"I heard," she said softly. She motioned toward the hallway to the other rooms. "We all did."

Brian sighed and his shoulders drooped. "Everyone would have known, as soon as the exam results were posted," he said.

She looked at the chests he was packing and her eyes widened. She came closer, touched his arm and looked into his eyes with deep concern. "Brian, are you being expelled?"

He grinned weakly. "No," he said, with evident relief in his voice. "Merlin decided that a change of scenery would be best. I am going to Normandy to continue my studies."

Jeanette smiled warmly. "Oh. Brian, that's wonderful. I know you'll do well. You'll see."

He blushed and nodded.

"We shall all miss your pastries at tea," she told him.

At that Brian smiled. He enjoyed making pastries and the fact that people enjoyed them. It was the one thing he did very, very well.

Jeanette placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Brian, you will be a wizard very soon." She gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek and Brian smiled. She turned to go. "I'll leave to you your packing. Best of luck, my friend."

Brian smiled warmly at her., "You, too, Jeanette."

She paused briefly at the door. "Wherewhen is Normandy?" she asked curiously.

B. D. King

Brian shrugged. "Somewhere on earth, I think."
"Oh, that should be interesting," she said brightly.

Normandy 1417 A.D.

Merlin was right, Brian thought as he traveled across the countryside to Le Moineau. Normandy was a lovely place with a long coast and green fields. Sluggish streams made their way slowly to the sea except where they were dammed to provide races for the mills that ground the local wheat into flour. At last they came to Le Moineau, the place he was to stay and study for the next twelve months. The castle of Lord Robert was much smaller than Brian imagined. Untutored as he was in military affairs, Brian could see that it was well sited on a hill that completely dominated the local countryside. It was an old castle with a large keep and square towers surrounded by a moat and a palisade. Lord Robert's domains were fertile and prosperous. As far as one could see there were orchards, vineyards and ripening fields of wheat. The peasants in the fields near the road were hard working and happy unlike many of the sullen villeins he had seen elsewhere. Many stopped work to look at the two carts that carried Brian and his possessions at a leisurely pace toward the castle. Some waved. Little could he realize that as a stranger, he piqued their curiosity and would be the subject of endless discussions in the cottages and taverns in the villages he could see.

Brian's cart rumbled across the drawbridge and came to a halt as a guard carrying a halberd blocked the entrance to the barbican. "Who art thou and what is your business here?" The guard asked politely.

Brian responded with the words he had memorized. "I am Brian of the Lyceum, and am expected by the Lord Robert and the Lady Anne."

The guard bowed deferentially, "Welcome, Excellency," he said stepping aside. Then he turned to another guard.

The Fief Of Central Park

“Tell the Lady Anne that their visitor has arrived.” The man nodded then ran across the courtyard to the keep.

After a short time, Beatrice, a slender lady-in-waiting with her long blond hair in braids and a youthful page came to fetch Brian. She led him to the keep and up the steps to the Lady Anne’s chambers. Lord Robert’s wife was a handsome woman with an oval face, small nose and long gray flecked black hair tied in the back. Her brown eyes were bright and she smiled warmly as Brian entered. He bowed deferentially and she held out both her hands “Welcome, Brian of the Lyceum. I hope your journey was not an arduous one.”

As he took her hands, Brian saw the amulet she wore. It was ancient and the design revealed that she was an adherent of the Lyceum. “It was pleasant enough, My Lady,” he replied, “And I bring greetings from an old friend.”

‘Old friend’ was the code used to identify wizards in this age of superstition.

“You must join us at supper this evening and tell us of your journey. Seldom do we get such distinguished visitors with such fresh news of the world beyond our domain.”

“I am afraid my tales are dull ones but if it please My Lady, I am happy to relate them.”

Lady Anne released his hands indicating that the interview was over. “Beatrice, take Brian to his chambers.

Brian’s room was in the top of a tower. It was much larger than his cell at the Lyceum and had a comfortable bed, a writing table and chair. Much to Brian’s delight it had a small window that looked out on the fields and vineyards he had passed that day. In all he was pleased and began unpacking his chests. Merlin had chosen well.

Brian met Lord Robert just before supper. Tall with broad shoulders, he had an angular face with a large nose, dark eyes and thin lips. He was reserved but polite. Then he was presented as a scholar who had come to observe the heavens in the clear skies above Le Moineau and all listened with great interest as he related his travels from Italy across France. Merlin had Brian make the long journey overland so

B. D. King

that he could become accustomed to the people and the time. By the looks on the faces of his audience, he was now accepted as one of them. That night he slept soundly and in the morning began his studies. Problems that seemed unfathomable at the Lyceum, he was able to solve with a little hard work. Soon Brian developed a pleasant regimen. He studied in the morning then went for a long walk before lunch. Brian's host offered him a horse, but Brian preferred the stability of terra firma to the undulating back of a steed. The exercise was good for him physically, helped clear his head and gave him a hearty appetite for the noon meal. In the afternoon he studied and took another walk before supper. After supper, he studied again. Before retiring, he went out on the battlement with his astrolabe to study the stars set bright as diamonds in a black velvet sky.

On his walks, the inhabitants treated Brian with a deference reserved for the nobility. Most of the clergy treated him with respect and even those clerics upset by his presence were civil. One cleric named Father Joseph was decidedly friendly and engaged Brian in long conversations about astronomic philosophy that helped Brian with his studies. For the first time in years, the wizard's apprentice was content. He had finally found his place in the universe. Now nothing could go wrong.

A Few Weeks Later

Lord Robert of Le Moineau paced impatiently along the battlements of his castle pausing every so often to look off in the distance. Were he not worried, he would have taken in the vista of green fields and peaceful villages on this hot summer afternoon with satisfaction. He ruled his peasants with a fair and honest hand. Under his wisdom they prospered and loved him for it. His eldest son, François, ignored his father's pacing and looked northward. "Someone comes," he said flatly.

The Fief Of Central Park

The older man looked in the same direction but his eyes were not as sharp as his son's.

"A single rider," François told him before Lord Robert asked a question.

"I am going down," Lord Robert said and Francois dutifully followed his father to the courtyard where Lord Robert continued to pace impatiently. The rider finally thundered across the drawbridge and drew up in front of the Lord. It was Malcolm son of one of Robert's loyal barons. Covered with dust and sweat from riding in the heat he slid wearily from the saddle, happy to be in the cool shade of the thick stone walls.

"Bring wine," Lord Robert commanded.

A man at arms ran to Malcolm and handed him a wine bladder from which he drank deeply. "Many thanks, my lord," he exhaled.

"Is it true?" Lord Robert demanded without ceremony.

"Verily, my lord." The rider nodded as he spoke. "King Henry has landed in Normandy to claim the crown of France. He marches for Paris as we speak. Thy lands are directly in his path."

"When are the great lords assembling an army?" Lord Robert demanded.

Malcolm hesitated. "They are not assembling, My Lord. Most do not wish to fight and many are treating openly with the English."

"Churls!" Lord Robert exploded. "Have they no honor?" He turned to his son. "Alert our vassals. I'll show these English there are still men of courage in France. Prepare for siege."

François bowed stiffly and hurried to alert those loyal to his father.

"You have done well, Malcolm. You bring honor to thy father's house. Freshen thyself and dine with us tonight."

The young man bowed. "You have done me great honor, sire." Malcolm led his horse to the stable and Lord Robert strode gloomily across the dusty yard to the great hall. In less

B. D. King

than two weeks the English would be at his gates. His wife met him with a pleasant smile as he stepped into the great hall, but when she saw his countenance her face fell.

"Is it true then, my lord?" She asked.

"My dear, Anne." He said taking her hands in his. "It is all too true. Malcolm has just arrived with the news. I wish it were otherwise."

Her eyes widened in disbelief. "The English are coming here?"

Lord Robert nodded solemnly. "We are directly in the English King's path, I fear. The harvest must be gathered early and quickly. There will be no fairs or tournaments this autumn," he added grimly.

"What about our visitor?" She asked.

Lord Robert sighed. "He will have to leave," he told her, "Battle is so uncertain and we cannot hazard the safety of an old friend. He must go." He paused. "And so must you and our daughters."

Lady Anne looked squarely into his eyes. "I will send our daughters away but I will not leave you, my dearest," she said gravely.

One look at the expression on her face and he knew it was useless to argue. "Why I ever married such a willful woman I shall never know," he said with a brief smile. "Regardless, tell Brian he must leave in the next few days. The English will be upon us soon. Besides, he has no sword arm and will be a useless mouth in a siege."

"I will, My Lord," she said and strode across the worn stones of the great hall to Julian the Scribe's alcove where Brian and the scribe sat drinking mead and discussing the subject of moral certitudes. They rose and bowed at her approach.

"Brian," she said gently. "The English will be here in a few days. We are all in great danger you must leave soon."

Brian stood mouth agape. "I don't understand," he said.

She looked at him sympathetically. "Brian," she said softly, "we are at war. King Henry of England and his army

The Fief Of Central Park

are on their way to Paris so that he may be crowned King of France. We are in his path and we will not surrender to him. We will resist. That means there will be carnage. We cannot guarantee your safety. Besides," she added coolly. "You are not equipped for fighting and staying here means that you are an extra person to feed with our meager stores."

Brian tried to take it all in. War? He was happy here and things had been going so well. What was he to do? Merlin had told him to stay and now Lady Anne was telling him he had to leave. "But..." was all he could manage.

"Brian," she insisted politely. "Pack your things and in the morning we will have you on your way." She turned him around and gave him a gentle push toward the stairs. In an instant she was gone to help prepare the castle for a siege. When she saw her husband a short time later, she assured him. "Brian is packing and will be ready to leave in the morning.

"Saints be praised," Lord Robert replied. "I'd hate to think what might happen if he were injured in any way." As far as Lord Robert was concerned the matter of Brian of the Lyceum was finished. He had more important things to attend to.

Supper that evening was a subdued affair with no minstrels or fools to amuse the Lord and Lady. As usual Brian sat next to Julian the Scribe, a small man with bushy eyebrows and thin lips, who seemed far more intelligent than those around him. He also ate whatever was placed before him with gusto.

"Why is everyone in such turmoil?" Brian asked innocently.

"Because the English are coming." Julian gnawed on a leg of mutton.

"I have heard that but why are they coming here and why is everyone afraid?"

Julian gave Brian a startled look. "Where have you been that you know so little of what has happened?"

"Ah...I have been away out of the country...across the sea...for some time," Brian replied evasively.

B. D. King

Julian accepted the explanation with a nod and tossed the bare mutton joint to a pack of mastiffs in the corner. He tore the leg from a roast capon and waved in front of him to stress his point. "But two years ago, Henry and his small army invaded France and besieged Harfleur, taking the city at a cost of a quarter of his men killed or wounded. But there was plague in the city and Henry with a thousand knights and eight thousand long bowmen marched to Calais to flee the sickness. When he found his way blocked at Agincourt by thirty thousand knights -- the flower of French Chivalry so the chroniclers say, he was awed by their strength, and offered to bargain, but our knights, with the English at their mercy were not. Sadly they should have."

"Why?" Brian asked.

"On the morrow they attacked only to be cut down by Henry's bowmen. 'Tis said five thousand were laid low by the time the sun set. Among them were D'Albret, Constable of France and many of the leaders of the Orleans - Armagnac party that had pressed for war with the English. We expected Henry to march to Paris and proclaim himself king, but to the relief of all he returned to England."

Brian leaned forward, his curiosity piqued. "Then why is he here now?"

"To finish the business, of course," Julian belched and drained a goblet of wine.

"Oh," Brian replied. He wanted to question Julian further but was unsure what question to ask. War had been discussed in his classes on moral certitude and historical logic through the ages. He had done some additional reading on the subject and it aroused his interest. He found it difficult to grasp the concept of two large bodies of men standing in a field trying to harm one another. It seemed so ludicrous and such a waste. Why couldn't they work out their differences logically? Did women also make war? He wondered.

"Are we to have fighting, then?" He asked with greater interest.

The Fief Of Central Park

Julian shrugged and nodded as he tore a piece of bread from the loaf and refilled his wine goblet. "Verily, Lord Robert will fight even if the others do not."

"Are you staying, Julian?" Brian asked.

Julian grinned sardonically. "Alas, I have little choice. I am Lord Robert's scribe and must remain at his side. However," he said wistfully, "if I had a choice I would be far from this place before battle was joined."

"Have you ever seen a battle, Julian?" Brian asked earnestly.

"Hah," Julian laughed cynically. "In my youth I was a man-at-arms and saw enough to fill my belly. It's a terrible thing to see men injured in all manner of ways missing limbs or heads or laying in the grass groaning after they had been gutted waiting days to die. When I learned to read and write I found there were easier ways to earn my keep."

