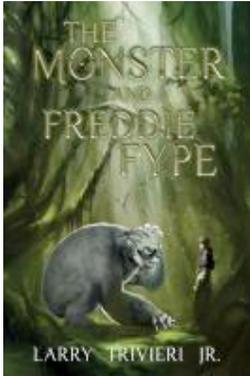


THE
MONSTER
AND
FREDDIE
FYFE



LARRY TRIVIERI JR.



Peace had long reigned in Glencastyr thanks to Northrop, its beloved king. Then Count Vileshoe and his men seize and imprison the king and his retainers, and banish Northrop's adopted heir Freddie Fype deep into the ominous Wyrddling Forest. But then, Freddie meets a monster... The Monster and Freddie Fype is an enchanting tale of courage, wonder, and the most unlikely of heroes. It is sure to capture the imagination of children of all ages.

The Monster and Freddie Fype

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THE MONSTER AND FREDDIE FYE

a novel by

Larry Trivieri, Jr.



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Dedication

For my Father, who was the first person to read this book.

RIP, Dad - I love you.

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Chapter One

THE KING WITHOUT AN HEIR

The doe stood stark against the faint beam of moonlight, grazing unaware beneath the forest's massive trees. Thirty yards away, concealed by shadow, the hunter pulled back the arrow in his bow, a grin of evil pleasure spreading across his features. He'd been in the forest nearly a fortnight, and the doe would mark his thirtieth kill.

But suddenly the doe leapt away. Cursing, the hunter looked about to spy what had frightened it. But all he heard was the slightest rustling of leaves in the treetops above him. Replacing his arrow, he angrily set off to rejoin his men.

He went three steps, then a giant hand seized him, pulling him into the trees. The hunter was a powerful man, but in his captor's hands he was as straw. He struggled violently but could not win free, then he was held aloft in the air to stare back at a face of absolute horror. He was a man who feared nothing, yet a cry escaped his lips, answered by a terrible roar. Then the beast, whatever it was, tossed him to the ground. He landed with a thud, but sprang instantly upward, pulling his knife from his belt.

But there was nothing to see. The forest was a wall of black silence. The hunter circled warily, forcing himself to stay calm, but sweat now dripped freely from his brow. Still nothing. Whatever had attacked him was gone.

Finally, he retrieved his arrow and proceeded back to camp. By time he reached it, he had fully recovered. "No meat tonight, Your Grace?" asked the first man he passed. The hunter ignored him, walking to his tent without a word. He would say nothing of this, he decided, for knowledge of the incident would hardly serve him. Yet in his heart Count Vileshoe now knew that the rumors were true. The monster of the forest was real!

Far from the forest, on the afternoon of the next day, Northrop, King of Glencastyr, stared out the window of his carriage, his mind

heavy with the weight of his office. Beside him, Pluribus said nothing, aware of Northrop's troubles and at the moment lacking any suggestion that might improve them. Outside, the splendor of the countryside passed by unnoticed, despite the beauty of the day and the rich, woody scent that filled the lane they traveled down. Spring had come early to Glencastyr, but just now Northrop was not in the mood to enjoy it.

"I'll not remarry, Pluribus," he declared, turning to his page. "No matter what else, I won't consider it. The Queen's memory is still too dear to me."

"Of course, Sire," Pluribus replied. "I would never have suggested it. The Queen lives on in my affection, as well."

Northrop looked relieved. "Good, then it's settled. And if another solution fails to present itself, well then . . ." He waved his hand in the air, as if dismissing a bothersome insect, leaving the sentence unfinished. He had no idea what he would do if another solution did not appear. "Bother, this king business," he muttered, settling his small, portly frame back against his seat. "I never wanted the Throne in the first place." In that moment, despite the regal clothes he wore, he hardly looked like the King at all. He stroked his curly, brown beard, then ran a hand over his bald pate, and in his normally blue, twinkling eyes there was no hint of happiness.

Pluribus sat rigidly beside him, in every way the King's opposite. He was tall and thin, with a full head of long, black hair, and a face that rarely betrayed emotion. His eyes were probing pools of brown and his nose was long and pointed. Having no reply, he pulled at his lip with long, bony fingers as the carriage continued on its way.

What Northrop had said was true enough. Being king wasn't something that one *could* ask for, after all. Certainly not in Glencastyr at any rate, where for centuries each king had been succeeded by his heir and matters had proceeded smoothly. For Glencastyr was a peaceable kingdom and its people had no cause to meddle with traditions that for so long had provided them with security, fair taxes, and ample freedom to live the lives that they chose for themselves. In truth, their only concern was that the traditions be maintained. Which was precisely why Northrop was now faced with his problem.

Because, as part of those traditions, it was his duty as king to provide his people with an heir before the time of his passing. A perfectly sensible responsibility, Northrop could not dispute that. The problem was that he had no children.

There was a solution to his predicament, of course. All that he had to do was remarry and then he and his chosen queen could have a child. But this Northrop adamantly refused to do, because he already *had* been married, quite some time ago, to someone he truly had loved. Her name had been Martha and her people had loved her, too, both for her graciousness and for her beauty. But Queen Martha had died of pneumonia during a brutally cold winter, when she and Northrop had both been young and before they had any children. Her death had been a terrible blow to Northrop, and for an entire year Glencastyr had mourned her passing. Eventually time healed some of the King's sorrows, but in all the years since he had never stopped missing her and so had never remarried. Martha had been the love of his life and he knew that he could never replace her.

For a long time the fact that Northrop was both a widower and without an heir had not disturbed the people of Glencastyr, but as the years passed and Northrop grew no younger they at last became concerned. How much longer would Northrop live to rule them? they wondered. And who would rule in his stead once he was gone? As their concerns over this issue grew, so did their uncertainty, until finally a number of citizens decided that they must somehow force Northrop to address the matter. Forming a delegation, they petitioned the King for an audience. As it was Northrop's policy to not stand aloof from his people, the audience had promptly been granted. Sitting pensively within his carriage, Northrop recalled his meeting with the delegation, which had occurred just a few hours earlier.

The King had been seated in the Throne Room, beginning to doze off after a hearty breakfast. Of late, he found his duties held less and less of his interest and it was no longer uncommon for him to be found napping once or twice during the day. As matters stood in Glencastyr, he could afford such indulgences due to the peace and prosperity that had accompanied his reign. This suited Northrop

perfectly for, although a kind and fair ruler, he was also somewhat lazy.

Pluribus had roused him with a tap on his shoulder moments before the delegation arrived. "Sire," he said, clearing his throat so that Northrop would know that Royal Business was at hand. "Sire, if you please, awaken."

"Hoom?" muttered Northrop, coming awake with a start. "Ah, Pluribus, what is it? I fear I must have fallen asleep."

Pluribus bowed politely. "As is your prerogative, Sire. However, I'm afraid I must disturb you. The delegation awaits outside."

Northrop's features clouded. "Oh, yes, the delegation. As if I do not know what is on their minds! Show them in, Pluribus. Let us have our audience and be done with it."

"As you wish, Sire." Again Pluribus bowed, then moved to the outer door. There, he looked back to the King, waiting for his signal. Northrop gave it with an impatient flick of his wrist, and Pluribus allowed the delegation to enter. "His Royal Majesty, Northrop, Son of Grolier, Liege of Glencastyr and All Her Citizenry!" he declared.

The delegation, which consisted of twelve men, bowed before Northrop from the far end of the Throne Room. "Come, you may approach," Northrop said, clapping his hands. He did his best to sound authoritative, but his heart wasn't in it.

The men drew near the Throne. "Our humble thanks for receiving us, Your Majesty" said their chosen spokesman, Jack Smattern, a tall, muscular man who earned his livelihood as a carpenter. Usually he was a man of calm and purpose, but as he stood there before the King it was obvious that he was nervous.

"Greetings, Citizens," Northrop replied. "As you have requested this audience, I am here to hear you. But first, perhaps you would care for some refreshments?"

Northrop's offer was a surprise to the men, and one of them, Morris Pikelow, a tailor, was about to accept when Jack prevented him by speaking first. "Thank you, Highness. Your generosity honors us, but we mean to take up little of your time and would come to the matter at hand."

“As you wish,” said Northrop, looking uncomfortable. “Continue then, Jack Smattern.”

Jack showed surprise to be called by name and Northrop allowed himself a chuckle. “Be not surprised that I know you, sir. It is the King's duty to know his people, after all, and in your case your craftsmanship also proclaims you. It's more than once that I've heard your work praised. Perhaps the day might come when I will employ your services myself.”

Jack couldn't help but blush at the compliment. He inclined his head in a bow. “I am yours to command, Sire, now and always.” He paused then, uncertain how to continue. “Sire, perhaps it is not fit that we meet with you like this, my fellows and I, yet ... “ Again he paused, knowing the ground that he was trodding.

“Yes?” said Northrop, leaning forward.

Come to the point, man! Jack told himself, forcing himself to face Northrop squarely. “It's best I speak plainly, Sire. My mates and I have taken it upon ourselves to give voice to a concern that is shared by many in Glencastyr these days. You see, Sire, we've been wondering ...”

“No harm in that,” Northrop interrupted.

“No, Sire, not usually,” Jack went on, growing uneasy. His fellows did nothing to help him, more awkward than he was as they snatched nervous glances at him and the King in between times of staring at the floor. Finally, Jack cleared his throat, then plunged into the heart of the matter. “We have been wondering, Sire, we and your people at large, what shall become of us at the time of your passing.” There, he had said it; let the consequences fall where they may.

For a moment Northrop said nothing. Then he smiled. “My passing, Smattern? Am I so old, then, that you fear I shall soon not be here to sit upon the Throne?”

“It's not quite that, Sire,” Jack began.

Northrop cut him off. “Or is some treason afoot that would imperil me?” he demanded, leaning forward angrily.