Brian nodded and turned his attention to his food. Now he was curious and had to observe war first hand. How dangerous could it be if he were only an observer? It wasn't as if he were a warrior who was actually involved in the fighting. After he saw war first hand he would write a parchment for additional credit in moral certitude. "I must stay and see this thing called war," he said quietly to himself.

The next morning, a train of horses carrying Lord Robert's and Lady Anne's two daughters and their ladies in waiting left the castle with a small escort. Everyone of importance was occupied with preparations for the siege and Brian was not missed. Staying at Le Moineau was easier than the apprentice thought. Remaining quiet and unobtrusive was something at which he excelled at the Lyceum and he faded into the scenery so well that he became part of it. Even Lord Robert who insisted he leave seemed to look right through him. Brian unpacked his books and instruments intending to continue his studies. He had his meals brought to the tower room to be even less conspicuous. Yet, his good intentions failed him and ignoring his studies, was drawn to the battlements as if by a lodestone.

B. D. King

Each day, Lord Robert's vassals rode into the castle to prepare for the inevitable. Sacks were filled with partially ripened grain and stored in the keep. Stones, arrows and spears were stacked on the catwalks along the walls and Brian woke daily to the sound of the smithy sharpening swords and spear points while carpenters in the courtyard built a huge trebuchet. Curious, he walked along the shelters in the yard listening to the inhabitants and savoring the atmosphere of apprehension that gripped the castle. It was so much more thrilling than the Lyceum. Here people were alive to the moment and the air was tense with excitement and fear! No conversation was too trivial for his attention. Pierre the Miller seemed to know everyone as he brought wagon loads of flour for the garrison.

"Another load today, Pierre?" Henri, the guard at the gate smiled.

"Lord Robert commanded the harvest be gathered early. It's an evil business."

Henri shrugged. "I do what my lord commands."

"You're a soldier. You don't have a family and a business to worry about. As soon as there is talk of war you get a new halberd and a shirt of mail to cover your jerkin."

Henri nodded. "All for the English. You'd better get your wife and little ones to the woods. I hear they eat children."

That news didn't make Pierre feel any better. "I hear they pay for everything they want and this is the only castle in France that wants to fight." He countered.

"God only knows," Henri said philosophically and crossed himself. "Robert is our lord and we must do his will."

Pierre nodded. "True." He drove the wagon to a storage shed where old Isobel was washing rags for bandages. "Still at it, Isobel?"

The wizened crone nodded as she stirred the cauldron with a big stick. "They'll need more bandages than they have here, miller. Mark my word."

The Fief Of Central Park

Pierre jumped down from his seat and walked to the back of the wagon and began unloading it. "So, you think we'll actually have a war?"

"I can feel it in my bones," she told him. "It'll be long and hard and by the time it's over there won't be a morsel left for the winter. These soldiers will eat the land bare. That's nothing compared to what they'll do with the girls around here."

"I pray you're wrong, Isobel. Lord Robert is a good lord and we prosper under his rule."

The old woman stepped away from the cauldron to wipe her brow and hold her aching back. "If I were younger I'd run away and not come back. I'd go to Bayeux or Caen where a strong woman can find work."

"I have a family. I can't do that," Pierre told her.

"Then hide enough food for the winter, miller."

Pierre looked at her thoughtfully. "I will take your advice and I shall light extra candles to the Virgin for deliverance."

Brian learned that in a war the peasants suffered most. For those who worked the land, an army, regardless of the banner it followed, was a curse. Soldiers could consume the fruits of years of back breaking toil in a few days, even if they weren't intent on laying waste to the countryside. As armies marched and fought across their fields, the peasants considered themselves fortunate to escape with their lives, if not their daughters, intact. But it wasn't the peasants who fascinated him. It was the idea of two large bodies of men locked in mortal combat. Curiosity filled his every pore and Brian looked eagerly forward to witnessing war first hand. Not wanting to miss an hour of it, he spent most of his days on the battlements peering in the direction from which he knew the English would come and was finally rewarded when he observed the first faint glow of their campfires on the night horizon. Later he could see in the day a dusty smudge against the clear blue sky. Each night the glow grew perceptibly brighter and in the morning, the smudge grew larger until it became a cloud of dust hanging low over the

B. D. King

distant hills. At the end of a week the nightly glow expanded and separated into individual campfires, while the base of the dust cloud had become dark and foreboding. Two days from Le Moineau the campfires were earthbound stars against the darkened landscape. Brian's excitement was unbearable as the base of the cloud grew darker and darker until it resembled an undulating pudding. The following day the pudding separated into siege engines, carts and men. Late that afternoon Brian could distinguish the knights and the mounted men-at-arms from the foot troops. Before nightfall he could make out the banners and liveries of the different houses. Pondering the thrilling spectacle below him, Brian stroked his beard. Watching from the battlements wasn't enough, he had to get close to this beast of war and view it personally. The following morning he was determined to see it firsthand.

He awoke early and washed. A brief knock on the door and Alesia, the serving girl entered with a wooden trencher upon which was a steaming bowl of porridge and a mug of cider. She was a pretty girl with long dark hair and a small nose. Around Brian, she blushed a lot because she looked upon him as a powerful, learned man. She had difficulty finding a clear place on the table which was covered with parchment and instruments. He cleared away a space and she put the trencher down.

"Thank you, Alicia," he said politely.

Normally when he thanked her she would leave and return later to pick up the empty trencher. Today she stood staring at him in a way that made him feel very uncomfortable. There was a long silence in the tower room as Alicia and Brian looked at one another. "Alicia?" Brian dared finally to ask. "Is something wrong?"

Suddenly Alicia burst into tears and fell to her knees to kiss his hand. "Oh, Excellency, the English are coming and I am so frightened. Can't you cast a spell to make them leave us be? Please!"

The Fief Of Central Park

Brian's mouth opened in terror and embarrassment and he jerked his hand away from her lips as if they had been red hot. "N-no," he stammered. "I can do no such thing. I am not a wizard. Now please go."

She rose, looking very sheepish. "I am sorry if I offended thee," she said. "Please forgive me."

Brian backed away from her even more. Moving around a pile of books on the floor, the flowing sleeve of his robe touched a pyramid of scrolls precariously perched on the writing table and parchment cylinders rolled everywhere. Retreating from the avalanche of learning Brian backed into an astrolabe balanced delicately on a pile of books and sent it clattering to the rush strewn floor. Attempting to retrieve it, he knocked the books into a heap. In an instant Alesia forgot her fear and wanted to laugh at the sight before her. Wherever Brian turned, piles of books toppled and scrolls rolled. Only fear that he would turn her into a newt or worse prevented her from laughing. In the midst of his confusion and consternation, Alesia withdrew daring only to giggle after she closed the door.

Gazing dolefully at the chaos he caused, Brian sat in his chair and sighed. His heart was still pounding with fear because Alesia thought he was a wizard and she had asked him to intervene in human affairs. That was something no wizard was ever allowed to do. His breakfast was covered by the disarray on his table and his attention was drawn to the noises outside the window where less than a mile away, the English army was assembling. He had to see it, no matter what. I wonder if Merlin will ever forgive me, he wondered picking up his floppy gray hat and putting it on his head. He was surprised how easy it was to get out of the castle. The main gate was still open to accommodate messengers galloping to and fro and late comers arriving from the countryside. These were not pathetic groups of peasants seeking shelter from the English but the last of Lord Robert's vassals and their armed retainers. Henri, the man-at-arms at the gate took little notice of the short man in the rumpled gray

B. D. King

robes walking across the drawbridge. How he was able to leave so easily puzzled Brian. Unversed in military operations he didn't understand that only the head of the English column had arrived at the village of Le Moineau. It would take days before the rest of the army arrived and even more time before the English were in position to completely invest the castle. The familiar sounds of the birds in the trees were gone and everything was unnaturally quiet as the noises of the castle receded. A short distance up the road, Brian heard shouting from the village and smelled something in the wind. Smoke! The English were sacking the village! Brian looked back to ponder the safety of the castle, took a step back and stopped. No, he had come this far to learn of war first hand and dared not falter. He proceeded slowly toward the village, and the chaos grew louder and the smell of smoke grew stronger. Brian could distinguish three columns of thick black smoke ascending into the bright afternoon sky and decided it was more prudent to approach the village from a less obvious direction, he left the road, making his way through the wood, tripping and stumbling through the underbrush. Brambles latched onto his hair and beard, thorns snagged his robe, and branches knocked his floppy hat from his head. Blundering out of the dense thicket, Brian found himself in the middle of the English army. The din was incredible and fear seized him as a large English soldier advanced menacingly.

"What, have ye no goods to sell, olde man?" The Englishman asked him.

"N...no," Brian said fearfully.

"Some mead for this beggar," the soldier said in a loud, good natured voice.

Brian was about to protest that he wasn't a beggar until he realized his robe was snagged and soiled. A soldier thrust bread and mead into Brian's hands as he passed through the milling throng. This wasn't the band of sullen cutthroats he expected. The sounds of singing and laughter were mixed with the rumbling of the siege engines and the creaking of leather. Flowers were tied to the soldiers' weapons and

The Fief Of Central Park

peasants lined the road cheering. The smoke was rising from three oxen roasting on spits near the church and a carnival mood was everywhere. Brian brushed off his robe and hat, then remembering he had not eaten, chewed the bread and sipped the mead which he found very tasty.

Wandering through the throngs of English Brian saw lines of men with halberds and bows, forming a barrier between their army and the castle. Farmer's fields were trodden down by the soldiers' feet and where wheat once grew colorful tents were going up in neat rows. The sounds of axes echoed loudly through the woods as trees came crashing down to provide lumber for the siege works and firewood for the soldiers. Brian understood little of it and he was more confused than ever. A goatherd whom he had seen often during his daily walks stood by the road, goats milling around his feet. Brian raised his hat in greeting.

"Good day to thee, goatherd," Brian said.

Doffing his hat with a bow, the goatherd replied. "Good day to thee, your Excellency."

"Prithee," Brian asked. "Is this the English army?"

"Yes, master, indeed it is."

"Then why is everyone laughing and singing as if this were a feast day?"

The goatherd's face erupted in a toothless grin and gestured to the goats "They pay for what they want. I have been selling them goat's milk, look!" Reaching in into a tattered purse he withdrew a dozen coppers and two or three small silver coins, more money than the man had seen in his entire life.

Brian was now thoroughly confused and bade, "Thanks to thee, goatherd, good day."

"God be with thee, sir," the goatherd replied with another bow.

Having had enough of war for one day, a confused Brian shook his head. He dusted off his robes and pulled the brambles from his hat which he placed securely on his head. Glancing back at the English, he walked back to the castle

wending his way through the throngs still munching the bread and sipping the mead. This time he walked straight down the road and none of the merry-makers questioned him. Had he looked closely, he would have noticed that one of the English knights was neither laughing nor singing.

Sir William Fitz Walter sat astride his charger and stared cheerlessly at the castle paying scant attention to the bearded man in the rumpled gray robes walking toward the object of his interest. Mounted on either side of him were his younger brother Geoffrey, still a squire, and their cousin Sir Percy de Clare. Sir William presented a striking figure mounted on his destrier. He was older and taller than most of Henry's knights, having won his spurs twenty years before. He was proud of the fact he could still wear the same armor and, as a result, he wore less of it than his kinsmen and his mail surcoat was longer. His strong face, deep set eyes and graying beard were not protected by the unvisored bascinet he wore. It was in his choice of weapons that Sir William stood out most, favoring the hand ax though it had gone out of style in the previous decade. Those who had seen Sir William use it in combat understood his preference. Geoffrey and Sir Percy were clad mostly in plate and favored the visored helmet currently in fashion in Italy. Each carried a sword and dagger eschewing wooden hafted weapons. Geoffrey was shorter and stockier than his brother while their cousin was as tall as William but slimmer. All three exhibited the same family characteristics of fair hair and skin, straight brow and blue eyes. Sir William's hair was graying and Geoffrey's was nearly blond. Sir Percy was younger than Sir William and was known as a reader of books, something his cousins thought a silly waste of time. The Fitz Walters were men of action. Maturity had put a damper on Sir William's impetuosity, but there was nothing of the sort to hold Geoffrey in check. He had come to France to win his spurs and sitting around looking at a silly old castle wasn't furthering that cause a bit. There were dragons to slay and maidens to rescue. Sir William and Sir Percy had hurried home from a

The Fief Of Central Park

pilgrimage to the Holy Land to support the king but Sir William had become more and more taciturn since their arrival in France and Geoffrey had become increasingly impatient with his brother's attitude.

"Why lookest thou so somber, brother?" Geoffrey inquired.

Sir William turned a cold eye to his brother and said, "I do not like this campaign and I do not like this place."

"Why?" Geoffrey asked in exasperation. "We have marched from town to town and wherever we stop, we are welcomed because the King insists we pay for everything. In many places they greet us as liberators. For all the need we have for our arms we may as well be a troupe of traveling mummers. The French have not offered us battle and they may never fight."