“Never, Sire!” Jack declared, shocked by the suggestion. “Or, if there be, then you have my pledge that the plotters will face the wrath of every man in this room!”

“Here, here!” cried the others in assent. Northrop sat back, moved by their show of support.

“Good people,” he said softly, “it is you now who honor me. I thank you for your loyalty. And I shall torment you no more, for in truth I know what it is that has brought you here.”

“Sire?” said Jack, surprised to note how weary and vulnerable the King suddenly looked.

Northrop motioned him to silence. “Of course I know. It's because I have no heir.” Northrop sighed. “I appreciate your concern. Even so ...” He shrugged. “For the moment I can offer you no solution.”

“Nor have we one to offer you,” said Jack. “We only wished to make it known to you that your people are grateful to you. All in Glencastyr have profited by your reign. In truth, Sire, we've grown used to it and would not see it displaced when your presence no longer graces the Throne. But we would never presume to tell you what you ought to do about it.”

Northrop laughed, finding himself genuinely liking this man. “Then you fail me after all, Good Jack, for, short of a suggestion of marriage, which I will not abide, I confess I could make use of your ideas. But enough. You have come to me and I have heard you. And I give you my promise that, though no solution now stands before me, I shall deal with this matter to our mutual satisfaction before the month ends. You may let the people of Glencastyr know this, as well. So, then, is the matter settled?”

The men of the delegation nodded, happy and relieved. But to himself Northrop wondered how he was going to make good his pledge to them.

“Thank you, Sire,” said Jack. “On behalf of all your people. I assure you they shall be greatly pleased by your decision.”

“Good,” said Northrop. “Then, as our business together is settled, I ask you all again if you won't join me in having some refreshments.”

Happy with the success of their mission, the men gratefully accepted the offer, and the meeting was concluded over cakes and ale.

“A good man, that Smattern,” the King mused. But before Pluribus could answer him, they both lurched forward and to one side as the carriage came to an abrupt halt.

“Driver, what is the matter?” demanded Pluribus, disentangling himself from the King to poke his head outside the window. Immediately he saw that the carriage had partly fallen into a ditch, and though the steeds strained to pull it out, it would not budge. Then the driver, a strapping young man named Robert, came into view, his livery smudged with dirt and grass stains.

“Your pardon, Sir,” Robert said, brushing himself off as Pluribus managed to open the door and climb out to inspect the damage. “We've had a bit of an accident.”

“Indeed,” Pluribus replied, discovering that not only was the carriage in a ditch, it was also minus one wheel, which lay in the lane behind them.

“What is it, Pluribus?” the King inquired, finally managing to right himself. “I dare say, that was quite the jolt. Are you all right, young man?”

“Yes, Sire, thank you,” said Robert. “Just a bit sore from my fall, Your Majesty. Nothing serious.”

Northrop nodded. “Good, then let's be on.”

“I'm afraid that isn't possible, Sire,” Pluribus informed him. “It seems that the carriage has lost a wheel.”

“What!” Northrop fumed. With Pluribus's help, he struggled out of his seat to join them outside. “Dear me,” he said, seeing the damage. “It's a wonder that none of us aren't injured. What about the horses, Robert?”

“Jittery, Sire, but otherwise well.”

“Well, that is good, at least. But what are we to do? Certainly we can't repair the carriage ourselves. Can we, Pluribus?”

“Unfortunately, I don't believe so, Sire.”

“I shall have to go for help, Your Majesty,” Robert volunteered. “I'll take one of the horses. We're only a few leagues from the Palace, so I won't be gone long. Um ... That is, of course, with your permission, Sire.” He looked expectantly at the King, who in turn looked at Pluribus.

Pluribus nodded. “It seems the wisest solution, Sire.”

“Very well, off with you then, lad,” said the King. “But mind that you are not gone long. I would be back in the Palace before nightfall.”

“And you shall be, Sire!” Robert declared. With Pluribus's help, he freed the lead horse from its harness, mounted it bareback, then raced back to the Royal City.

“Nothing for it but to wait, then,” Northrop shrugged, watching him go. “Bother, what a day this has been!” He looked at the carriage and chuckled woefully. “Pluribus, stay here with the carriage. I need a walk to clear my head.”

“Alone, Sire?”

“Yes, alone. Come, don't be so alarmed. It's not as if I am in any danger. This is Glencastyr, Pluribus, the land of peace and quiet. For everyone else, at least, if not for me. Anyway, stay here, would you? I shall return shortly.”

Pluribus bowed. “As you wish, Sire.”

Northrop set off down the lane. Pluribus watched him go for a few moments, then went to retrieve the wheel.

Once he was far enough away to not be overheard, the King began talking to himself, as he was wont to do whenever he was alone and beset by problems. “Ah, Martha, what am I to do?” he said, looking up at the sky as if it was possible to catch a glimpse of his beloved wife. “I can't even seem to take a ride in the country these days without some sort of mishap, and now I've promised the people that I shall provide them with an heir. But how I shall do so, I have no idea. If only you were still here to guide me! You have no idea how much I miss you.”

Northrop grew silent as the sadness that had never been far from his heart since his wife's death now flared up anew. Looking both old and melancholy, he strolled aimlessly along the lane until he came upon an open glade. He entered it and found a fallen tree, which he sat upon. There he remained for some minutes, every now and then softly sighing as he thought about his problems, until he became aware of the gurgling sounds of a running stream and realized that it must not lay too far away. Northrop smiled, suddenly recalling how, as a little boy, he had loved to ramble along whatever waterways he found. He would skip rocks and soothe his feet in the water, and usually return home to the Palace both dirty and happy. Remembering those times, his smile grew. Before he could think about what he was

doing, he found himself moving through the glade into the woods, following the sounds of the stream.

“Ha!” he exclaimed, suddenly having to scramble down a sloping hill while clutching on to the trees he passed in order to remain upright. His spirits began to lift as the boy in him resurfaced. He caromed down to the bottom of the hill to stand before the stream.

There was no one around. Northrop laughed happily, feeling as if he had discovered his own private sanctuary. He bent down, picked up a stone, and flicked it into the water. *Twp, twp twp!* it skimmed the surface three times before finally sinking. “Not bad!” Northrop congratulated himself. “With a bit of practice, I bet I could regain my form.” Just to prove it, he threw another stone, and it skipped four times before it too disappeared below the surface. “Ha, ha! Not bad, indeed!”

He spotted a large boulder midway in the stream. Stripping off his shoes and socks, he rolled up his pant legs and splashed into the stream. By time he reached the boulder to climb atop it, he was wet from his knees down and he didn't care one whit. Sitting there, he splashed his feet to and fro, feeling a sense of freedom that he had not known for many years. “Oh, this is good!” he sighed. “This is very good, indeed!” Laying back on the rock, his arms outstretched and his feet still dangling in the water, he closed his eyes as a big, wide smile spread across his face.

He was still in that position when he was startled by a voice.

“Hey, mister, did you catch any fish?”

Northrop bolted upright. “Say what?”

He turned to spot a young boy by the shore who pointed at him, laughing.

Northrop sat up straight, trying to appear dignified and knowing that he was failing miserably. “See here, lad,” he grumbled, having to squint against the sun to see him better. “Mind your manners!”

The boy stopped laughing. “Sorry,” he said politely. “I didn't mean to offend you. It's just that you looked so funny, surprised like that and with the sun in your eyes.” He looked to be nine years old. He had wide, brown eyes, his hair was unkempt and the color of sand,

and his clothes were too large for his thin frame. But what Northrop noticed most about him in that moment was his happiness.

“Who are you, boy?” the King demanded, lifting himself upright.

“My name's Fype, sir. Freddie Fype. Who are you?”

Northrop eased himself off the boulder and into the stream. “Who am I? Child, are you blind? I'm the King is who I am!” Puffing about, he made his way unsteadily ashore.

Now it was Freddie's turn to be surprised. “The King, sir?” he marveled. “Are you truly?” He brushed the hair out of his eyes and tried not to fidget, now that Northrop stood so close to him. “I mean, you wouldn't be playing a joke on me, would you, sir? Mary says that grown-ups sometimes like to play jokes on children.”

“Of course I am the King, lad! What man would joke about such as thing as that!” He wiped his sleeve across his brow. “Phew!” he said, catching his breath. “Just between you an me, I'm not as young as I once was, you know.” Then he chuckled, looking down at himself. “Look at me, I'm soaked! Pluribus will have a fit when he sees me.”

“Who's Pluribus, sir?”

“My page, lad. Aren't you bold with questions!”

“Oh . . . um . . . I'm sorry, sir,” Freddie fumbled. “It's just . . . well, it's a funny name and I was curious, that's all.”

“No need to apologize, Freddie. Curiosity's a good thing. Now be a good lad and fetch me my shoes and socks.” Northrop pointed to where they lay and Freddie ran off to retrieve them. “Thank you,” said the King when Freddie returned. He sat down upon the ground. “Now then,” he said, brushing off his feet and putting on his socks. “You mentioned Mary, Freddie. Who is she?”

“My best friend in all the world,” said Freddie proudly. “My only friend, really, now that Aunt Megan's gone.”

Northrop was struggling to get his shoes on and having a hard time of it.

“Here, let me help you,” Freddie offered. Before Northrop could protest, he knelt down to assist him.

“Thank you, lad,” said the King, a bit astonished at how unaware Freddie seemed to be regarding the proper means of addressing him, yet finding the boy's innocence refreshing. “So Mary is your best and

only friend, is she? And this Aunt Megan of yours, where has she gone off to?"

Freddie looked at him without understanding. "Gone off to?"

"Yes. You did say that she was gone, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, gone where, lad?"

Freddie shrugged and his features dimmed. "I don't know, sir," he said blankly. "Wherever people go when they die, I guess."

Northrop got to his feet, looking at the boy with concern. "I'm sorry, Freddie. I didn't know that your aunt had died."