"That is precisely what worries me. The French are more dangerous when they do not offer battle."

"More dangerous when they do not offer battle?" Geoffrey scoffed. "That's preposterous!"

"Thy brother speaks the truth, Geoffrey," Sir Percy leaned forward to loosen the reins to let his horse graze.

"What sayest thou, cousin?"

"'Tis true, Geoffrey. In 1356 we slaughtered the French at Poitiers just as we did at Crecy and at Agincourt but two years past. France, we thought was ours, but we didn't reckon on the Duc du Guesclin."

"Who?" Geoffrey looked from Percy to his brother and back again.

"The most unchivalrous knight ever to walk the earth," Sir William interjected vehemently. "A demon."

"I still don't understand." Geoffrey said.

Sir Percy shifted in his saddle. "Du Guesclin was one of the few on either side who recognized the superiority and the weaknesses of the longbow," he explained. "As Constable of France he directed only those attacks which could avoid it."

"He fought from ambuscade or at night," Sir William added disgustedly.

B. D. King

"Oh," Geoffrey's replied not quite able to grasp the unchivalrous concept of fighting at night.

"Aye, he was so skilled at siege craft," Sir Percy continued. "That our towns fell to him one by one until only Calais and part of Gascony were left to us."

"That's unchivalrous," Geoffrey exclaimed.

"Unchivalrous or not," Sir Percy moved in his saddle to relieve the stiffness. "It's war. There's a time when thou needs must forget much of the rubbish they teach thee in squires' barracks."

"'Tis no rubbish!" Sir William retorted. "A man needs must have his principles."

"'Tis true," Sir Percy agreed, "but at Agincourt the French had more principles than sense."

Sir William opened his mouth to reply when Geoffrey interrupted. "A rider comes."

"Who is it?" Sir William asked, squinting at the approaching dust covered rider.

"'Tis Edward our man-at-arms," Geoffrey declared.

The rider spurred his horse toward them and reined to a stop. It was only then that the Fitz Walter arms were visible beneath the layer of dust from the long day's march.

"What news, Edward?" Sir William asked anxiously.

Edward turned from his master, took a breath and spat the dust from his mouth. "Yon castle is closed up and the lord therein is ready to fight."

"Well," Sir Percy sighed. "Here's one Frenchman who still has the stomach for it."

"What is this place called?" Sir William inquired.

"Le Moineau, Milord, same as the castle," Edward informed him.

"Le Moineau?" Geoffrey exclaimed. "The Sparrow? 'Tis a weak name for a town much less a castle."

"Sparrows in number will drive out larger birds," Sir Percy remarked soberly.

"Does the lord of this place fly arms?" Was Sir William's next question.

The Fief Of Central Park

"Yes, Milord," Edward said looking from knight to knight, reluctant to volunteer the information.

"Whose arms?" Sir Percy testily demanded. "Orleans?"

"Nay, Milord de Clare." Edward hesitated, "France Ancient."

"A pox on it!" Sir William cursed loudly. "I knew we should have stayed in the Holy Land. A curse upon this rotten place. The brave knights are too stupid to be anything but brave and the wise ones fight like villeins."

"Calm thyself, cousin." Sir Percy said. "Du Guesclin has been dead these many years."

"Verily, and rotting in Hell it is to be hoped," Sir William remarked loudly, "but his spawn and ilk abound in this land. Mark me, Percy, this is but the beginning and aught good will come of it."

"Someone comes," Edward said relieved by the interruption.

"Who might this be?" Sir William muttered to no one in particular.

"He wears the King's livery, Milord," Edward said. "A page, I'll wager."

The rider reined up a few paces from the four horsemen and doffed his hat. "His Majesty greets his cousins Lords Fitz Walter and de Clare, prays for their good health and bids them attend him."

"We come at once," Sir William said. "Where is His Majesty?"

"In yon copse by the castle," the page told him. "By your leave, I must inform the others." The page bowed from his horse and rode away.

"Why doth the King call thee cousins?" Geoffrey asked.

"Thy father, thy brother and I supported the late King for the crown. He was grateful and so is his son." Sir Percy replied.

"Edward," Sir William ordered. "Find us a good camp. I fear we will be here a good while."

B. D. King

"Very good, Milord," Edward obeyed spurring his horse forward.

"Geoffrey wait thee here," Sir William told his brother.

"Yes, brother." Geoffrey watched his brother and cousin ride off in one direction and Edward in another. "Wait here, wait here," he muttered. "At this rate I shall never win my spurs."

The King and his entourage had gathered in a copse not more than half a mile from the foot of Le Moineau Castle. Henry would have stood out among them even without his royal garb. Tall and fair he had inherited the fiery blue eyes of the Plantagenets along with their temper, which he was displaying as he paced like a caged lion among the trees. Sir William knew what was coming and looked up at the castle standing on a steep slope overlooking the entire area. Le Moineau was a small castle, its age betrayed by its square keep. There were hundreds of castles in Europe that were better built, but Le Moineau was well sited and a determined garrison could make an attacker pay dearly. No one had any question about the determination of Lord Robert to fight if he gazed upon the tattered blue banner with its faded gold lilies flying from the keep. Unlike most of the cowards that populated the French realm, this man knew his duty to his king, and Sir William grudgingly respected that. Sir Percy nudged his cousin and the elder Fitz Walter returned his attention to the King. All the knights had arrived and Henry was speaking.

"I am determined to show this French churl who is King of France. We attack tomorrow -- at dawn!"

Sir William looked up at the castle again and sighed audibly. He didn't like this. He didn't like this at all. They waited until the king gave them their assignments. The Fitz Walter contingent was to assault the northeastern section of the wall. Sir William uttered a silent thankful prayer that they hadn't been assigned to storm a tower.

The Siege

Edward had found an excellent camp site near a fast running stream and was in the process of setting up their tents when the three knights found him. One of the servants had meat roasting on a spit. While it was still light Sir William assembled his men-at-arms around him and ordered them to gather materials to build four ladders, a dozen or so pavaises and as many fascines as they could assemble.

"We must get these finished by morning," he insisted. He turned to the serjeants in charge. "See that the men are fed first. It will be a long night and they'll work best on full bellies." They bowed respectfully and gathered the men around them.

Sir William turned to his brother and cousin. "Come with me, we also have work to do. First we eat then we look at the castle."

"But we can see it from here," Geoffrey said.

"Geoffrey," his brother asked patiently. "What sort of ground lies between here and the walls of Le Moineau?"

Geoffrey blinked. "I don't understand, brother."

Sir William looked directly at his brother. "Is the ground hard or soft? Is it barren or are there plants that may trip us. In what condition is the palisade? How large are the logs that make it up? How wide and how deep is the moat?"

Geoffrey listened carefully then smiled in understanding. "This so there will be no surprise tomorrow."

"At least as far as the path we take," Percy added. "In battle there are always surprises but we must reduce the risks as much as we can."

"I understand cousin."

"It grows dark soon," Sir William told them. "Let us eat and we can go."

At dark, the two knights and Geoffrey stealthily left the camp. Sir Percy carried a staff that could be used to judge the depth of the moat if they could get close enough. The night sky was clear and full of stars while the half-moon rose early giving them enough light to do what was necessary without

making them too easy a target for the archers in the castle. The ground was hard enough to support men moving across it in mass. They found two stakes that marked the effective bow range from the castle. Obviously someone in the castle knew his business. They pulled them up. Much to their chagrin, they discovered the palisade was manned or at least patrolled and they withdrew as silently as they came.

When they returned to camp, Sir William called the serjeants to his tent. He described what he and the others had learned then told them, "We must reach the wall as quickly as possible and get the ladders up. It all depends on speed. Make sure the men get what sleep they can and have breakfast. It will be a hard morrow, make no mistake."

The serjeants nodded, bowed and left the tent. Sir William turned to his brother and cousin. "We will succeed tomorrow only if we are very lucky. We must prepare for a long siege, I fear."

Sir Percy was silent but agreed totally. He had seen it before, a hasty attack badly done followed by a long siege. Time was on the side of the besieged.

"Let's to bed," Sir William told them.

None of them slept well. Sir William and Sir Percy were concerned about the details of the attack and Geoffrey lay awake in anticipation of his first great battle.

Brian also found it difficult to sleep. What he had sensed as apprehension on the part of the inhabitants of the castle had turned to a palpable anxiety. The sounds of everyday life, talking merrily, the iron bound wheels clattering across the drawbridge and the birds in the countryside were gone. They had been replaced by guarded whispers and grim visages. Gradually, he drifted off to a troubled slumber.

The English Camp

Sir William was awaked by Edward before dawn. More wood was placed on the fires to warm the porridge in the kettles. Sir William looked on the ladders and pavaises with

The Fief Of Central Park

satisfaction. During breakfast he went among his soldiers. They were in good spirits. Most had been with him for some time and he addressed many by name and shared a soldier's joke with one or two. Then at a nod the serjeants began moving them to their positions where they would wait for the signal from the king to begin the assault. Sir William, Geoffrey and Sir Percy shared a skin of wine as they waited for the stars in the black eastern sky to fade as the first blush of the sun announced a new day. Gradually the castle became visible, an indistinct shape in the dim light. Dawn broke and the outline of the image sharpened revealing the details of the walls the palisade and the moat. As soon as it was light enough to move forward, trumpets sounded along the length of Henry's army and the cry rang out "For Goode King Harry!"

Sir William, his brother and cousin moved to the front of their troops. "Forward!" He shouted and the mass of men began to move. First came men with axes to cut down the palisade. Next came groups of men carrying fascines. Their job was to fill the moat so the ladder parties could get their ladders to the walls. They were followed by the four ladder parties each followed by a column of armed men ready to mount the ladders once they were up. Finally came the line of archers carrying the pavaises. They moved as quickly as possible to bow range, set their mobile shields down and began firing at the spot on the wall that the Fitz Walter contingent was to assault.

Le Moineau

The trumpets woke Brian from a fitful sleep and he was vaguely aware of the cheer from the English camp. His window revealed the faint glow of dawn and as soon as he sat up, he heard the sounds of scurrying feet and shouted orders within the castle. Hurriedly, he put on his robes, hat and sandals and made his way to the battlements. The walls were lined with men crouching behind them for protection. A serjeant was shouting "Keep down, men, until they're within

B. D. King

range." Along the wall were quivers of arrows and baskets of large stones.

Brian walked to the edge of the battlement and blinked. A wave of men was rushing toward the castle. Most carried swords or pole arms but some carried ladders. Behind them a group carried what looked like two man shields and behind that siege engines were being dragged into position. Seconds later something odd buzzed around his head. As arrows hit the wall behind him he realized what they were. He leaned over the wall to get a better look just before a soldier grabbed his robe and dragged him to the floor. "You damned fool," the soldier shouted, "Do ye want to lose your head?"

Brian was indignant that he had been so roughly handled but on reflection decided he should thank the man for saving his life. By the time he found his voice the man was gone. Arrows continued to hit the wall. Then a stone from a siege engine struck the wall to his left showering the soldiers with sharp bits of rock.

"Ready!" Someone shouted. The archers and crossbowmen rose.

"Draw!" The archers drew their bows and the crossbowmen cocked theirs.

"Mark your targets!"

A few feet from Brian a man cried out and crumbled to the floor, an arrow through his throat. Brian stared in horror as blood gushed from the man's neck. He began crawling toward the man hoping there was something he could do for him. There must be something he could do for the poor wretch then he remembered Merlin's words, "Whatever happens, you must never interfere."

The command, "Loose!" brought him back to the present. Now arrows were flying in both directions. More catapult stones hit the wall and more men fell, wounded or killed by arrows.

"Poles!" Came another order, then "Make ready the stones!"

The Fief Of Central Park

Archers put down their bows and drew their swords. Several grabbed long poles and others lifted the heavy baskets of stones to the edge of the battlement. The tops of ladders cracked against the walls and at the command, "Away!" the stones were poured onto them. As soon as the baskets were empty the men with the poles pushed the ladders away from the wall. With the English soldiers so close to the wall, their archers were holding their fire so Brian stood up to see more clearly. Despite the French arrows, stones and the poles, some ladders were fast against the wall and Englishmen reached the top. Swords glistened and clanged in the morning light as men shouted, screamed and crumpled to the floor. Blood flew everywhere as limbs and heads were hacked off. Brian backed into a doorway thinking some sane person must call an end to all this but the expressions of blood lust on men's faces showed that nothing of the sort was about to happen. One of the English attackers fell at his feet, clutching his stomach and moaning. He looked up at Brian pathetically and muttered, "mother," just before one of the defenders leaned over and cut his throat with a poniard. "English pig," the Frenchman spat and went back to the fight. Terrified, dumbstruck and revolted, Brian backed through the doorway and stumbled down the steps to his room. He curled up on the narrow bed and pressed his hands over his ears trying to shut out the sounds of the battle that raged a few feet away.