Freddie shrugged once more. "It happened a few months ago. I'm starting to get used to it, but it's been harder for Mary. Aunt Megan was her aunt, not really mine. I'm just an orphan they took in when I was a baby."

Northrop looked at him with growing interest. "An orphan, you say? I'm sorry to hear that, Freddie. What happened to your parents?"

Freddie looked at the ground. "I don't know, sir. I never knew them. Aunt Megan said she found me one day laying abandoned by her door. Mary was only a little girl herself, back then, and Aunt Megan's husband had passed away a few months before she found me." Freddie looked up again. "But she took me in anyway, sir, and I turned out all right, I guess."

Northrop patted his shoulder. "Yes, Freddie, I should say you are right about that. Your Aunt Megan must have been a remarkable woman."

"Oh, she was! Aunt Megan was the best, sir! Mary and I, we would've been lost without her."

"But now that she's gone, you and Mary are orphans again!"

Freddie nodded matter-of-factly. "Yes, sir, that's so."

Northrop frowned and rubbed his beard. "Something must be done about that. You can't continue to live by yourselves."

"Why not, sir?"

"Why not? Why, because . . . Because it isn't right, Freddie! Children shouldn't have to struggle. Not in Glencastyr anyway, not so long as I am King!"

“But if Mary and I don't live by ourselves, where shall we live, sir? You wouldn't think of separating us, would you?” Freddie asked anxiously.

“No, no, of course not, lad. As for where you shall live, well, that is the question, isn't it?” Northrop paused, looking up at the sky, then suddenly he began to smile. “Oh, but wait a minute, I believe I have a solution. Ho, oh yes, Freddie, a very good solution indeed! Come, give me your hand. Let's go find Pluribus.”

“But, sir,” said Freddie, as Northrop led him excitedly up the trail. “Where are we going? What about Mary? I can't just leave her behind.”

“Of course you can't,” Northrop replied, still laughing. “We'll return for Mary directly, you have my word on it. But first we must see Pluribus. Come along.”

“But what *is* your idea, sir?” Freddie said, ducking under a branch as Northrop pulled him up the hill. “If you don't mind my asking, that is?”

“Why, isn't it obvious, Freddie?” said the King, not minding having to scramble past a precipice, dirtying his shoes and clothes in the process. “You and Mary shall come and live with me. I'm going to adopt you!”

Freddie didn't know what to say. All he could think of was Mary. My gosh, he thought, what have I gotten us into?

Northrop continued onward, too pleased with himself to notice Freddie hadn't replied. “Ho!” he chuckled as a small branch snapped back to hit him in the chest. “Northrop, old man, sometimes I do believe that you are brilliant!”

“Sire, good heavens!” exclaimed Pluribus when the King returned some time later. “Your clothes, Sire, they're ruined!”

“So they are, Pluribus, so they are,” Northrop smiled, regarding the smudges of dirt that covered his garments toe to shoulder. “Isn't it delightful? I say, Pluribus, I haven't felt this happy in... Why, I can't even remember, that's how long it's been! Come, don't look at me so aghast. Today is not for frowns, but for celebration!”

“But, Sire,” Pluribus began, wondering what mishap could have befallen his liege to have left him in such an addled state.

Northrop ignored him, moving towards the carriage, which was once again righted and fully repaired, thanks to Robert and the hands who had returned with him from the palace. “Fine work, lads!” Northrop told them. “Upon our return, see that Pluribus awards you each with one gold crown as a token of my appreciation.”

The men looked at each other and then to Robert, who shrugged back at them, just as astonished by the King's generosity as they were. They bowed. “Thank you, Your Majesty,” Robert said, speaking for all of them.

“You're welcome, Robert. It's the least I can do for your services. Pluribus, you will see to this once we are returned.”

“Of course, Sire,” Pluribus replied, still unable to stop frowning.

Northrop clapped his hands. “Good. Now, then, I have a surprise.” Turning back to the woods, he called, “Come forward, Freddie.” At his command out stepped Freddie Fype from behind a tree, looking just as uncertain as the men who stared back at him.

“Men,” Northrop said.. “It's my great pleasure to present to you my chosen heir to the throne of Glencastyr, Master Freddie Fype!”

“Sire, have you gone mad!”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Pluribus realized the impropriety of his outburst, yet still he looked sternly at the King. “This lad is but an urchin with clothes that don't even fit him!”

“Pluribus, you forget your place!” Northrop snapped, confirming to all present that he still indeed was King. “My decisions, once made, are not open to debate, as you of all people should know. And what wisdom is there in judging the lad by the clothes he wears? Were that the proper measure of a man's worth, any who wore the Crown would be deemed fit for the Throne regardless of how they ruled! Freddie is my choice to succeed me, I say, and unless any here know of a precedent that speaks against me, I bid you all give him welcome!” Then, to Freddie, more gently: “Come, lad, you may approach. These are your fellow countrymen and will not harm you.”

“Indeed, young sir” said Pluribus, again the proper page as he bowed to him. “As you are under the King's protection, it is our duty to safeguard you in every way. On behalf of us all, I welcome you.”

Stepping close to Northrop, who placed an affectionate hand upon his shoulder, Freddie said, “Um . . . Thank you, Pluribus.” He nodded at the others before staring down at the ground.

Northrop tousled his hair, grinning happily. “What say we return to the palace?” Clapping his hands, he motioned to the carriage. Robert took his place atop it, the men mounted their horses, and Pluribus hastened to open the door. Before Northrop could enter first, as was fitting and proper, Freddie scrambled inside. “A delightful, lad, isn't he, Pluribus?” Northrop said softly, cutting off his page's reprimand.

Seeing his King so happy, Pluribus was surprised to find himself agreeing. “Yes, Sire. Forgive me for questioning you on the matter.”

Northrop squeezed his arm. “No need, my friend. Your reaction was quite understandable. But let's be off, shall we? I fancy a good hot bath after today's adventures.”

They joined Freddie inside the carriage and set off for the Royal City.

Chapter Two

PRINCE FREDERICK

As the sun slipped below the horizon young Mary Edwards was growing afraid. Freddie had been gone for hours. Something must have happened to him. Something unforeseen and . . . No! I won't focus on my fears, Mary told herself, struggling to be brave. She recalled Aunt Megan's frequent advice to her. *The future is shaped by our thoughts, dear. So be positive and refuse to entertain your fears. Do that and you've all the secret you need to live your life successfully!*

When Aunt Megan was alive her words had been easy to accept, but now Mary was all alone, it was growing dark, and there was still no sign of Freddie.

Where can he be? Mary wondered, feeling the pain that had yet to heal following Aunt Megan's death begin to stir until . . . “No!” She stamped her foot. “I won't give in to you, Fear, I won't, I won't, I won't!” *A chore, Mary, find yourself a chore. Having something to do is the best solution for worry.* But what to do? She glanced about the modest, yet neat cabin that was her home. She'd already swept up the floor; the beds were made; and her baking was long since done, with the pots and dishes all put away. Then Mary realized that she hadn't eaten anything since lunchtime. With the thought her stomach grumbled and she recalled another of Aunt Megan's maxims. *Worry has a more difficult time of finding us when our stomachs are full.* Mary brought out the bread she had baked, cut off a few slices and covered them with honey. Adding an apple and a glass of water, she forced herself to concentrate on her meal. After she ate it she had to admit that she did feel a bit better. She put away the rest of the bread and placed her dish and utensils in the basin to be washed next day.

But within an hour her fears had returned. Freddie had never stayed outside this late before. Where could he be? *When you get home, you're going to hear it from me, Freddie Fype,* she vowed.

One hour before midnight Mary was startled awake by the jostling of lights and the sounds of horses and wheels. "Who's there?" she cried, bounding up from the chair to grab her broom. No one ever came down the trail leading to the cabin at this time of night. Few enough traveled it by day.

Then Freddie called to her. "Halloo, Mary! Are you in there?" She ran outside, straight into his arms.

"Freddie, you're safe! Oh, thank goodness, I was so worried about you! Don't you ever leave me alone like that again, do you hear! Where have you been?"

"That's a bit of a story, Mary," Freddie said between breaths that did not come easy, so tight was Mary hugging him. "I met the King, you see, and . . ."

"The King!" Mary stepped back in surprise. "Freddie, what joke are you playing now?" Then she gasped, noticing who else was standing there outside the cabin.

Freddie took her hand. "It's all right, Mary," he whispered. "King Northrop is a nice man, you'll see."

At that, Northrop stepped forward, bending down to her. "Hello, Mary," he smiled. "Freddie has told me many wonderful things about you. I'm delighted to meet you and apologize if my arrival startled you."

Mary curtsied before him. "That's quite all right, Your Majesty. It's just that . . . well, I surely wasn't expecting you, Sire, that's all!"

She's polite enough, Pluribus thought as he regarded her. And knows the proper forms of address, which is a welcome improvement over young Master Fype. Perhaps the King's plan might work, after all.

"No, I'm sure you didn't expect us," the King continued, chuckling. "I must confess, I didn't expect to be here tonight, either. My choice was to come fetch you tomorrow, but Freddie wouldn't hear of it. Now that I've met you, I can see he was right. It would have been shameful of me to have kept you all alone in the night. Instead, I've come to offer you lodging in my castle. Along with Freddie, of course."

Mary looked from Northrop to Freddie and back again, not knowing what to say. As she did, the King noticed how pretty she was with her blue, intelligent eyes, perky nose and softly freckled face framed by curly brown hair. Even though she was only ten years old, Northrop could tell that she was no stranger to responsibility and not one to shy away from work. Aunt Megan, whoever she was, had certainly known what she was about when it came to rearing children. A pity, Northrop thought, that he would never know her.

Mary still said nothing, looking to Freddie to help her. "Sire, perhaps it would be best if Mary had the benefit of our names," Pluribus suggested.

"Right you are!" Northrop agreed. "Mary, this is Pluribus, my page and loyal confidant."

"How do you do, Miss," Pluribus bowed. "I hope you will accept Our Majesty's invitation. Your presence would add a unique charm to the palace." He held out his hand and Mary took it, curtsying once more.

"Thank you, Pluribus. You're very kind." Mary smiled shyly at him.

Northrop laughed. "He is, indeed, Mary. And now may I present my royal coachmen." He motioned to the trio holding their lanterns, who also bowed.

"Evening, Mary," they chorused.

"Hello," Mary smiled, not so shyly this time. She thought them rather funny in the livery they wore.

"And I, of course, am Northrop, King of Glencastyr. Now, what say you to my offer?"

Again Mary looked to Freddie. He squeezed her hand. "Whatever you decide will be the right choice for me, Mary," he said for all to hear. Then: "But I really would like for you to see the palace." He smiled impishly.

Mary turned back to Northrop. "Very well, Sire. I accept."

"Bravo! Then into the coach with us! If we hurry, I think we can rouse my kitchen staff long enough to enjoy a midnight treat!"

"What about my belongings, Sire?" Mary wondered.

“All shall be taken care of, Mary,” Pluribus replied. “The King's men can return for your belongings tomorrow. Here, let me help you up.” He assisted her into the carriage, followed by Freddie; then he and Northrop joined them inside.

“That's it then,” Northrop said. “To the palace!”

When Mary awoke next morning, she gave a start as she looked about her. She had gone to sleep far past her normal bedtime and had slept so peacefully that for a moment she had quite forgotten all that had happened to her in so short a time. Now the full impact of it all was beginning to dawn on her. To begin with, there was the bed that she was in, which Mary estimated half a dozen children could have slept in without getting in each other's way. Then there was her chamber, which was almost as big as Aunt Megan's entire cabin. Every inch of it was lavishly decorated with marvelous tapestries, carpets, paintings, vases and furniture. And the ceiling, which stood at least fifteen feet high, was a swirl of beautiful pastels depicting a soft summer sky.

Mary sank back against her pillows, wondering at all the craftspeople it must have taken to create this room, let alone the entire palace. There was a knock at her door. “Mary,” Freddie whispered. “It's me, are you still sleeping?” He opened the door to peep sheepishly inside.

“Come in, Freddie,” Mary said, smiling at seeing him. “Can you believe that we are actually here?”

Freddie, dressed in an overlarge nightshirt (all that Pluribus had been able to find him before he retired), stepped inside the room and closed the door. “It does seem like a dream, doesn't it?” he said. “Your room's even lovelier than mine, although I think mine's bigger, if you can believe it. Pluribus told me I've been placed in the Prince's Royal Chamber. If the King actually does adopt us, I guess it's where I'll be sleeping from now on. Imagine what Aunt Megan would say to that!”

“If only she could be here with us! After all that she did for us, it seems so sad that all of her life was passed without being able to enjoy any luxuries.”

“I know. But we mustn't forget what she taught us. ‘The things of most value can only be found in the heart.’”

“You're right, of course, Freddie. Still, it would be nice if she could be here with us. I still miss her. I think I shall miss her forever.”

Freddie took her hand. “I miss her, too,” he said. They grew silent, each in their own way remembering the woman who had raised them. The palace seemed a poor substitute for the great joys they'd found in her cabin when she was alive. They looked at each other, understanding that now more than ever they must depend on each other to find their way in the world.

After breakfast, which had consisted of enough food to feed a large family. Northrop gave them a tour of their new home. They were astonished to discover exactly how big the palace was. It contained twelve additional chamber rooms, including the King's and one for Pluribus. The rest of them were unoccupied, and all were done up in its own lavish decor. Together they made up the top floor of the palace. The second floor was where the Throne Room was located, along with the Royal Library, a number of studies, and both private and public dining halls. Of these, it was the Library that most took the children's fancy. Aunt Megan had placed much emphasis on the value of books. When they saw the thousands of volumes that the Library contained they were astonished. “Sire,” Mary said. “I had no idea that there were so many books in the world! How should anyone ever have the time to read them all?”

“I don't think anyone has, Mary,” Northrop replied. “But I want you to know that you are free to use the Library whenever you wish. Let's leave that for later, though, shall we? There is more that I wish you to see.”

He led them to the Hall of Court, a spacious room that occupied the entire center of the first floor. Huge and marvelous tapestries hung from the walls, each of them depicting a part of Glencastyr's history. Above the entranceway was a magnificent stained glass window through which beams of sunlight streamed, dappling the walls and floor with a rainbow of colors. At the far wall was a mahogany dais upon which stood two throne chairs wrought from gold and purple

velvet and encrusted with an assortment of brilliant gems. These were where Glencastyr's kings and queens sat at Court. They were flanked by two rows of elegantly carved benches which were reserved for the King's advisors. Above the dais, anchored into the wall, hung the kingdom's crest of arms, an oversized gold shield upon which was emblazoned a single rose enfolded by a wreath of laurel, and below which rested two crossed swords.

"The rose symbolizes the heart of the kingdom, the people of Glencastyr," the King explained. "The laurel wreath signifies the duty each king has to rule wisely and in the kingdom's best interests, and the swords proclaim the will both king and citizens must not shirk from in those times when we must defend our freedoms. Mind that you remember this, Freddie, for some day it may be your burden to uphold the king's office."

Freddie cast a questioning glance at Mary, daunted by the great responsibilities the King hinted at. Then Northrop pointed to the tiered benches which faced each other across the east and west walls. "These are where the kingdom's other royalty sit when court is convened," he said. "You shall meet them soon enough, since I must have their agreement if I'm to adopt you."

"Will they agree, do you think, Sire?" Mary inquired.

Northrop smiled at her. "Oh, I'm certain of it, Mary. They have no other ambitions beyond their stations, you see. The entire affair is merely a formality which I must honor before I can properly declare my will to the people. All in all, we royalty are a docile lot, which is why Glencastyr has blessed her people with peace for so long. One or two might express their doubts about Freddie, naturally, but once they are satisfied that I am not abandoning protocol the issue will soon be settled. That is, unless Count Vileshoe appears in time to stir things up."

"Who is Count Vileshoe?" asked Freddie and Mary together.

"The one bad apple among the royal houses, I'm afraid. He and I are distantly related from my mother's side. Fourth or fifth cousins, I think. Because of that the Count has more than once sought to lay claim to the Throne should I pass away. But his challenges, upon investigation, have fortunately proven to be unfounded, for the

Throne has always been passed down according to paternal bloodlines. Since his last challenge a few years ago, he's been increasingly absent from Court, spending his time hunting and exploring the wilds beyond the kingdom's border. Anyway, he's not someone you need worry about. I tolerate his comings and goings and in return he no longer interferes with my rule.”

“But what if he does appear before the Court when you present Freddie as your heir, Sire?” Mary said.

“Then matters may take a bit longer to settle, but that is all,” the King shrugged. “The others may listen to him, but they will not side with him, for in truth he is not very well liked. Chances are, however, that he won't be present. I intend to convene the Court within a fortnight and he isn't expected back for at least another month.”

“But, Your Majesty, doesn't he have to vote on the matter, too?” Freddie wondered.

“Fortunately not,” Northrop answered. “The measure only needs a clear majority to see it through and, with or without the Count, I am assured of receiving it. But enough of such talk.” He showed them the rest of the first floor, which included the kitchen, another dining hall, and ample quarters for the various servants and attendants who saw to the daily tasks of the palace's routines.

By the end of their first week at the palace Freddie and Mary, although still finding it difficult to accept their newfound circumstances, had become much more settled in their new surroundings. The more that they got to know the King, the better each of them liked him. Behind his royal appearance he was really a kind and simple man who genuinely cared about their welfare. Pluribus, too, became more of a friend to them, although he seemed to be forever reminding them of how to speak and act according to what he always referred to as “Proper Protocol.”

After their first day the King resumed his duties and Freddie and Mary found themselves free to do as they wished. On their fourth afternoon there, Pluribus came upon them in the library. He immediately noticed how bored Freddie looked sitting by himself as Mary pored through a book about Glencastyr's ancient history. “What

is it, Master Freddie?” Pluribus asked. “I thought the library was to your liking.”

“Oh, it is, Pluribus,” Freddie replied. “It’s very wonderful, in fact.”

“So I’ve always thought,” Pluribus agreed. “Still, I can’t help but notice that you hardly seem to be enjoying yourself. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No, that’s all right. I’m quite happy to be here, really. It’s just that, with all these books, I wish that I could find some of the ones that my Aunt Megan used to read to me.”

“And what sort of books might those be?”

Freddie told him and Pluribus allowed himself a bit of a smile. “Adventure tales, you mean. I know such books very well.”

Freddie was surprised. Adventure tales and Pluribus were not things he would have thought went together. “You do?”

“Why, of course I do! I was once a young lad myself, you know. And when I was, there was nothing that I liked better after my sweet mother’s cooking, then to spend time reading tales about heroes. Especially tales about Sonnaben. He was my favorite.”

“He’s mine, too!” Freddie said, remembering the stories Aunt Megan had read to him about Glencastyr’s legendary champion who’d spent his life battling giants and dragons and the sinister Lord Grimsneer in the days of the kingdom’s misty past.

Pluribus smiled. “I doubt there is a lad anywhere that would not be moved by his mighty exploits. Pity there are no tales of him in this room.” He stroked his chin. “I believe we shall have to rectify that, Master Freddie.” But what Pluribus intended to do about the matter, he wouldn’t say. That night, however, a package was waiting for Freddie on his bed table. Opening it, he found a leather bound edition of *Lord Grimsneer’s Gambit*, Sonnaben’s epic last adventure against his evil arch-enemy. On the title page was an inscription. “To Young Master Fype,” it read. “Happy reading from a Fellow Adventure Lover.” Next day, Freddie was informed by one of the librarians that a new section devoted to adventure tales and other works for children was being installed with the cooperation of Glencastyr’s finest booksellers.