Sir William and his party were having bad luck. At first things went very well. Only a few arrows landed among them as they crossed the open ground. They chopped through the palisade and made a narrow path across a shallow moat with fascines. From there everything went wrong. As the ladders went up, baskets of stones were emptied on their heads injuring several of Sir William's men. The older Fitz Walter mounted the first ladder in place. "Follow me!" He shouted and began his climb. Even though six sturdy lads held the ladder fast, the French pushed it away from the wall with a long pole. Sir William was halfway up when was forced to

jump. He landed in the moat and would have drowned in his armor had not Geoffrey and several men-at-arms dragged him out. Twice more ladders went up and twice more they were pushed over. No one was disappointed when the trumpets sounded the recall. As they retreated, the archers on the walls hit several of Sir William's men.

The English Camp

As soon as they returned to the tent, Sir William was helped out of his armor and the surgeon attended him.

"No bones broken but you're badly bruised. You must take some rest, Sir William," he said.

The knight waved the surgeon away. "I'm fine," he insisted, "I've had worse." After the surgeon left Sir William lay down on his cot with a groan. He was very, very sore.

Sir Percy entered the tent. "How are you, William?" He asked with concern.

"I feel like I took ten straight falls in a tournament," the elder Fitzwalter said with a weak smile. "I'm bruised, that's all. What is the butcher's bill?"

"Three killed and one more will definitely die. Two are gravely wounded and will recover if the surgeon doesn't kill them. A dozen more are lightly hurt but will be fit for duty on the morrow." Percy took a stool and sat next to the cot.

"Make sure the dying man gets a priest and they are all given proper burials," Sir William said sternly. "None of my men are going into an unmarked common grave."

"As good as done, cousin," Sir Percy replied.

"Where is Geoffrey?"

"Seeing to the organization of the camp and setting the watch. He's quite good at it. He did very well today."

"Is he injured?"

Percy shrugged. "A few scratches, that's all."

Sir William nodded in approval then looked at his cousin for a moment.

"What are you thinking, William?" Percy asked.

The Fief Of Central Park

Sir William was silent for a moment and sighed, "It was badly done."

"I agree," his cousin said. "The king should have planned this carefully instead of blindly rushing into it. We are going to be here for a while and if that's the case a lot of these men will be dead of disease before it's over."

"Too true, but the king commands and we obey. We can only hope that he comes to his senses before too long. Methinks we should have stayed in the Holy Land."

Sir Percy nodded in agreement. "Get some sleep cousin. I doubt anything of note will happen tomorrow."

Le Moineau

After a time, the sounds of battle faded but Brian found no peace. The zing of arrows and the clash of swords were replaced by the moans and screams of dying men and the sobbing of their women. When he looked over at the writing table, a scroll rolled off revealing the porridge and bread Alesia had placed there in the morning. It was growing dark and he hadn't eaten all day. Yet he wasn't hungry. The very thought of food made his stomach turn and he was very, very tired. He lay back on the bed hoping to sleep when there was a knock at the door. He thought it was Alesia come to get the tray.

"Brian?" It was the Lady Anne.

He rose from the bed and bowed. "My Lady, I am honored."

"You should have left." She said gently. Nevertheless it was a rebuke.

"I – I'm sorry," He replied but..."

"But?" Without being asked she sat in the chair.

"I was curious," he confessed. "I wanted to see war."

"Brian, you can't just stand back and observe war. It isn't like a tournament."

B. D. King

"I know that now. My Lady, what I saw today was horrible, men hacking at one another without mercy...it's insane. Someone has to put an end to it."

Lady Anne looked him unsympathetically. "It will not end until it has run its course." She said flatly.

"Would it not be wiser just to give in to the English and avoid the death and destruction?" He asked naively.

"Surrender to the English?" She shot back. Her brown eyes were ablaze. "Never!"

Brian was shocked by the vehement reply.

She continued, "Brian, we are the nobility. As vassals of the King of France, we are duty bound to defend these lands in his name. It is also our duty to protect the weak and see that the King's law is carried out. Without us, there would be chaos. There is also the matter of our honor."

"Honor?" Brian asked.

"Yes, honor," she shot back. "Without it we are little more than the villeins who serve us. Honor sets us apart from the lower classes. That is why we have to fight. It is the only way to maintain our honor and achieve glory."

He looked at her blankly not really understanding.

"Brian, without honor and glory life is cold and meaningless." She explained. "It is better for us to die defending our realm than to be seen as cowards or, worse, traitors to the king."

"I understand," he said finally. He didn't really but he wanted to be left alone.

She rose and so did he. "If there is a way to leave through a truce or some other means, I'll make sure you get out." She said.

"Thank you, My Lady." He bowed and watched her leave. How could there be honor and glory when all he felt was fear and revulsion? How could they do what they did? Why were they so different? He shook his head. He had no way of knowing. All he wanted to do was get as far away from this slaughter pen as he could. Merlin and his studies be damned, he thought bitterly.

The Fief Of Central Park

There was no way to leave. Neither side was about to give an inch. The only truces in the next few weeks were short ones to gather the wounded and bury the dead. Then there was an ominous quiet. By this time Brian understood when everything was quiet something bad was about to happen.

42 Days Later The English Camp

Sir William was sleeping fitfully when Edward nudged him awake. "Tis nearly time, Milord," he whispered.

The knight rubbed his eyes and pondered the morning to come as Edward woke Geoffrey and Sir Percy. All had slept in their armor. They buckled on their sword belts and blearily walked out of the tent, eyes automatically fixed on the castle as they were so many mornings before. Dawn was creeping through the mist and in a few minutes it would reveal the dark, lurking shadow of Le Moineau. None needed a clear morning to see it. The details of the battered wall streaked with soot were etched in their brains. Le Moineau had withstood half a dozen assaults. The knights made their way to the fire to break their fast.

"Forty-two days," Sir Percy muttered. "Canst thou believe we have been here forty-two days?"

"Humph," grumbled Sir William.

"I know," said Sir Percy before Sir William could say it again. "We should have stayed in the Holy Land."

"Breakfast, Milords." Ignoring the usual morning grumbling, Edward handed each of them a steaming bowl.

"Porridge," Geoffrey moaned, "a pox upon it."

"Eat," Sir William ordered dipping a wooden spoon into his bowl. "Thou wilt have need of nourishment this day."

Making a face, Geoffrey began eating without further comment and Sir William and Sir Percy looked at one another. Geoffrey had turned out to be quite a fighter, but the siege was wearing on him as it was on everyone else. It was

B. D. King

one thing to fight an armed opponent in open combat and quite another to climb a flimsy ladder while those above rained divers missiles and lately hot pitch on one's head.

"It should be today," Sir Percy said purposely trying to break the silence.

"Humph." Sir William replied.

Eying the castle they noticed the mist breaking and the upper works of the castle were silhouetted against a clear blue sky. As if to remind the English of Le Moineau's defiance, a puff of wind stirred the lily banner to life as it had so many mornings before. This morning would be different, however. In the second week of the siege the King came to his senses and hired the master builder Jakob of Mayence to assist him in bringing the siege to a swift conclusion. After two days of consideration, Jakob advised the digging of a mine beneath the east tower of Le Moineau. Henry agreed. Thus began three weeks of back breaking toil. Secrecy had to be maintained as digging proceeded around the clock. Fresh earth, dug during the day, was put into sacks which were carried into the forest and emptied after dark. Assaults were ordered as diversions and the defenders never suspected a thing. Finally the tower was reached and the earth and stone supporting the tower were replaced by timbers soaked in pitch. On the forty-first night of the siege, Jakob emerged from the mine and nodded to the King. A few hours later the timbers were set ablaze. On the forty-second dawn of the siege, the issue would be decided. The defenders could do nothing. It was too late. As they had done so many mornings before, Sir William, Sir Percy and Geoffrey made their way to the line of pavaises that marked the extreme bow range of the castle. Trumpets sounded within Le Moineau's walls and the defenders appeared on the ramparts. Sir William wondered what they were thinking.

"Cousins, look!" Sir Percy shouted pointing to the east tower which swayed perceptibly.

A murmur went through the armed throng followed by a ghastly silence. Not a soul on either side whispered as the

The Fief Of Central Park

tower creaked and swayed again. Suddenly, with a tremendous crash, the east tower of Le Moineau collapsed upon itself, raising a gigantic cloud of dust that obscured the sun on the eastern side of the battlefield. A loud cheer echoed through the English army and the war cry "For Goode King Harry!" drowned the signal trumpets as English soldiers, carrying their ladders, surged toward the castle. Sir William Fitz Walter led his contingent toward the west wall opposite the collapsed tower. In order to insure success, Henry ordered a three pronged assault. The main attack was to seize the collapsed tower; the second attack was mounted against the main gate with a battering ram; and the third attack led by the Fitz Walter contingent was directed against the west wall.

Each of the Fitz Walters and Sir Percy commanded a detachment of three ladders. There was little confusion. They and their soldiers had done this same thing over this same ground many times before. Few crossbow bolts or arrows fell when they moved forward, because the French saved their ammunition until the attackers were close enough to make each shot count. About seventy yards from the walls arrows rained down in sheets, several bouncing off the knights' shields and armor. The palisade had long been cut down and the moat had been filled in numerous places. Casualties were light as Sir William's detachment reached the base of the wall. The ladders went up and stones the size of melons began to fall. Sir William was the lead man on his ladder and the rickety contraption swayed beneath him when he ascended. Suddenly the ladder jerked as a man with a forked pole attempted to push it over. Sir William swung his ax and the pole shattered. The Frenchman lost his balance, falling to the ground as the ladder snapped back against the wall and Sir William continued to climb. Reaching the top and gaining the catwalk, he saw some of his men already there and one of the men-at-arms fell as if struck by an invisible hand, then another toppled over. The defenders had saved their bolts for definite targets. Leave it to the French, Sir William thought

B. D. King

grudgingly, it was unchivalrous, but practical. A group of French followed up the volley with a vigorous charge attempting to dislodge Sir William and the other English from the wall. The lead Frenchman swung his sword clumsily and Sir William easily parried the blow with his shield. The reply of the tall English knight was swift and deadly. As ax cleaved through armor, flesh and bone, the Frenchman fell in a bundle at the elder Fitz Walter's feet. Sir William wrenched the ax free and the haft broke. "God's name!" He swore.

Another defender, thinking Sir William defenseless swung wildly at the knight. Ducking, he struck his off-balance opponent with his shield and the man tottered on the edge of the wall, grabbing Sir William's shield for support. Giving his opponent an evil grin Sir William released his shield and the Frenchman plummeted to the courtyard below where his scream ended with a thud. Sir William cursed the loss of his shield and drew his sword in time to fight another attacker. This one was far more difficult to dispatch because the dead and dying littering the catwalk made it difficult to keep one's footing. The assault had been a costly business for both sides. Geoffrey and Sir Percy were doing little more than holding their own against superior odds while some of their men looked dazed. Had it not been for the first savage onslaught, they might have been pushed back already. Sir William shrugged. If it worked once...

"For Goode King Harry!" He shouted, rushing into the melee. He dispatched one of the Frenchmen pressing Geoffrey while his brother caught another under the arm. Sir Percy cleaved the shoulder of his adversary and the man went down with an agonizing scream. Sir William pushed a fourth Frenchman off the wall and the enemy's will to fight suddenly evaporated. The survivors fled leaving the Fitz Walters and their cousin alone. Dazed, they observed the battles raging in other parts of the castle. A column of black smoke beyond the gate towers was evidence the defenders had fired the battering ram and stopped the English there. The battle was still hotly contested across the rubble of the

The Fief Of Central Park

ruined tower but the attackers were slowly pushing the desperate defenders back. The first to regain his senses, Sir William rushed down the undefended steps to the courtyard with his brother and cousin close behind. The courtyard was empty save for the debris of battle and badly wounded defenders who were laid on the ground in neat rows. Regarding the Englishmen listlessly, the closest ones asked for water.

"We should open the gates," Sir Percy said. "That will insure victory."

Geoffrey looked at his cousin and then at Sir William waiting for his brother to say something, but Sir William was silent, his gaze was fixed at some distant object. The others followed the trance like look.

"The keep," Geoffrey said softly.

The main defensive work of the castle lay open before them, its heavy door shattered by a catapult stone. To take the keep meant to take the castle, but military considerations were only secondary. Geoffrey's and Sir Percy's eyes snapped from the shattered door to Sir William's face and back again. A common thought inspired them all.

"Plunder," they chorused.

As they ran for the door, Sir William felt his age. Geoffrey and Sir Percy reached the keep several yards ahead of him. The Englishmen rushed through the door completely taking the guards at the outer door by surprise. The hapless Frenchmen were cut down before their swords were completely drawn and Sir William rushed by them and was nearly to the inner door before the two hit the ground. Geoffrey and Sir Percy were close on Sir William's heels when they were seen by the guards at the inner door. Assuming the castle had fallen because there were English in the keep, the two men-at-arms threw down their weapons and fled. The three armored men proceeded down the corridor and to the stairs, their footsteps echoing against the stone walls.

"The keep is empty," Geoffrey said in astonishment.

B. D. King

"No soldiers?" Sir Percy asked.

"Lord Robert must have used them all on the wall," Sir William speculated. "Come with me but be ready for a trick."

They moved cautiously up the narrow staircase and down the restricted corridor of the keep. It was devoid of everything living except for Alesia cowering in a corner. Grinning, Geoffrey grabbed for her and she screamed. Sir William pulled him away.

"But..." Geoffrey protested.

"There's time for that later," Sir Percy told him.

"But..."

"Where lies the gold?" Sir William asked the girl in a booming voice.

Staring at them in stark terror, the panic stricken serving girl tried to melt into the stone wall.

"We won't harm you," Sir Percy said softly, then realizing that she probably spoke no English switched to French. "Ou'st l'argent, l'or?"

The shuddering girl thinking he said "sorcier," the French word for wizard, and unable to speak, pointed down the hall to stairs that led to a solid door.

"That must be the treasure room," Sir William said. "Come on."

"Don't go away," Geoffrey said leering at the girl. Sir Percy pulled him down the hall.

Sir William tried the squat wooden door first. It was solid oak and bolted from within. He looked around and found a stand of halberds against the far wall. Taking one down, he let the head rest on the floor and hacked at the nine foot haft until a three foot handle remained.

"This will make it easier to swing." Sir William grinned at his handiwork. "Stand back."

Brian's Chamber

After the second English attack, Brian no longer went out on the battlements. He had seen enough. The cruel spectacle

The Fief Of Central Park

that he had been so curious about was more than he could bear. How human beings could inflict such grief and suffering upon one another time after time he didn't know. Within sight lay the mosaic of primeval man. In a short span of time he had seen craven cowardice and feats of magnificent courage; incredible cruelty and tender compassion, and thought nothing could ever surprise him again. He still could not understand why no one was willing to put an end to it. After the second assault he went down to the stables where the wounded lay on dirty straw. Even though he was not supposed to get involved he went from man to man giving each a measure of water to relieve his suffering. Each night the moans and cries of the wounded grew more pitiful. Invariably the morning would see more of them carried to a mass grave. The women wailed at the loss of their men while grim soldiers shoveled dirt onto the bodies. There were no services because the local priest had been killed by an arrow weeks before.

In the midst of the tragedy, Brian had completely forgotten his studies. He no longer thought about the Lyceum or Merlin or even being made a permanent acolyte. His only motivation was to get out of this situation alive so he always took the precaution of locking his door.

Just before dawn, Brian went out on the parapet to get some air. It was unnaturally quiet. The soldiers at their posts were care worn and many of them were ill. They paid no attention to him. Half of them slept while the others stood with their eyes fixed on the English camp watching for any indication that they were about to attack. As the sky grew light and the sun dispersed the morning mist, the English trumpets signaled assembly and the French soldiers murmured. By now they and Brian recognized all the English trumpet calls. He also knew that it meant another attack. Why can't they just leave us alone? He thought in frustration. I want this to end. The soldiers who were awake shook their sleeping comrades awake and got them to their feet. Some passed around a wine skin and a loaf of stale bread. It's time to return to the

B. D. King

safety of my room, Brian said to himself and headed for the stairs until he heard a loud creaking noise. He turned around and saw that all the men on the parapet were looking in the direction of the east tower. Throughout the castle there was an eerie silence. Brian glanced at the east tower and thought he saw it sway ever so slightly. Surely, he thought, I must be imagining things. Towers don't move. As he stared it moved some more and one of the older soldiers shouted, "Saints preserve us, a mine!" Brian looked at the man wondering what a mine was then looked back at the tower just in time to see it collapse upon itself with a deafening crash, a cloud of dust, and a vibration that sent him and most of the other men sprawling. Regaining his feet, the apprentice heard an English cheer ring through the air as the decimated defenders groaned in despair. Brian knew this was the end. He ran down the steps to his room, slammed the door and bolted it. Hidden in his room, Brian tightly shut his eyes and tried to purge his thoughts of the images of slaughter. There was no way he could shut out the sounds of the battle that raged over the heap of rubble that was once a tower. His ears picked up every nuance of the clashes of weapons and the screams of men. Suddenly there was one crash against the heavy door that barred entry to his room and then another. Brian's eyes popped open. He watched petrified as dust rose from between the planks at each blow. Another crash made it vibrate on its hinges. Brian could not take his eyes away from it. They're going to kill me, he thought and wanted to scream but his vocal chords were paralyzed. The barrier to his sanctuary was being chopped away. Hypnotized, he watched until the sharp edge of the halberd blade appeared on his side of the door. Panic seized him and he completely forgot Merlin's permission to disappear if necessary. The only escape was the window and he wasn't about to leap to his death. On the other side of the door were the demon English from hell. Wrenched loose, the heavy blade disappeared only to return with even more of it visible on Brian's side.

The Fief Of Central Park

Suddenly, the lock splintered with a resounding crash, the door burst open and three knights rushed into the room.

The three Englishmen stopped short. Geoffrey, in the rear, nearly bowled his brother and cousin over and his shield clattered to the floor. Their mouths gaped as they stared at the small bearded man in the disheveled gray robes and floppy hat.

"Devil take us," Sir Percy whispered. "A wizard."

Brian gasped and stared at the armored men before him. He could, indeed, not imagine three more likely specters from hell. They were bearded, covered with dirt and spattered with gore. Their swords dripped blood and he was terrified beyond reason. Merlin's admonition, "a wizard always thinks," ran through his mind but Brian wondered if Merlin had even been in danger of being hacked to bits. He had to get these three hell hounds away from here and he had to do it now. Drawing a spell from an obscure reading buried deep in his unconscious mind he raised his right arm and began to chant, "Ikkam nim volucca..."

Sir William saw the man's arm go up and decided that no feeble French magician was going to cast a spell on him and his kin. He was going to put a stop to it by beheading the nasty beast. He raised his sword to charge forward but he could not move. For a brief moment, blue light glowed before him as the wizard and the room faded.

Chapter Two

Strangers in a Strange Place

New York City

Elaine Livingston perched nervously on the edge of her seat as the elevated train sped over the gloomy streets of the Bronx. Fidgeting with her briefcase she stared out the window and wondered how she could have been so stupid. Engrossed in a homework project she had lost track of time and failed to get home before dark, something she was always careful to do. The lapse was not only thoughtless, it was very dangerous. As the train pulled into the dimly lit station, Elaine anxiously bit her lip, stood up and peered out at the platform through the smudged windows. The doors opened with a hiss and she stepped carefully onto the platform without noticing the appreciative glances of the men on the train. Professionally dressed, she was slim, attractive and moved with such a natural grace, her admirers guessed she was twenty-two or younger. At any other time the thirty year old woman would have been extremely flattered, but tonight the most important thing on her mind was survival. Standing on the empty platform, the sense of frustration and isolation was so overwhelming she didn't hear the doors close and jumped skittishly when the train lurched into motion. Taking a deep breath to stay calm, Elaine told herself everything would be all right, tucked the briefcase under her arm, and confidently headed for the exit. Heels clicking loudly on the cement floor of the deserted station, she ignored the graffiti on the walls, and descended the steps to the street.

Mentally, Elaine couldn't stop castigating herself. If she were intelligent enough to be a law student, she should be intelligent enough to know when to go home. The run-of-the-mill street crime wasn't the problem, because she could handle your every-day mugger. The "Stompers" were a

The Fief Of Central Park

different story and they made everyone terrified of being out after dark. Elaine's mouth turned up in a grim smile. The streets weren't that much safer during the day, come to think of it. When there were multiple gangs in the Bronx, each had its own territory and the delicate balance of power allowed the average citizen to go out during daylight without much harassment. The Stompers changed that. Originally, a small gang made up of the rejects of the other gangs, it had no power or territory until "Boots" Swanson took it over. In a year of bloody street fights, the Stompers mercilessly drove every other gang out of the Bronx and that included "Los Compadres," reputedly the toughest gang in New York. From that time on, the Stompers were masters of all they surveyed, terrorizing their victims so thoroughly that none dared testify against them. They went unchallenged by the police and it was rumored that even organized crime stepped lightly in the Bronx. It was hard to believe that she and her father once looked upon the Bronx as a haven from the street crime of Harlem. In the past few years it had become infinitely worse, but City Hall refused to admit it. An unreported crime meant no crime and Mayor Ruckzug was fond of mentioning the low crime rate in the borough.

Hurrying along, Elaine passed a row of abandoned buildings. Once homes and thriving businesses, they were now lifeless monuments to bureaucratic ineptitude. To protect the people and win votes, politicians put a ceiling on the rent the owners could charge, and when the costs of maintaining the buildings rose, the owners were forced to cut back on their services. Blight set in and the city cracked down on the landlords, forcing them to spend money in a no profit situation. Many of the owners just abandoned their property writing it off as a tax loss while others turned to arson, so the insurance would cover their losses. The city took over the abandoned properties but had neither the expertise nor the resources to administer them and they fell into further disrepair. Those who could moved out while those who couldn't were left defenseless. Chalk up another great

B. D. King

decision by City Hall. The only smart thing to do was leave and Elaine intended to move as soon as she graduated from law school and got a job with a good firm. Only four more blocks to go.

"Hello, momma," croaked a shadow from the doorway of the abandoned building to her left front.

Recognizing the voice made the hair on the back of Elaine's neck stand up. She kept moving. This was no time to hesitate and show fear. The shadow moved swiftly from a doorway to block her path. Illuminated by the dirt dimmed glow of a street lamp, it became Freddy Green whose nickname among the Stompers was "Blade" because of his skill with a gravity knife. One of the worst Stompers, Blade sauntered toward Elaine wearing the uniform of dark trousers and a black jacket. On the back of the jacket was the painting of a winged boot crushing a little man and above the boot was the name STOMPERS, the empty spaces on the "P" and the "O" filled with skulls. Blade's jacket was hung with chains, the Stompers' favorite accouterment. Worn around necks, wrists and waists the gang turned them into deadly weapons at a moment's notice.

Freddy, a black youth of 19, was six feet tall, clean shaven and wore his hair short and had it not been for bad teeth, would have been a good looking young man. Moving directly in front of Elaine, he leered and forced her to stop. Inwardly, she shuddered in revulsion and fought the urge to panic. Remaining calm was an effort considering the probable consequences of this encounter.

"How's my favorite lady lawyer this evening?" Blade drawled smugly as he looked her over with a leer.

Elaine looked over her shoulder.

"Don't worry, ain't no one else around," he said reassuringly. "I wouldn't share you with nobody. Not right now, anyway." He stroked her upper arm through her coat.

"How are you, Freddy?" Voice cool and even to mask her fear, Elaine used his real name hoping it would make him more human.

The Fief Of Central Park

"C'mon, chick, a fox like you shouldn't be so cold. All I want is to show you a good time." He cooed smoothly as his grip on her arm tightened.

Looking at his collar instead of his face to mask her fear Elaine gave him a coy little smile. "Do you really want to show me a good time, Freddy?" She asked maintaining her self-control with great difficulty.

"Sure, babe," he replied with a broad smile without releasing his grip.

"Then leave me alone and let me go home." Slipping out of his grasp she moved to one side. Blade adroitly blocked her path again.

"C'mon, bitch, don't play hard to get," he said with an edge to his voice. "We both know what you really want." Grabbing her by both arms, he pulled her so close that she gagged at his rancid breath.

"Don't, please," she said reflexively.

"I like it when a chick plays hard to get," he said moving his mouth to hers.

Revolted, Elaine kned him in the groin as hard as she could. Grabbing his crotch, Blade dropped to his knees with a pathetic groan and Elaine side stepped him to get away.

"Bitch!" Blade yelled grabbing her skirt. "You're going to get it now!"

Desperately, Elaine swung her briefcase in a wide arc and it connected with the side of the Stomper's skull with a sickening crunch. Releasing her skirt Blade grunted and pitched face forward onto the pavement. Feeling guilty at causing anyone pain, Elaine leaned forward to see if Freddy were all right, then stopped and reminded herself that right now self-preservation was paramount. She stepped around the unconscious Stomper and hurried on.