Three days later, Northrop summoned Glencastyr's royalty to the Hall of Court to inform them of his decision to adopt Freddie as his heir. As he had predicted, Count Vileshoe was not in attendance, and the various other dukes and counts presented no objection to Northrop's plan. In fact, many of them expressed relief that the issue of an heir had finally been resolved, especially after they were introduced to Freddie and had the opportunity to question him. He seemed a bright enough lad, they decided, and their decision was made easier when Northrop presented them with the legal precedent supporting his plan. Thanks to his librarians, he had unearthed historical documents more than five centuries old that revealed another ruler of Glencastyr, King Stonegulf, had also been without an heir due to the inability of his wife, Queen Glorianne, to have children. Stonegulf had also chosen adoption as the means of satisfying his obligations, and his adopted heir, King Rhiordan, had gone on to become one of Glencastyr's fairest rulers. So much so that his lineage eventually seemed of little consequence and for the most part had been forgotten. (Northrop himself had not known of his adoption until the librarians pointed it out to him, and his ignorance of that fact was shared by the majority of the nobles who had answered his summons.) The matter concluded with each of the nobles swearing loyalty to Freddie as their future liege, and recording their signatures to this effect in the Book of Records.

“Well, that went easily enough,” Northrop said after the gathering had dispersed and he, Freddie, Mary and Pluribus found themselves once more alone. “Now that it's settled, it only remains for me to tell the people.”

Five days later a holiday was declared. The palace grounds were rich with festivities provided by jesters, clowns and minstrels. Food was also in abundance, along with mead and ale. Only Jack Smattern and his mates suspected the underlying reason behind the celebration, but they kept their thoughts to themselves, not wanting to spoil what they hoped was the King's surprise.

It was not until sunset that Northrop, from the palace terrace, appeared before his people, by which time every man, woman and

child was sated on song and food and drink. Before he could say a word, they filled the air with cheers.

“Hail the King! Hail the King! Long life to Northrop, fairest of rulers!”

Northrop waited for the cheers to end, then raised his hand in salute.

“Greetings, my people. It does my heart good to see you in such spirits.” Again the people cheered. Northrop's smile broadened. “Today I put to rest your concerns about my reign. At long last your king has found an heir!”

Murmurs of questions and surprise swept through the crowd. Off to one side, Jack Smattern smiled as he took another sip of mead. “He's kept his word, Morris,” he told the tailor. “Didn't I tell you he would?”

“Aye, Jack, and I never doubted you,” Morris replied. “Only, who has he found, I wonder.”

That was the question that swept over the gathering. It was well known that the King refused to remarry, so who could this heir be? As they pondered this, they began to realize that it must be someone actually chosen from amongst themselves. Could that be possible?

Northrop went on. “In accordance with Glencastyr's tradition, I have exerted my prerogative to choose my successor through the agency of adoption.”

A second wave of murmuring passed through the crowd. Adoption? Who could the adopted heir be? How had Northrop found him? It *was* a him, wasn't it? Filled with curiosity, they stared up at Northrop as he continued.

“My people, it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Frederick Fype, Heir to Glencastyr's Throne!”

With that, Freddie, prodded by Pluribus, stepped timidly into view, wearing a cloak and the Prince's Crown atop his head.

The crowd bustled with reactions. Glory, look how young he is! Aye, and cute as well, don't you think? What's cute got to do with being king? Where on earth did Northrop find him! Quiet, all of you, he's saying something!

Freddie was indeed speaking, but in a voice much softer than the King's. The gathering had to pay close attention in order to hear him. "First of all, hello. Um . . . I hope that you had fun today . . . Did you?"

"Aye!" the crowd nodded, as if suddenly they were in a school room. They couldn't say what it was just yet, but there was something about the boy that made them want to help him to face the tasks ahead of him.

Freddie smiled, still nervous, but growing encouraged by the way they looked at him. "Good, I'm glad. Um . . . I don't have much to say, really. Since King Northrop has seen fit to select me as his heir I can only accept his decision. It's certainly a great honor, and I promise you that I will do my best to live up to it. And, um . . ." He shrugged. "I guess that's all I have to say. Though I am now the King's Heir, it's King Northrop who still sits on the Throne, and thank goodness for that. I hope that he remains there for a very long time, don't you?"

The crowd roared their assent. "Long live the King!" they shouted. "Long live Northrop of Glencastyr!"

Northrop looked upon them, both proud and moved. It was minutes more before the cheers died down and he was allowed to speak. "Thank you, citizens. Your good will touches me to the bottom of my heart. Carry on in your festivities and know that your welfare is in good hands." He placed his arm about Freddie and the two of them raised their hands in benediction as the crowd cheered long and loud beneath them.

"You were wonderful," Mary told Freddie once he stepped back from the terrace. She ran up to hug him and he returned her embrace, but in his eyes were doubts and questions about all that would follow once the celebration was over.

Chapter Three

COUNT VILESHOE

Three weeks after Northrop's proclamation of Freddie as his heir, thirty horsemen rode into view beneath Freddie and Mary where they sat on the palace terrace. The men seemed both arrogant and bold, riding where they would and more than once forcing passersby to scurry aside to avoid being run down by them. In their lead was a dashing figure of curly black hair, a fine moustache, and handsomely tailored clothes. But for all his good looks, his manner as he led his followers charging through the streets made Freddie and Mary nervous.

"I see that Count Vileshoe has returned," said Pluribus, bringing them their breakfast. "I had begun to hope we'd seen the last of him."

"Why do you say that, Pluribus?" Mary asked.

"Because it's the way I feel, Mary, though it isn't my place to say so," Pluribus replied, setting down a tray laden with scones and jams and fruit. "As King Northrop has told you, the Count has more than once set his ambitions on the Throne through claims of his bloodline. Fortunately, his claims were rejected, yet I still regard him as a man bent on trouble and not good for Glencastyr. Why the King puts up with him is beyond me. But then, I am only a page and it isn't my place to think such things. Come, it's time for your breakfast."

Freddie and Mary reached for their food. "Surely the King can handle the Count, though, don't you think, Pluribus?" Freddie said as he bit into a delicious buttered scone.

"One would hope that you are right, Master Freddie," Pluribus said. Yet his frown revealed that he did not share Freddie's confidence in the matter. A man of Count Vileshoe's ambitions did not easily lay them down, and the King, he feared, afforded him freer rein than Pluribus thought was prudent.

The Count and his men lodged in Westwryn Castle, which was located a good few miles away from the palace, upon grounds that were rich with forests and all manner of animals to satisfy the Count's passion for hunting. It had been built many years earlier by one of

Northrop's ancestors as a gift to Vileshoe's great-grandfather Count Rothan for services he had rendered to the kingdom. Anyone else would have been well contented with all that the castle and its grounds had to offer, but Vileshoe was a man doomed to never be happy with what he had (which, next to the King, was more than anyone else in Glencastyr). Much younger than Northrop, and like him unmarried, Vileshoe made no secret that he found life in Glencastyr boring. He often spent long times away from it, usually in the company of his men. They shared his curse of restlessness, and they knew that whatever benefitted Vileshoe would be to their advantage as well. That is why Vileshoe had selected them, and why, the night before his return to Glencastyr, he'd brought them further into his confidence.

They had made camp before a roaring fire, sated from a day of hunting and their kill of a mighty stag which they had left to lie on the forest's floor, its heart pierced by Vileshoe's arrow. Hunt was a sport to him and his men, never about survival, and they had killed game enough already to more than provide for their meals. As the fire blazed, Vileshoe sat idly on the ground, picking at a leg of turkey, yet in his gaze there was tension.

"My friends," he said, "is it not odd that we, of all in Glencastyr, should live the way we do?"

"What do you mean, Your Grace?" asked Bolt, a tall, bearded, broad-shouldered man, and the Count's trusted ally.

"I mean," said Vileshoe, "that men like us should have much more than what we do. After all, are there any in the kingdom to match us in might and cunning?"

"None, an' that's true enough," grunted Gall, a rough mass of an oaf with a low-sloping brow who was little given to shaving. He tore apart a loaf of bread and stuffed it in his mouth. "But I still don't take yer meaning, Count."

Vileshoe sat up and his men gathered around him. "Let me make it plain, then, Gall. Since we *are* who we are, I say it's only fitting that the rule of Glencastyr rest in our hands. More, I say it's our right! The King is a fool, as are his followers, and the lot of them grow more detestable each day. Do you agree?"

Around the fire there were grunts of assent and Vileshoe knew he had their interest. "But Your Grace," Bolt said, "as things stand Northrup still sits on the Throne and your own claims to it have been defeated. Certainly we would all be happier if that weren't the case, but it is, and I hardly see how it might change."

The Count sneered. "Then you don't look far enough, Bolt. Or haven't you considered Northrop's age and the fact that he has no heir. What happens when he dies, then, hey?"

Vileshoe looked at each of his men in turn and they looked back at him, understanding beginning to dawn in their eyes. "Do yer mean that you plan to succeed him, Your Grace?" Gall asked, scratching his belly.

Vileshoe sat back, an evil smile upon his lips. "That's precisely what I mean." His men stared at him, seeing how much he meant it. He went on, his voice rising and coated with bitter anger. "Why shouldn't I succeed Northrop? I'm count already; to be king is just another step! And who will there be to gainsay me once Northrup is gone? I tell you, the Throne remains in my reach and I aim to take it before long. When I do, you may be sure that I will remember those who helped me to it. Nor shall I forget," he said, his tone growing menacing, "those who stood in my way."

No one spoke for a bit, then Bolt cleared his throat. "You know that you can depend on us, Your Grace. Is that not right, men?" The others voiced their assent. "Yet," Bolt continued, "Your Grace, don't you speak of this too early?"

"What do you mean?" Vileshoe snapped.

"Only that Northrup, though no longer young, is still a way off from being truly old. It could be years yet before your time comes."

Vileshoe brightened at this. "You forget, Bolt. There are ways to make one used up before they should be, ways that even kings are not immune to." He laughed, and by his manner his men knew what he meant. In order to gain the Throne, Vileshoe was prepared to do anything to achieve his ends, even kill Northrop if he had to.

Silence fell about the fire then as the men wrestled with their thoughts. They were rough men, it was true, greedy and even savage. But killers they were not. Yet that was precisely what Vileshoe was

hinting they might become if they aided him in his scheme. It wasn't an idea that made them comfortable, but it didn't leave them flinching, either. Not as they considered how great their rewards might be once the Count sat on the Throne. The more that they considered the idea, the less far-fetched a thought it seemed.

"I see that you are with me," Vileshoe said. "Good. Then let us end our stay in these woods and return to Glencastyr. There is work ahead of us, don't you agree?"

At that the evening filled with laughter as the fire sputtered and hissed, and next morning Vileshoe and his men galloped into the kingdom.

But the Count was hardly settled into Westwryn Castle when he learned of the bitter surprise awaiting him. "The King has done what?" He was seated in his chamber where food and drink had been set before him.

"An heir, Your Grace," said Dumkin, his gaunt and callow servant, trembling before him. "The K-King has selected an heir."

"Curse it all to rot!" Vileshoe thundered, uprighting the feast before him. Dumkin scrambled to tend to the scattered mess. "Leave it!" the Count cried. "I must know all that has happened. Tell me, Dumkin, and be swift!"

So Dumkin related the events which had come to pass while his master was away. Vileshoe listened with growing fury, pacing like a panther about the room. Before Dumkin could finish telling of Northrop's presentation of Freddie to the people, Vileshoe said, "Enough of your prattle, dolt! I have the picture!" Pushing Dumkin to one side, he raced from the room to his stables.

One hour later the Count tethered his horse outside the palace, then ran up its steps. Rushing past the guards without a word of explanation, he spotted Pluribus.

"Count Vileshoe," Pluribus said, as politely as he could manage. "What a surprise."

The Count seized him by his collar. "Where's the King?"

"Careful, Your Grace. I do believe you are choking me."

"I shall do more than that, you idiot, if you don't answer me!"

But Pluribus could say no more for his face had gone red and he was gasping for breath. Vileshoe released him. "Speak! Where is the King?"

"The King," said Pluribus hoarsely, "is in his chambers."

Vileshoe raced away.

"Your Grace, wait!" Pluribus cried, moving after him. "His Majesty has commanded me that he is not to be disturbed!"

Vileshoe ignored him, leaving Pluribus following after him as best he could.

As the Count went on his way he brought his anger under control, knowing that it would do him no good before Northrop. The King's actions were a setback to Vileshoe, true enough, but not irreversible. But he wasn't on the Throne yet, the Count reminded himself, and so must act accordingly. That meant offering Northrop his respect. Even if the man was nothing more than a tired, old fool!

Coming to Northrop's chambers, Vileshoe rapped lightly on the door. "Come," beckoned the King. Vileshoe entered to find him in the middle of a game of chess with Mary while Freddie sat nearby, reading about his hero, Sonnaben.

"Vileshoe!" said the King, unable to hide his shock at seeing him there.

Vileshoe bowed. "Good day, Sire. Forgive my intrusion, but I feel it is my duty to present myself."

Northrop arched an eyebrow. "Your duty? I don't understand."

The Count came closer, beginning to smile. "What I mean, Your Majesty, is that I have only now learned of your heir and felt it was my place to present myself to pledge my allegiance to him. I've just returned to Glencastyr to learn of his selection, you see." He looked about the chamber, ignoring Freddie and Mary, then back at the King. "Is he nearby, Sire?"

"Of course he's nearby!" Northrop cried, displeased by the Count's interruption. "He's right in front of you!"

At this Freddie put down his book to stand up. "Hello," he said.

Vileshoe didn't answer. He was stunned. Both children were dressed so plainly he had thought them servants. To learn that this

imp was Northrop's choice to succeed him was too much to take. Malice clouded Vileshoe's brow, but he swiftly dispelled it.

Once more the Count bowed. "My apologies, Sire." He turned to Freddie, making his voice sweet against the rage he felt. "Forgive me, as well, young prince. The shock of finding you so ordinary has momentarily confused me."

"Ordinary!" Mary scowled, her dislike of the Count plain in her face. But before she could say more, Freddie came forward.

"It's all right, Count," he said. "I can imagine what a surprise I must be to you. Being the heir and all, I mean. I'm still not used to it myself." He smiled. "Now that we've met, though, would you like to stay and share our refreshments?" He pointed to a tray of fruits and pastries.

Northrop could not help smiling. "Is he not polite, Count? Allow me to present to you Freddie Fype, who shall be king one day. And this is Mary, our Royal Friend."

"Indeed," said Vileshoe, bowing to her in order to mask the rage which now was near to choking him.

"Will you stay then?" Freddie asked him.

"No," said the Count, rising. "Thank you, but I really must be going. I only came to pay my respects, and now have other obligations I must attend to. I congratulate you, Sire. It is well that Glencastyr should at last have an heir. And to you, Freddie, if I may call you by name. It is not every day that one becomes king."

"Oh, I'm not the king yet," Freddie replied. "Only the heir."

"Indeed." Once more Vileshoe bowed. "And now I must take my leave so I bid you farewell." He strode away before any could answer him.

"I don't like him," Mary declared.

"Oh, Mary, don't be silly," Freddie said. "Remember what Aunt Megan used to say about not judging people before you know them."

But Mary didn't answer.

Just then Pluribus appeared, looking deeply chagrined and still struggling for breath. "Sire, my apologies! I tried to stop him, but he insisted."

King Northrop sighed. "Be calm, Pluribus. Our audience was brief and no harm has been done." Secretly, though, he wondered about this. To hide the fact, he turned to Mary. "If I'm not mistaken, young lady, I believe you were on your way to placing me in check. Shall we resume our game?"

Soon the innocent fun which the Count had intruded upon was restored. But in Northrop's heart a feeling of unease began to grow and try as he might, he could not shake it.

Chapter Four

A PLOT IN THE NIGHT

That night, Count Vileshoe sat in his chambers with Bolt and Gall, relating what he had learned from his visit to the King.

“Then I guess the plot's done with,” said Gall after the story was told. “What good will it do to remove Northrop if he's already found himself an heir?”

Bolt nodded. “Yes, and one the people are pleased with, from what I hear. Sorry it puts an end to things, Your Grace.”

“You fools!” spat Vileshoe. “It puts an end to nothing! The King's selection of this Fype matters not at all!”

“It doesn't?” Gall said, darting a glance at Bolt.

“Of course it doesn't!” Vileshoe sneered. “I'll still have the Throne. The King's choice simply means that I'll have to set about getting it in a different way.”

Gall scratched his head.

“What do you have in mind, Your Grace?” asked Bolt with a frown.

“Something simple and to the point. We shall take the Throne by force!” Bolt and Gall exchanged worrisome looks. “Oh, don't look so shocked, you dunderheads! Or have you forgotten last night's talk by the fire?”

“No, Your Grace, it's not that,” Bolt began.

“I don't care what it is, Bolt!” cried Vileshoe, leaning closer to both of them. “Have I not made it plain to you that I mean to rule Glencastyr!” Mutely, Bolt and Gall nodded, seized by their fear of him. “Then listen to what I have to say and be done with your objections! Northrop has surprised me, it's true, but I will not allow his selection of an heir to thwart my plans. As I've often told you, it's we who have the skill in war and the daring to use it.”

The Count laughed. “Why, the rest of the kingdom couldn't defend itself properly if their lives depended on it. Moreover, with the exception of the palace guards, who wear arms only for decoration, I doubt there is another man in all Glencastyr besides ourselves who

even owns a sword, much less knows how to use it. Whoever resists us will fall like lambs to the wolf!”

“But, Your Grace,” Gall said. “These lambs yer speak of . . . I mean, the people. They number in the thousands, while we are a handful!”

“What of that?” the Count demanded. “Last night you were willing to kill Northrop if need be, why do you hesitate now? It doesn't matter how small our number. A dozen men armed with purpose and a leader can stand against any amount who are leaderless and weak. And you can be sure that our number will swell once the people see the way of things.”

“What of Northrop, then, Your Grace?” Bolt asked. “Are we to kill him?”

Vileshoe grinned evilly. “Why Bolt, are you afraid of him? Well, be at ease. I've decided that he needn't die for me to have me way. No, I think I should much prefer that he be alive to see me triumph. Still, we shall deal with him, all right. Then, once he's disposed of, that brat of his will rue the day he ever entered the palace. Now listen, both of you!” Bolt and Gall crept closer and in the silence of the night the Count told them what he planned.

One week later, exactly at midnight, three figures crept through the corridors of the palace, towards the King's chambers. Swords hung at their sides and knives were in their hands, but so far they had managed to avoid detection by the few palace guards on duty. Occasionally they were forced to hug the walls as one or more of Northrop's various servants went past, yet they were not seen. At last they stood before the King's door.

Just as they reached it, the door opened to reveal Pluribus. “Good night, Sire,” he said, then shut the door and turned away. As soon as he did so, he was gripped by strong hands and a blade was put to his throat. “What is this?” he hissed, but said no more as the blade bit into his neck. Then he was spun about to find Count Vileshoe leering back at him. Pluribus's eyes went wide.

“Good evening, Page,” the Count whispered. “Bringing the King a late night snack, I see.” Pluribus said nothing and the Count's smile

widened. "Don't play the fool, Pluribus. We saw you leave his chambers, which means Northrop is alone and our task that much easier." He leaned menacingly forward. "Now, my poppycake, there is information you will give me. Where are Fype and the girl?"