Totally paralyzed as the room and wizard faded, Sir William could see Sir Percy in his peripheral vision, but not his brother. There were no sensations other than the paralysis and the gloom. Unlike normal darkness in which the

B. D. King

light is slowly extinguished, everything gradually lost its substance and dissolved into a featureless black void with no time or form. The elder Fitz Walter would have felt better had he been able to break out in a cold sweat. Wondering if the wizard had cast them into hell, he could suddenly move again and his sword arm continued its upward arc. Along with the ability to move and the normal sensations came a cold sweat. Looking around, he was relieved to see that Geoffrey and Sir Percy were with him. At first they looked at one another not daring to speak. Finally, Sir Percy asked in a whisper.

"Are thee all right?"

Sir William and Geoffrey patted themselves but their armor prevented them from feeling their bodies.

"'Twould seem so, cousin," Sir William whispered. "Art thou also well?"

"Verily, I believe so."

"What is this place?" Sir William looked around.

In every direction were tall, dark, silent buildings between which ran straight wide, paved streets pocked by cracks and potholes. The silence was uncanny.

Turning slowly in a circle, Sir William shrugged. "In all our travels I have never seen such broad smooth roads and such tall buildings. This is neither Byzantium nor Italy."

"Fabled Cathay, perhaps?" Percy suggested.

"Cousin, I know aught save that it is night," Sir William replied.

"We are cast into Hell," Geoffrey moaned. "And I am lost for I died with thoughts of plunder and lust in my heart."

Sir William opened his mouth but didn't reply. Had he not thought the same thing moments (at least it seemed moments) before? What if it were true?

Sir Percy thoughtfully scratched his beard. "Drivel," he decided and Sir William silently breathed a sigh of relief.

"Drivel?" Geoffrey asked. "Why sayest thou 'drivel', cousin?"

"Thy words sound that thou wouldst be disappointed to be disproved." Sir Percy said.

The Fief Of Central Park

"Nay, cousin. By all the saints disprove me." Geoffrey insisted anxiously. "For in God's name I was happier fighting the French."

"Seest thou souls in agony or towering flames?"

"No, cousin."

"Gavest thou Charon two coins to carry thee across the Styx?"

"No, cousin."

"Smellest thou brimstone?" Sir Percy asked in a rising voice.

"No, cousin."

"Seest thou the Prince of Darkness?" He finally shouted.

"No, cousin," Geoffrey admitted sheepishly.

"Then how, by all that is holy, can we have been cast into Hell?" He said his voice returning to normal.

Still skeptical Geoffrey kept silent, while Sir William was convinced. "Then where can we be?" The elder Fitz Walter asked.

"No doubt in some foreign land," Sir Percy replied.

"An enchanted land?" Geoffrey asked eagerly.

"Heaven knows," Sir Percy told him in exasperation. "Obviously, we are in the center of a large city."

"Obviously," Geoffrey agreed looking at all the buildings with their boarded up windows. "But why are all these dwellings deserted?"

"They do appear deserted." Sir William agreed.

"Let us investigate," Sir Percy told them.

The three moved toward one of the buildings for a few steps then Geoffrey stopped short. "What if it is plague?" He asked.

"Plague?" Sir William swallowed hard.

"Not plague." Sir Percy did not sound very sure of himself.

"How canst thou speak with certainty?" Geoffrey asked, secretly pleased he had presented his learned cousin with a question he could not dismiss.

B. D. King

Sir Percy hesitated looking for an answer. "There are no crosses painted on the doors."

"What if this is not a Christian Nation?" Geoffrey asked.

Sir Percy could think of no other answers and moved no closer to the buildings. "Whichever," he said. "We needs must find our way home. We have our swords and our purses so we should not want. Even in Cathay they must know of our Goode King Harry. I suggest we find some holy order to show us hospitality and guide us on our way as did the Hospitalers in the Holy Land."

"Assuming there are holy orders in Hell," Geoffrey quipped.

"Cease thy mumblings about Hell this instant, Geoffrey." Sir William insisted testily. "I'll have no more talk of it. Surely, we have enough trouble."

"Yes, brother."

"Let us be calm, cousins." Sir Percy said soothingly. "We must find someone to help us."

"Prithee Percy, in which direction should we go?" Sir William asked.

Sir Percy looked up and down the street. "Toward the red and green lanterns." He said. "The way they go on and off it is obviously a signal. We may obtain information from the lamp tender."

"What if he speaks no English?" Geoffrey asked.

"Thy brother and I speak the most common language of all, Geoffrey?" Sir Percy replied.

"Latin?"

"No," Sir William chuckled patting his purse, "Money,"

"What?"

"Never mind, Geoffrey," his brother told him. "I shall explain later. Let us be on our way."

They had gone but a few paces in the direction of the lamps when they heard a dull rumbling and felt a trembling of the earth.

"W-what is happening?" Sir William asked. The roar and clatter grew louder. Sir William was able to control his fear

The Fief Of Central Park

until lights and sparks flashed low above the earth not more than a hundred yards from where they stood. "Saints preserve us," he gulped crossing himself.

The light reflected in their armor before it stopped behind a distant building with a screech and hissed. "Quick, behind here!" Sir William commanded when he recovered from his fright. They moved quickly around the corner as it hissed again and moved on with a roar.

"Good thinking, William," Sir Percy said, peeking around the corner of the building. "It obviously didn't see us and has gone on."

"What was it?" Geoffrey asked, hesitantly peeking around his brother to see where it had been. He looked at his brother and cousin.

Sir William hesitated, not sure whether it was wise to reveal his thoughts.

"Saint George preserve us," Sir Percy said sounding a bit shaken. "It was a dragon." For good measure he crossed himself as well.

Hearing his own conclusion uttered with so much certainty Sir William gulped. "A dragon, art thou certain, Percy?"

His cousin nodded affirmatively. "Thou hast seen its fiery eyes and its glowing scales and hast heard its defiant growl and deadly hiss. Canst thou deny thine own senses? Why else would the houses be deserted? The dragon has driven off all the inhabitants."

"Or eaten them," Geoffrey added ominously.

"No, cousin. I doubt not my senses." Sir William said dejectedly, his eyes riveted to the spot where the beast had disappeared. He was beginning to sweat beneath his armor again.

"What else could it be?" Sir Percy asked. "Methinks we have been sent to this land to rid these poor folk of this terrible creature."

"A dragon?" Geoffrey asked looking hopefully at his brother for another answer.

B. D. King

"A dragon," Sir William confirmed.

"I think mayhap hell is not far off," Geoffrey muttered.

"If that is our quest then we must seek this beast in its lair and slay it." Sir William said with determination. He was regaining his composure. A dragon was a problem that could be solved with a sword, something the elder Fitz Walter understood, which made it infinitely better than Hell or the plague.

"Art thou certain that the wizard didn't have something else in mind?" Geoffrey asked. "This dragon is much larger than the ones I have seen on church windows with pictures of Saint George. It was at least 50 yards long." For years, Geoffrey had been looking forward to his first encounter with a dragon, dreaming of the damsels who would be grateful to him. This one was so enormous he was quite willing to forgo the pleasure.

Neither his brother nor his cousin had a chance to reply as a strange carriage stopped abruptly before them dazzling them with the brightness of its lanterns.

"F' Christ's sake get outta da street," a shadow inside the carriage yelled.

"At least they know of Our Lord here," Sir William said.

"And they speak a form of English albeit much corrupted," Sir Percy added, pleased with their discovery.

They walked around to the side of the vehicle from which a head protruded.

"Excuse us, good sir," Sir William said. "We are strangers here."

"Don't take no Einstein to figure dat," the head replied. "The way youse're dressed youse oughta be in Greenwich Village."

"I have been to Greenwich," Geoffrey said innocently, but the others ignored him.

"Why do you remark upon our dress, good sir? We are vassals of Goode King Henry."

"Good King Henry? Nevah hoid a him. He your band leader? Look, I just came up from Manhattan to drop off a

The Fief Of Central Park

fare. Youse need a ride, hop in. It ain't healthy around here after dark, if youse know what I mean?"

"Verily, sir." Sir Percy replied. "We have seen the dragon."

"Dragon? Oh boy, I don't what you guys been smokin' but it must be rare stuff. Look, I gotta go."

"If thou couldst but direct us to some holy order..."

"Dere ain't no holy order around here. Dere's a church of the Holy Madonna about five blocks east, but it's closed. Ain't nothin' open after dark. I know, youse've seen the dragon. If I was youse I'd worry more about the Stompers than any damned dragon. Also, stay on the sidewalk it's safer. Jeez."

The dingy yellow vehicle quickly reversed itself, drove around the three and sped away.

"Where is the horse?" Sir William asked stroking his beard.

"I think I smell brimstone," Geoffrey mumbled.

"We should have asked what land this is," Sir William added.

"Most curious," Sir Percy said. "Perhaps the horse was small and completely barded.

"Only the Persians completely bard their horses, cousin."

"How can we know the customs of this land?" Sir Percy remarked. "Besides, I saw arms on yon carriage or the barding which were chequy or and sable. In this light azure could have appeared sable."

"Chequy or and azure? Those are de Warren arms," Sir William said with delight. "We are among friends."

"That I dare not say, cousin," Sir Percy said soberly. "On the roof of yon carriage was a word with which I am not familiar. It was Greek, methinks."

"What word."

"Taxi."

Geoffrey looked around. "There is something very strange here," He said ominously.

"We know that," Sir William said.

Geoffrey shook his head. "That isn't what I mean."

B. D. King

"What is it, then?" Percy asked impatiently.

"There are no horses."

"What do you mean?" Sir William asked. "A carriage just passed."

"It had no horses," Geoffrey insisted.

"Geoffrey how do you know this?" Sir William asked irritably. "Have you had a vision?"

"No, Brother. Look around at the streets." He said.

Sir Percy did as he suggested and murmured, "Zounds, by all the saints, you're right, Geoffrey."

"What is it?" Sir William demanded.

"William, there is not a pile of horse manure to be seen or smelled anywhere. Have you ever been in a place where piles of manure are not in evidence?"

Sir William thought. In the holy land there was not as much horse manure as there was camel dung, but animal waste abounded. Geoffrey was right. This place was getting stranger with each step they took.

Without looking back at the prostrate figure of Freddy Green, Elaine hurried on almost jogging to get home. After a block she was out of breath and slowed down. She couldn't see anyone or anything. Maybe I'm in the clear, she thought, only two blocks to go. Elaine picked up the pace again. I'm going to make it. Then she saw them. A few moments before the street before her had been clear. Now, at least a half a dozen dark shapes were assembling under the dull street lamp at the corner directly in her path. She didn't need to see any details to know that they were Stompers and she hesitated. Glancing over her shoulder, Elaine saw three more materializing from an alley and to her right shadows lurked in doorways that might have offered sanctuary. To her left, heading her way were more of them and as they drew closer, the street light's cheerless glow was reflected by swinging chains. As they surrounded her, the fear of a trapped animal gnawed at the pit of her stomach. For a moment they stopped a few yards away to relish their prey, then a tall thin boy with

The Fief Of Central Park

slicked back blond hair and a bad case of acne approached. Elaine sucked in her breath as Snowflake, a Stomper as bad as Blade, leered, belt chain in hand. Moving closer were, Specs, Yo-Yo, Reverend, Dude, Knuckles, some of the worst. There were others whom she did not know, but they were also Stompers. Drawing every reserve of will power, Elaine fought down her panic and tried to think of ways to get away.

"Evenin', mamma," Snowflake said quietly.

"Be polite to the lady, Snowflake," Specs reproached him making the rest of the gang snicker.

"Where's Blade, mamma?" The chain in Snowflake's hands was taut. "You two had a date."

Looking at them carefully Elaine saw that many of the Stompers with Snowflake were black and decided anything worth a try.

"Who you callin' 'mamma', honkey?" Elaine protested.

Reverend, a heavily built Black Stomper stepped up beside Snowflake, his shining eyes only inches from Elaine's face. "Thas' no way to talk to a white brother, fox. So, like, apologize."

Elaine sighed. It figured. With her luck she had run up against the only gang sanctioned by the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission. "I ain't apologizin' to nobody!" She yelled startling the Stompers. They weren't used to being defied.

For a moment they stepped back and she tried to brush past them, but the bravado didn't work and Snowflake and Reverend grabbed her. Elaine kicked out, connecting with a shin. Snowflake yelled and released his grip. Dropping the briefcase her fist caught another Stomper across the nose and for a moment she was free until the rest of the Stompers lunged. Elaine punched, kicked and scratched fighting a losing battle. Finally, she forgot her pride and screamed.

"Does no one live in this God forsaken place?" Sir Percy asked no one in particular.

B. D. King

"I know not," Sir William replied. "But this I do know. I am weary and verily do I hunger." He sat on the curb and the others sat beside him.

"I'd give a ducat for a bowl of Edward's porridge," Geoffrey lamented.

"This land must be enchanted," Sir Percy sighed. "There is no one to be seen yet the red and green lamps blink on and off and the fire in the lamp above our head never flickers."

"What of the man in the carriage?" Sir William asked.