Pluribus didn't answer.

"Dog!" hissed the Count. "Do you think you can thwart me? You have five seconds to cooperate or my man here will gut you where you stand!"

Pluribus paled, seeing no escape. Either he answered Vileshoe or he died. As Bolt pressed the knife even further into his skin, he broke into a cold sweat. "Stop!" he squirmed. "Stop, please, I'll tell you . . . I'll tell you!"

Vileshoe looked pleased but the blade remained where it was. "Not so foolish after all. I didn't think so. Well, then, tell me."

Pluribus pointed out the children's chambers further along the corridor. "What are . . . What do you plan to do?"

But the Count just nodded at Bolt, who, with a grunt, clasped a hand over Pluribus's mouth and began dragging him away. Then Pluribus fainted, forcing Bolt to carry him.

Vileshoe turned to Gall. "See what cowards the King's men are? Follow me."

Gall stepped into the light with his sword held ready as Vileshoe softly opened Northrop's door. He and Gall entered the room.

They found Northrop propped up in bed, asleep and snoring loudly. A silver tray containing an empty bottle of milk lay on his bedside table.

"Let the fool be for now," the Count told Gall. "But should he waken, seize him. I'm going for the children."

Once back in the corridor, Vileshoe motioned in the direction from which he'd come. At his signal, two more of his men stepped out from the shadows to join him. In silence, they made their way to where Freddie and Mary were sleeping.

Entering Freddie's chamber first, they found him peacefully asleep. The Count's men were surprised to see how young and helpless he looked. "Small little bug, ain't he, Your Grace," said Plank, a rail thin man with greasy hair and dim-witted features.

Instead of replying, Vileshoe moved forward to shake Freddie awake. "Come, Your Excellence," he sneered. "Your destiny awaits you!" Startled, Freddie sat up, but the Count clamped a hand over his mouth before he could speak. Freddie struggled to break free but could not. Giving up, he noticed the two other men in the room.

"Friends of mine," the Count informed him. "Both come especially for you, Freddie. I doubt you'll enjoy their visit, though. Plank, tie him up and gag him!"

Plank did so, using strips of Freddie's bed sheet. When he finished, Vileshoe released him to glare. "So you were to be Glencastyr's new King, hey? My, how quickly fortune changes. Look at you now, imp! Not much good as the heir tonight, I'd say. Not much good at all. Plank, wait here with him. We'll soon be back."

Trailed by his remaining henchman, an overweight brute named Sisp, the Count made for Mary. They found her curled up with a stuffed doll beneath her arm. "How sweet," Vileshoe cackled. "Such a shame that we must wake her." He motioned to Sisp, who went over to her.

At his touch, Mary sprang awake and it was all Sisp could do to prevent her from crying out. At last he succeeded in gagging her. Mary kept struggling, however, and he had a hard time pinioning her in order to bind her arms and legs. Finally he did so.

"Mmphf!" Mary cried. "Nnng ungh!"

It was then that Vileshoe revealed himself. "Such a temper, my dear," he mocked her. "Pity it doesn't serve you. I must say, though, that it does my heart good to see you trussed up so. Bring her, Sisp. It's time we tend to the King."

Moments later, Vileshoe and his men, with Freddie and Mary bound between them, stood once more in the King's chambers. Northrop was still asleep. Vileshoe regarded him, hatred bare across his face. "Such a fool to be our King," he said. "Such a fool to be anything!" With that, he threw Northrop from his bed.

The King landed roughly on the floor. A dull moan escaped him and for a moment he didn't move. Then, feebly, he struggled to rise. Blood trickled from his nose as he stared about him, hardly knowing where he was.

“Good evening, Sire,” said Vileshoe with a bow.

Northrop's senses swiftly returned to him as he looked at his captors and saw Freddie and Mary in their midst. “Children! Oh, no!” Moving forward, he cried, “Pluribus! Guards! Somebody help!”

”Shut up, old fool!” Vileshoe commanded, kicking him back to the ground. “Another word from you and I shall have your precious brats killed. As for your guards and servants, I assure you that the rest of my men by now have them under control. You're quite powerless, old man.” The Count looked down on him. “Didn't I once tell you that it was a mistake to reduce the size of your Royal Corps?”

“What do you want, Vileshoe?” Northrop said, once again rising and holding his side. “What is it you intend?”

Vileshoe laughed. “You don't know? Then you're a bigger fool than I thought! What do you think I intend but to take your place on the Throne!”

“But you can't! Your bloodline's already been rejected, and there's Freddie...”

“Are you blind? Your little dolls have joined you as my prisoners. As for my bloodline, I rather doubt that will matter to the rest of your subjects once they realize their need for a leader to replace you. There are none left now to stand against me, Northrop. No one except fools. And should they prove stupid enough to oppose me,” Vileshoe brandished his sword. “Well, let them try!” The Count laughed once more and his men joined in with him.

“You'll never get away with it!” Northrop declared. He made to leap at the Count, but, still weakened from his blows, he moved slowly. Vileshoe knocked him to the ground with the broadside of his blade.

“I won't get away with it?” the Count cried, as if astonished. “You blubber-filled idiot, I've already gotten away with it! Gall, tie him up and let's be gone!”

As Gall set to work, Bolt returned.

“Pluribus has been disposed of, Your Grace.”

Vileshoe grinned. “And the others?”

“All under hand as well, Your Grace.”

“The Throne is mine, then,” said Vileshoe simply. “Come, my friends, let us finish what we've started.”

Gall shoved the King forward towards Freddie and Mary. They looked at him sorrowfully, but he only stared wretchedly at the floor, blaming himself for what had happened. Then he was seized by Gall, while Bolt took Freddie and Mary under his arms and the invaders departed the palace.

Once outside and reunited with their fellows, the Count addressed his henchmen. “You know what to do. Northrop and the girl shall join the others in my castle's dungeon. As for the boy . . .” He paused, regarding Freddie coldly. “Take him away, Gall!”

“Where to, Your Grace?” Gall asked, confused by this sudden change of plans.

“Take him where he shall never bother us again,” said Vileshoe. “To the heart of Wyrddling Forest!” His eyes gleamed as he thought of the strange beast he had encountered there and what would happen should the brat meet it, too.

Mary gave a frightened groan. Freddie looked back at her, doing what he could to be brave. As for the King, abject and powerless, he avoided their gaze.

“Return to me quickly, Gall,” the Count said. “After all, I wouldn't want you to miss my coronation!” He laughed and his men laughed with him. Then they gathered up their prisoners and departed.

Chapter Five

WYRRDLING FOREST

The sun had risen hours earlier, but no light shone upon Freddie and Gall as they made their way through Wyrddling Forest. All about them was darkness and shadows, and the only sound they heard was the timid clop-clop-clopping of Gall's horse. The forest was a foreboding, frightful place and Freddie didn't like it one bit.

Since his capture he'd hardly said a word and given Gall no trouble. What was the use of speaking, he thought. He knew that Gall wouldn't listen to him. And there was no point in struggling. Gall was much too strong to resist and, besides, Freddie was still bound. All that was left for him to do was cry, but he didn't do that either, for he was an orphan and had learned long ago the uselessness of tears. Still, he was sad and afraid, and not just for himself. He thought of Mary and the King and worried about what Count Vileshoe would do to them. If only he could save them!

It was a foolish thought and Freddie knew it. Even if he could get free, what more could he possibly do? He was just a boy and about to be abandoned in a place he didn't know and was certain to lose his way in. That was to be Vileshoe's punishment for him. Lost and alone, he was to be left to perish in this grim, untamed forest that no sensible traveler would ever venture into. Maybe he would starve to death, or perhaps some creature would attack him. It didn't matter which, for Freddie knew that unless he found help he was destined to die here.

"Say somethin', why don't yer!" Gall finally said to him. He'd removed the gag from Freddie's mouth once they were safely out of Glencastyr. But Freddie kept silent. "Bah!" Gall snorted, rubbing his fist across his brow. He was becoming nervous as the forest closed about them. "Be still, then, see if I care! It's no concern of mine anyway, now is it? None at all! But there is one thing I want yer to know."

Freddie looked at him, with a look so full of grief and innocence that it was all Gall could do to not repent and free Freddie right there.

Only the thought of what Vileshoe would do to him kept Gall moving on. "Don't look at me like that!" he snapped. "It ain't my fault what's happened to yer. No, an' I want yer to know that. The Count's who gives the orders, not me. I jus' follow 'em, that's all. If it was me in charge, see...well, I wouldn't be pickin' on no children. Northrop I got no qualms about 'cuz what good's he anyway? But kids I don't like foolin' with. Still... " He shrugged uneasily. "Ah, what can I tell yer? It's like I said, it's Vileshoe's the boss, not me. Do yer hear me, Freddie Fype?"

"Yes," said Freddie softly. "I hear you, Gall. But think about this, if you will."

Gall laughed. "Advice fer me, hey? Awright, then, speak yer piece, boy."

"It's only this, Gall. Orders have no meaning until they're obeyed."

"An' what's that supposed to mean, hey?" Gall frowned. "What're yer tellin' me 'bout orders, Fype?" But he didn't go on, for he knew well enough what Freddie was telling him. For a moment he seemed on the verge of hitting Freddie, but he steadied himself and went on. "Bah!" he muttered. "Kids! Think yer so smart but what d'yer know? Nuthin', I say. Nuthin' at all!"

Freddie didn't answer him.

They rode for another hour, and the darkness of the forest did not abate. Gall sensed that it must be near to noon. Only the fact that he had many times before explored the forest in the company of Vileshoe and his men kept Gall from becoming lost. Still, this was the first time that he had ventured into it alone, and he was not anxious to continue on much further.