Sir Percy shrugged. "I am no longer sure he was a man. All we saw was his head and I believe Geoffrey is correct because the carriage did not smell like horses. Verily, this place is unseemly strange."

"Mayhap we should stay here until morning," Sir William suggested.

The long, terrified scream startled them to their feet.

"What was that?" Sir Percy asked.

"A damsel in distress," Geoffrey shouted. Forgetting his fatigue and his earlier fear of the dragon, the younger Fitz Walter ran around the corner toward the sound.

"Geoffrey," Sir William called. When there was no response, Sir William muttered, "Impetuous puppy."

"The dragon, William?" Sir Percy asked

"I know not, Percy, but there are easier ways to gain a lady's favors, I'll wager. So, let us see that he lives to enjoy them." The two knights hastened after Geoffrey.

The younger Fitz Walter stopped in the middle of the street and taking in the situation was genuinely relieved to discover that the damsel in distress was attacked by ruffians and not the dragon.

"Unhand that lady, you curs," he demanded in a loud voice.

"What the f..." one of the Stompers stared and everyone stopped struggling. The Stompers let go of Elaine and stared.

"What the hell is this?" Yo-Yo asked.

The Fief Of Central Park

Elaine could have used the time to escape but she stood with her mouth agape. No one, she least of all, expected anyone to come to her rescue and the sight of one young man dressed like a knight was too much. Elaine was suddenly sorry she screamed because the Stompers would tear the poor kid to pieces, plastic armor and all. Before she could recover and run away, Specs grabbed her and pressed a knife to her throat.

"Don't move, bitch," he threatened, "or they'll have a hard time finding enough pieces to bury."

Snowflake, Reverend and Dude turned to face Geoffrey. "I don't believe it," Snowflake muttered.

"I ain't never seen nobody dressed like dat," Reverend remarked.

"Let's show him whose territory he's in?" Dude added slapping his chain against his palm.

"Shit," Knuckles said from behind them. "The broad's more fun."

The rest of the Stompers murmured their assent. "This is a freebie, fag," Snowflake told Geoffrey. "Get outta here."

Geoffrey didn't move. He stood his ground looking grim indeed.

"What occurs, Geoffrey?" Sir Percy asked.

Geoffrey glanced over his shoulder to see his brother and cousin move up behind him.

"Holy shit," Knuckles said as Sir William and Sir Percy walked into the light. "Three of them."

"These ruffians are attempting to dishonor yon lady," he informed them pointing to Elaine. "And they refuse to desist."

"Musta been some costume party," Reverend said loudly pointing at the three knights. The Stompers laughed loudly and hooted derisively.

"What did he say?" Sir William asked.

"I am not certain I fully understand their language," Sir Percy replied, "But I believe they just insulted our mode of dress."

B. D. King

"Our arms are emblazoned on our surcoats," Sir William asked. "Does this mean that our houses have also been insulted?"

"'Twould seem so," Percy told him. "And I am not inclined to let an insult as this from a bunch of villeins pass."

"Look," Snowflake said. "I'm losin' my patience. Beat it."

Sir William stepped forward and addressed Snowflake. "You, sir, are you the leader of this rabble?"

"Yeah, I am," the Stomper said arrogantly, "so you better watch it."

Sir William glared at him and declared loudly. "Unhand the lady and you and your band be off. Do this quickly and we will do you no harm."

"Just who the hell do you think you're talking to?" Snowflake demanded. "We're Stompers and no one talks to us like that."

"Hear that guys?" Reverend said mockingly. "If we unhand the lady he'll do us no harm."

The Stompers laughed again, but Snowflake's patience was exhausted. Motioning to Dude and Reverend, the three of them approached the knights. Behind them, Stompers pulled out chains and knives.

"Methinks they wish to do us harm," Geoffrey said quietly.

Snowflake strode right up to Geoffrey, moving so quickly that Geoffrey had no chance to react. In a smooth, rapid motion, the Stomper pulled a gravity knife, flicked it open and lunged catching Geoffrey squarely beneath the breast bone. It was a perfect thrust and Snowflake grinned expecting his target to drop to the pavement dead. In a fraction of a second the grin turned to astonishment as the tip of the knife broke against the steel of the breastplate that Geoffrey wore beneath his surcoat. It took another fraction of a second for the pain of Snowflake's sprained wrist to register.

"Ow-w-w," he screamed, dropping the knife. He stared in astonishment at the steel shining behind the torn surcoat. As

The Fief Of Central Park

he grabbed his wrist, he howled in agony. "What the hell is this," he whimpered in shock.

This time it was Geoffrey's turn to grin and it was an evil grin at that. He raised his mailed fist and with one massive blow dislocated Snowflake's jaw. The Stomper never even cried out. With a thump, the gang member sprawled on the pavement totally unconscious.

Elaine stared as she witnessed the unimaginable. Someone had hit a Stomper and knocked him flat. She couldn't help smiling.

In appalled silence the Stompers gaped at the scene before them. In recent memory no one had ever raised a hand to one of their number and lived. The gang's shock rapidly turned to anger and desire for revenge.

Taking charge Reverend yelled. "You bastards, no one hits a Stomper and lives! Stomp 'em!" He shouted and all the Stompers except Specs swarmed toward the knights.

Elaine wanted to look away but she was unable to avert her eyes. To her horrid fascination the Stompers pressed forward and obscured the view of the three men. She knew the gang was about to murder them.

"Take a good look, bitch," Specs told her. "Now you'll see what happens to anyone stupid enough to fight us."

Sir William, unable to draw his sword smashed Jamal, the closest Stomper, in the face with a mailed fist, then blocked the chain of a Stomper named Stevie while "Mouse" tried to stab him in the back. Sir William tore the chain away from Stevie breaking his wrist in the process. Turning swiftly he felled Mouse with the chain.

Sir Percy, the only one able to draw a sword, cut Ralph across the arm and hit "Chains" Lowell soundly in the ribs. "Grape" got the hilt of Sir Percy's sword in the face for his trouble. Breaking a Stomper's shoulder with his own chain, Geoffrey tore a knife from its owner's hand and slashed him across the arm with it. With enough breathing space to finally draw their swords, Geoffrey and Sir William wielded them with consummate skill and the Stompers suddenly found

B. D. King

themselves dodging the flashing blades. Several went down to the pavement with wounds to arms and legs and attempted to crawl away.

Finally they had enough. Jamal, holding his bleeding head, got up and screamed, "I'm gettin' outta here!"

The Stompers fled, running and limping away as fast as they could helping those who couldn't hobble away.

Elaine and her captor stared in amazement as gang members, many of them with injuries fled from these three refugees from a Hollywood set. For a brief moment Specs stared in disbelief, relaxed his hold on Elaine and lowered his knife. Recovering her composure, the law student gave him a vicious elbow in the ribs.

"Bitch," he yelled doubling over and dropping the knife. Fed up, she hit him with her fist, breaking his glasses which fell to the pavement.

Wide-eyed, he made no attempt to retaliate and ran after the others, holding his bleeding nose. "We'll be back." He shouted.

"Not gentlemen," Sir Percy remarked in disgust.

Bewildered, Elaine stood on the sidewalk and looked around. The three strangely dressed men stood in the middle of a street littered with chains, knives and brass knuckles and dotted with pools of blood.

"We had best see to the lady," Sir William ordered and the three approached Elaine.

"Art thou Numidian, Milady?" Sir Percy asked politely when he realized Elaine was black.

"Huh?" the stunned woman replied.

"Milady, art thou damaged in any way?" Geoffrey asked solicitously.

"Huh," she said again then regaining her composure. "I - I don't think so." Dazed, Elaine looked herself up and down. She had literally been saved from a gang rape by three very strange people. "My blouse and coat are torn, that's all," she explained. "I'd better get home before they come back. I-I

The Fief Of Central Park

don't know how to thank you." She looked into their faces not knowing what to think.

"Thanks are not necessary, Lady," Sir William said sternly. "It is our duty to protect the weak against such villeins as those. As it is not safe, we will escort thee to thy lodgings. Are they close by?"

"What?" Elaine, still in shock, was trying to take it all in.

"Thy lodgings," Sir William repeated.

"Oh, sure, about a block from here." She bent down to pick up her briefcase.

"Allow me to bear thy burden, Milady," Geoffrey said picking up the briefcase.

"Hey, this isn't necessary, I'm okay." Elaine protested weakly wondering for a moment if she hadn't gone from the frying pan into the fire.

"Okay?" Sir Percy repeated curiously. "Is that thy name?"

"Uh, no," I guess this is the night of the weirdoes, Elaine thought but the three men followed her respectfully to the door.

"It's okay, guys." She reached for her briefcase. "I live on the third floor."

"Then we'll see thee safely to thy chambers, Lady Okay," Sir William insisted.

The hallway light was out again and when the knights saw it was dark, they drew their swords. The scrape of the steel blades against their leather scabbards gave Elaine goose bumps. The blades glinted in the dim light cast from the street and she stared at them. Something wasn't right. The swords were neither theatrical decorations nor cheap souvenirs, as she originally assumed, they were heavy steel like the ones you saw in museums and the three men handled them with an uncanny familiarity. Easing the door open, Sir Percy led the way up the steps. Nothing moved in the dark hallways. Elaine stopped in front of the door nervously fishing for the keys in her purse. Her hands trembled uncontrollably as the emotional after shock of her

B. D. King

ordeal set in. Elaine's father, hearing the rattle of the keys, opened the door.

"Elaine," Horace Fisher said. "Where have you been? We were wor..."

"Oh, Dad," she sobbed throwing her arms around his neck. "It was awful."

Horace held her tightly. "It's okay. It's okay," he said soothingly.

"Mom, what happened?" Her son Jimmy asked. "We were worried."

"Oh, Jimmy." Elaine broke from her father's embrace and knelt down to hug and kiss her son, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Mom, are you all right?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes," she sniffed. "Thanks to these three."

For the first time, Horace noticed the knights standing in the hallway. Sir William and his kin were staring into the brightly lighted chambers. There were no torches just lamps with flames that didn't flicker. From inside came strange music, but no musicians were visible. The three looked at one another then at the squarely built black man in the doorway. His short hair was graying and he was wearing an open neck print shirt, blue slacks and leather bedroom slippers.

"We deliver thy daughter safe and unharmed, sir," said the elder Fitz Walter bowing respectfully from the waist.

"Come in," Horace said. When the three walked into the apartment, and Horace saw how they were dressed, he couldn't help uttering, "What the hell is this?"

"Don't ask, Dad," Elaine tried to keep herself from shaking. "I don't know myself, but if it hadn't been for these three I'd still be entertaining the Stompers."

"The Stomp...", Horace's eyes widened in amazement. "What happened?"

"First I need a drink," she said.

"Sure," Horace agreed. "You fellas want a drink, too?"

"Verily, good sir, 'twould be most welcome but first let us introduce ourselves. I am Sir William Fitz Walter, this is my

The Fief Of Central Park

brother Geoffrey, and Sir Percy de Clare, our cousin. We are vassals of Henry V, King, by the grace of God, of England and France."

Horace raised an eyebrow, not knowing what to make of three grown men dressed like the Knights of the Round Table. Since they saved his daughter, he was willing to play along. "I am Horace Virgil Fisher, retired postmaster of the United States Postal Department."

The three knights murmured, politely impressed, having seen no humor in Horace's titles, so he continued. "You have met my daughter Elaine, and this is my grandson James Edward Livingston," Horace said putting his arm around Jimmy's shoulder.

"Hi," Jimmy said. "Where'd you get the neat costumes?"

"Jimmy," Horace said, silencing the boy.

"We are privileged to be of service to thee, Lord Horace."

While Sir William was doing all the talking, Sir Percy and Geoffrey glanced around. The steady light illuminated the rooms far more brightly than any torch or candle. Thick carpets adorned the floor and the walls were covered in a decorative paper only a wealthy Venetian merchant could afford. Pictures of people in wooden and silver frames covered a table and the portraits were done with such skill that all the artists in England and France would be put to shame.

"What would you like to drink?" Elaine asked. "We have rum, bourbon and vodka."

"We are strangers here," Sir William deferred politely. "Whatever Lord Horace advises."

"Double bourbons all around please, Elaine."

"Coming right up."

"Have a seat," Fisher said gesturing to the sofa and the chairs.

Moving the swords to one side the three sat on the sofa and leaned back. They looked at each other amazed, never having sat on such a comfortable piece of furniture.

B. D. King

"Where are you from?" Fisher asked, making polite small talk.

"Cheshire," was the reply.

"Oh," Elaine said on her way to the kitchen. "I like Connecticut."

"Connec..." Sir Percy said having trouble with the pronunciation. He looked puzzled. "We are English, Lady."

"Oh, that explains the accents."

Elaine returned with the drinks and Horace handed the glasses to the knights who looked at the amber liquid.

"Glass drinking vessels," said Sir William, genuinely impressed. "Truly we had no idea that thou wert a man of such affluence, Lord Horace. We are honored."

Unable to understand the fuss about the glasses, Fisher raised his. "To your health."

"To thy health," they repeated.

Horace tilted his head back and took two swallows. The three knights followed his example.

"Zounds," Sir William said.

"Gad!" Remarked Sir Percy.

Geoffrey coughed.

"Nectar," the two older knights agreed.

"So what happened?" Horace asked with genuine curiosity.

Explaining the incident in detail while she cried helped Elaine overcome her terror and by the time she was through, tears of relief were rolling down her cheeks. When she finished, she wiped her eyes and sipped her drink.

"That's incredible," Horace remarked, shaking his head in awe. "Three guys roughing up a dozen Stompers. No one has ever come close. I wish the police were half as good. How did you guys happen to be wandering around the Bronx after dark?"

Sir William let Sir Percy tell their story and as the tale unfolded Elaine's jaw dropped. By the time he explained about the wizard and the dragon she was speechless. Horace

The Fief Of Central Park

had a sudden feeling about the three strange men sitting on his sofa. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"I'm sure you guys must be hungry after a fight like that." He said. "How about supper?"

"Verily, we accept thy hospitality, Lord Horace," they chorused.

Beside herself at the invitation, Elaine motioned her father into the kitchen.

"Why did you have to do that?"

"Do what?" he asked innocently.

"Ask them to stay for dinner," she said.

"They saved your life, didn't they?" Horace asked.

"Sure, but you heard all that wizard and dragon crap," she said pointing toward the living room. "Those three are nuttier than fruitcakes."

"I'm not so sure about that," he said also looking toward the living room. "At least we owe them dinner."

"No!"

"Look, they're obviously foreigners."

"Yeah, especially to soap and water," she snapped. "They're filthy. Did you get a whiff?"

Horace nodded. "Start dinner. I'm going to call the police and find out if anyone has escaped from Bellevue."

"Dad?"

"Yes, dear," he said blandly.

"You're up to something," Elaine said pointing a finger at him, "and I don't like it."

"Trust me," he said glancing at the door to the living room. "I have a feeling about this."

"No," she said.

"That hurt." He smiled.

Horace made his phone call. "No one missing." He hung up. "Maybe they're pulling our leg. You know maybe they're from one of those TV shows where they play tricks on people."

B. D. King

"These guys aren't actors," she said shaking her head. "You should see the way they handled their swords. I have never seen anything like that in a movie."

"Really?" Horace was genuinely impressed.

"Really and you heard that stuff about the wizard and the dragon. You know damned good and well they believe every word they're saying."

She was about to say more when a crash came from the living room.

"My sword!" Sir William shouted.

"Oh my God, Jimmy!" Elaine cried, rushing into the living room with Horace close on her heels.

A lamp and a chair had toppled over and Sir William stood in front of the TV set, sword in hand. Behind him stood Sir Percy and Geoffrey, swords drawn shielding Jimmy from the set. On the screen was a mounted knight with a lance. Elaine grabbed Jimmy and hugged him while Horace took in the scene. "It's okay, Sir William," Horace said.

"Okay? What means this okay?"

"Uh, everything is all right, really. What happened?"

"Thy grandson touched this box and that knight appeared."

"I turned on the TV, Gramps," Jimmy explained. "'Ivanhoe' was on and I thought they might like to watch it."

"Oh," sighed Horace in undisguised relief. "It's just a movie -- a play."

"A play in a box?" Sir William's eyes grew wide. "What manner of sorcery is this?"

"Just electronics," Horace remarked hoping they would get the joke.

The knights stared. They didn't.

"Okay, I'll put in medieval terms. It's magic."

"Magic?" The knights chorused and took a step back.

"White magic," Horace said quickly. "I can see why you were upset."

At the term "white magic," Sir William, Sir Percy and Geoffrey visibly relaxed.

The Fief Of Central Park

"Sit down and watch the play," Horace said soothingly. "You'll enjoy it." Once again Elaine directed her father into the kitchen, taking Jimmy by the hand.

Geoffrey waited until they were gone. "I told thee this place was enchanted," he whispered loudly.

"So, do we not have magicians that travel the realm in England?" Sir William asked him.

"They do not put people in little boxes." Geoffrey insisted.

"'Tis but a troop of mummers therein," Sir Percy explained.

"What if their souls are trapped in the box?" Geoffrey inquired frantically.

"Didst thou not confess and take Holy Communion on Sunday, Geoffrey?" Sir William asked.

"Yes, brother."

"Then thy soul is protected by God and Holy Mother Church. Drink thy..."

"Bourbon," Sir Percy reminded him.

"Thy bourbon," Sir William instructed.

"It fires my guts," Geoffrey said.

"I think it is rather good," Sir William offered.

"Verily," said Sir Percy. "If thou carest not for thy portion, thy brother and I will finish it. We do not wish to offend our host."

"I do not like it here," Geoffrey insisted.

"Watch the play," his brother told him. "These people and their customs are strange to us as we must seem strange to them, but we have done Lord Horace a service by saving his daughter from those ruffians. He, in turn, has offered us drink and hospitality. That is the way of good people throughout the world. If we did not accept his hospitality we would offend him, so mind thy manners."

"Yes, William."

In the kitchen a remarkably similar conversation was underway.

B. D. King

"Dad, I want those lunatics out of here right now. Do you understand me?"

"But, Mom," Jimmy said. "You told us they saved your life."

"Or more," Horace added. "There are three people out there who have done you an incredible service. Crazy or not they put their lives on the line for you so the least you can do is feed them and give them a place to stay."

"I'm afraid for Jimmy," she said.

"Bull!" He replied testily.

"Bull? What do you mean bull? They nearly wrecked the living room when Jimmy turned the TV on. How can you be so sure they won't hurt him?"

"When we got to living room after the crash what did you see?"

"The lamp and the table knocked over," she said.

"That's not what I mean. Those three had no idea what that TV set was but they were afraid it was harmful and put their bodies between your son and that set. They were determined to protect him."

"Gramps is right, Mom," Jimmy said.

"What is this a conspiracy?" Elaine shook her head. "All right, all right. We've got a couple of army cots and the foldout bed in the living room, but by God they're going to bathe before they sleep in this house."

"Good," he told her with a smile. "That sounds more like the daughter I raised."

The knights approved of Ivanhoe and cheered throughout the movie. Horace brought out a six pack of beer.

"Is the Lady Elaine's husband to join us?" Sir William asked.

"I'm afraid the Lady Elaine's husband was killed many years ago." Horace told him.

"Killed? He was a warrior, then?"

"No, a firefighter."

"A what?"

The Fief Of Central Park

"A heroic man who saves innocent people from great fires. He was killed saving a family from such a fire."

"Oh," Sir William replied sympathetically. He could not understand why people who fought fires were necessary. Servants ordinarily did that, but the sorrow at the loss of his son-in-law was evident in Horace's voice.

"Do you have a wife, Sir William?" Horace asked trying to change the subject.

"My wife and children were taken by the fever," the elder Fitz Walter said somberly.

"Sorry to hear it," Horace said wondering if he could make the conversation any more depressing. "How about you, Sir Percy?"

"Betrothed to a great lady," he said with a smile. "Her parents have asked us to wait until she is fourteen."

"Fourteen?" Horace nearly choked on his beer.

"I know it's eccentric. Still it is only a few more months. Don't ask Geoffrey. He has no property until he wins his spurs. Until then no lady will have him."

"I fail to see the humor, cousin," Geoffrey was irritated.

"Dinner's ready," Elaine called from the kitchen.

Everyone trod into the dining room and Elaine showed them where to sit.

"Dad, you're at the head of the table."

When they were all seated, Horace asked Elaine to say grace.

"Grace? We nev..."

He shot her a dirty look and she said, "Dear Lord, bless us and the food with which we nourish our bodies. Amen."

The knights bowed their heads reverently. They echoed Elaine's "amen" and crossed themselves.

"Are you guys Catholic?" Jimmy asked.

"Jimmy," Elaine said. "It is not polite to discuss things like that with guests. Now mind your manners."

"No offense taken, Lady," Sir William offered cheerfully. "It is the nature of sturdy lads to be curious."

Thank you, Sir William. Dad, will you serve our guests?"

B. D. King

"Of course."

Horace insured that each knight received an adequate helping of roast beef, peas and mashed potatoes. Elaine watched Jimmy closely as he cut up his meat. Jimmy lifted the fork to his mouth but stopped it inches from his lips. His eyes went wide and Elaine followed his gaze.

Sir William tore the thick slices of roast beef into strips by hand, then stuffed them into his mouth as gravy ran over his beard and onto his tunic. Sir Percy ate the peas with his dagger while Geoffrey ate his mashed potatoes and gravy with his fingers. Sir William belched deeply and then took another draught of beer before wiping his mouth with his sleeve. Sir Percy cut his meat with his dagger and wiped the blade on Elaine's good linen tablecloth, while their hostess stared in horror. The knights smiled at her continuously through the meal.

"Delicious, Milady," Sir Percy said with his mouth full. "Never have we tasted meat this fine."

Elaine turning back to Jimmy who was now also eating with his fingers shook her head and buried her face in her hands.

"Excuse me," Horace said, covering his mouth with his napkin. He headed for the bathroom and closed the door. Suddenly raucous laughter erupted from behind the door.

"Is Lord Horace well, Milady?" Sir William asked.

Elaine, glanced in the direction of the bathroom door, then, with put her hands on her hips in utter frustration. She looked Sir William directly in the eye. "At this point I'm not really sure!"

After dinner Elaine muttered as she cleaned up the mess the knights had made of her kitchen. Fortunately, for her peace of mind, she could not hear the discussion in the bathroom.

"What is this place?" Geoffrey asked.

"It is the bathing chamber," Percy informed him.

"Lord Horace has informed me that it is the custom in this realm to bathe before retiring," Sir William announced.

The Fief Of Central Park

Geoffrey's eyes went wide. "Bathe?"

"It is the custom," Sir William said. "In the Holy Land, the Saracens bathe often. It can be quite pleasant."

"This is the bathing vessel," Sir Percy said leaning into the tub. "Lord Horace instructed me in the use of the faucets. One may select water as warm as one wishes." He turned the valves until hot, steaming water rushed from the faucet.

"Most ingenious," Sir William remarked watching the flow of hot water. "And look it drains so that none need empty it."

Sir Percy picked a white bar from the side of the tub. "This is called soap," he said. "It washes the dirt from one's skin."

Sir William took it from Sir Percy. Looked it over and sniffed it. "Most pleasant," he said.

He turned and handed it to Geoffrey. The younger Fitz Walter backed away, his eyes widened in terror. "No! There's just so much a man can take. Battles, wizards, dragons and magic boxes I can stand. This is too much. Any physician will tell thee that bathing brings on the chills, affects the lungs, stiffens the joints and softens the wits. I won't, it's bloody degrading."

"Must we force thee?" His brother asked.

"Thou art my brother and my cousin. Thou wouldst not."

"We would," Sir Percy said with a grin and turned on the shower.

Both of thee will pay for this," Geoffrey yelled as his kinsmen grabbed him by the arms and forced his head under the spray.

Jimmy was already in bed when Elaine came to say good night.

"Did you say your prayers?" She asked.

"Yes, Mom."

"Good, now go to sleep. You've got to go to school tomorrow."

"Mom, are Sir William, Geoffrey and Sir Percy from outer space?"

"No, dear. Why do you ask?"

B. D. King

"Well, they talk and dress and act funny."

"A lot of people in this world have customs different from ours, but that doesn't mean that they're funny or from outer space."

"I guess," Jimmy said sleepily. "But I like them anyway."

Elaine bent down and kissed him on the forehead. "You would," she said, turning out the light. "Your father probably would have, too."



The Fief of Central Park, an enchanting tale of three medieval knights thrust forward in time to fight a dragon, battle urban gangs and bring down a corrupt city government. The heroine they save from the gangs finds her true love, becomes a millionaire and is elected the first African-American woman mayor of New York.

It begins during a battle in 1417 when Brian, Merlin's inept apprentice, blunders and sends Sir William Fitzwalter, Geoffrey Fitzwalter and Sir Percy de Clare to the Bronx where they arrive in time to save Elaine Livingston from a vicious gang called the Stompers. After another confrontation with the Stompers, Elaine and the knights find themselves the targets of corrupt mayor Bertha Ruckzug, her crooked city bureaucracy and organized crime. Meeting these challenges, which include lawsuits, street battles and computer crime, the four prevail at every turn.

Alas, Brian's spell has upset the time-space continuum placing earth and the entire galaxy in danger. Merlin tells Brian to reverse the spell, but the numskull can't remember which spell he used...

The Fief of Central Park

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8879.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**