"Ought to do, this," he mumbled to himself. "Far enough from Glencastyr t'do any harm now, yer are, Fype. Tens of miles, I should say, never find yer way back after this. Yes, I think yer can be let down now. After all, the Count hisself told me not to tarry long." He reined in his horse and dismounted. "Awright, Fype, down yer come," he said, reaching up to bring Freddie to the ground.

As soon as he did so, Gall was again struck by guilt for what he was doing. He knew that Freddie, by himself, would never find his

way out of the forest. He didn't want to admit it, but he knew that he was leaving Freddie there to die.

“Don't look at me that way,” he said. “I told yer, this ain't my fault.” Freddie still didn't say a word, making Gall more uncomfortable. “Anyway, who's to say what'll happen to yer. Mebbe you'll end up likin' the forest, who knows? Stop starin' at me that way!” Gall stamped his foot. He was by no means a good man, but never before had he done something like this and the thought of it was starting to get to him. “Look at things rightly, Fype. Here at least yer got yer chances, but back at the palace, why, the Count'd kill yer sure!”

Still, Freddie said nothing.

Gall cursed. “Fine! Blame me then! It don't matter anyway, cuz I'm on my way. Here, take this!” Gall took his blanket from his saddle. He hadn't intended to, but once he gave it to Freddie, it seemed the right thing to do. “This'll keep yer warm, at least. I know, cuz I've slept many a night in it with no bother. An' this'll keep yer from gettin' thirsty.” He handed over his water pouch. “When yer run out, yer'll find there's a river about fer a refill. An' here's some grub that oughtta last yer fer a day or two.” He placed a pack of food in Freddie's hands. Feeling somewhat less guilty, he pulled on his belt. “There, then. That oughtta do yer fer a bit. An' so it's over between us, Fype. Get along now.”

But Freddie didn't move, loosely holding onto the bag of food, with the water pouch and blanket at his feet.

Gall got angry again. “Yer young fool! Stay there, then, see if I care!” He remounted his horse, turned about and rode away. The forest soon enveloped him, leaving Freddie all alone.

Just then the wind blew and Freddie felt a chill. Settling the pouch and pack across his shoulders, he picked up the blanket. It was old and rough and smelled of many campfires, and was much too big for his small frame. Still, it was warm. Freddie wrapped it about himself and began walking.

It was his hope that he somehow might be able to follow Gall's trail back to Glencastyr, and at first this seemed possible. Gall was a heavysset man and so was his horse, and its tracks made deep

impressions in the ground. But Freddie didn't get very far before what meager trail there was disappeared beneath fallen leaves. Finally the horse's tracks were impossible to find. And with the huge trees a jumble and cast in shadow, Freddie gave up trying to guess which way Gall might have passed. He knew he was truly lost. He gathered the blanket more closely about him and considered what to do.

He realized that his first concern should be to find shelter. With the forest as thick as it was, what scant light there was within it during daylight would vanish altogether once the sun set.

Freddie looked about. The giant trees were everywhere, but perhaps somewhere among them he could find a cave or something. But the trees provided no clues. A thick and ancient mass, they stared solemnly back at him. A feeling of helplessness began creeping over him.

To calm himself, Freddie spoke aloud. "One way's as good as the other," he said, turning about in a circle as he tried to see the treetops. "You trees are great big giants and I can see that you won't help me. All right, Freddie, start thinking. Remember what Aunt Megan used to say: Any problem can be solved if it's looked at the right way. The only thing is, what's the right way?"

As he spoke, he kept looking up at the trees, wishing that they could somehow help him. Then he had an idea. "Of course!" he cried, snapping his fingers. If he climbed one of the trees, he might possibly discover a pathway that could not be seen from the ground. Freddie was good at climbing trees, having often spent days doing so in the woods near Aunt Megan's home. Of course, those had been different trees than these of Wyrddling, but a tree was a tree all the same. Unburdening himself of the blanket and supplies Gall had given him, he looked around for the best tree to mount.

He spotted one with branches growing lower to the ground than the others. Its branches were still a few feet beyond his reach, but its bark was thick as slate. Perhaps it would support his weight, allowing him to climb high enough to reach the branches and then continue upward. "It's worth a try, at least," he said.

He went over to the tree's base and took off his shoes and socks. Then he took a deep breath as he studied the approach he wanted to

take. For a moment being lost didn't seem to matter. All he was concerned with was succeeding at this challenge. He grabbed hold of the bark and began his ascent.

It was as he'd hoped. Freddie didn't weigh that much and the bark supported him. He pulled himself up as his toes felt for anchor holds. Finding them, he pushed himself up further, then repeated the process. Soon he was within reach of the branches, and his success caused him to laugh. "Ha, Tree! You're easy!" But just as he grabbed hold of the lowest branch with his right hand, the bark he'd dug his feet into gave way. "Yikes!" he cried, finding himself dangling in the air by one hand. Feeling his grip slipping, he kicked wildly against the tree trunk, and managed to get his other hand onto the branch, as well. There! Now all he had to do was control his swinging. He did so, then pulled his ankles around the branch. Pausing for breath, he concentrated on shifting himself until he raised his chest atop the branch. After that, it was a simple matter to release his legs and pull himself up into a crouch while once again holding onto the bark. Now he was ready to begin the real climb.

The tree's branches were thick and gnarled and much too close together for a man to have made much headway. But Freddie was short and slight, and he continued to climb. Before long, he was nearly thirty feet high, but the other trees surrounding him were still too close and wide for him to be able to see much. He kept climbing.

Soon he was sweaty, breathing heavily, and covered with scratches. His hands were grimy with sap, and his progress was slowed because the higher up he went, the narrower and closer together the branches grew. He was forced to pick his way more carefully, often having to stretch and twist in order to get a hand hold. "Tree," he panted. "You aren't so easy after all!" But finally his efforts paid off as he came to a sparseness within the branches where he could see out across a wide expanse of forest.

Looking about, he noticed that no more than what seemed a few hundred yards east of where he was the trees appeared thinned out along a ribbon-like pathway before bunching back together again along the other side. What was it that made the trees thin out? he wondered. Then he remembered that Gall had mentioned that rivers

ran through the forest. Of, course, he told himself. There was a river nearby! “Yahoo!” he cried, knowing that a river meant water to drink, and possibly even a trail of sorts. If he followed it, he might find his way out of the forest, or at least a spot to spend the night. He started the climb back down.

Descending the tree took far more time than climbing up it. As Freddie negotiated his way he became even more scratched up and sap-stained, to the point where what he wanted most was a nice, warm bath. Finally, though, he set his foot upon the first branch he had reached. There, he realized that it would be too awkward to attempt to scale the rest of the way by holding onto the bark. Better to hang from the branch and simply drop the remaining feet to the ground. He lay his belly against the branch, grabbed hold of it firmly, then let his weight fall. In one swinging motion he was hanging with his arms outstretched, then he let go.

He hit the ground in a tumble. Picking himself up, he felt almost happy until he noticed how much darker it had become on the ground. Collecting his belongings, he hurriedly set off in the direction he had marked.

Before long he heard the sounds of running water, and within a few minutes he stood by the river. It was just a stream, really, only a few dozen feet across, but the trees did give out along both sides of it so that, looking up, Freddie could again see the sky. He saw that the sun would soon set and considered what to do.

“Stay here for now, I guess,” he said, as if speaking to the stream. “There’s no sense in following you once night comes. The ground’s soft here, so I can sleep all right and get a good start in the morning.” So decided, he threw down his gear and dipped his hands in the water. It was cold, but the touch of it refreshed him and he sipped a few mouthfuls. Then he scrubbed at the sap stains covering his hands and feet. They didn’t clean entirely, but Freddie was satisfied, using a corner of the blanket to dry off.

His efforts had left him hungry. Opening up the bag, he found that Gall had left him a fair supply of hard rolls and dried jerky, as well as some apples. If he ate sparingly, he felt that he had enough food to last him for three or four days. After that . . . Freddie didn’t want to

The Monster and Freddie Fype

think about that just yet. He ate one roll and a bite of jerky, chewing slowly to make the meal last. Then he drank almost the entire contents of the water pouch before refilling it from the stream. Finally, he searched about for the best spot to sleep in. He decided upon a patch nestled between two huge roots of a tree. Wrapping the blanket around him, he curled up, using his shoes to make a pillow. It wasn't very comfortable, but Freddie didn't expect that. Staring up at the sky, he spotted the first glimmerings of the stars as the sun set. He was all alone within the forest and night was coming on.

Chapter Six

THE MONSTER

“**F**reddie, help me!” Mary cried. “Please! It’s all because of you that I’m in trouble!”

But Freddie could do nothing, only watch as Count Vileshoe tied her up, leaving her to dangle from a tree branch at the edge of a cliff. The Count laughed. “She’s right, you know, Freddie. I never would have captured her if you hadn’t tried to be king.”

“I didn’t want to do it,” Freddie pleaded.

The Count sneered. “Didn’t you? Well, you certainly fooled me! Now say goodbye to Mary!” He swung his sword, cutting through the rope which held her.

“Mary!” Freddie yelled, rushing forward.

Too late. Mary fell into the abyss with a terrible scream.

“Mary! Oh Mary, no!”

“**M**ary?” Freddie rubbed his eyes, for a moment not certain where he was. Then, blinking in the darkness, he felt the chill and remembered he was in the forest. It was still night and the trees were bathed in moonlight. Mary hadn’t fallen after all, it had only been a dream. Yet it had seemed so real, and had left him coated with sweat. Why not? Freddie thought glumly, wrapping himself back in the blanket he’d kicked off in his sleep. Didn’t the dream have its roots in fact? “Oh, Mary,” he said softly. “What are we to do?” He had no idea, once more overcome by how helpless he was.

The forest was even more foreboding at night. Even though the moon shone, its light was faint and eerie, and the sounds of the stream seemed like evil laughter. How was he ever to escape? Thinking that he never would, he grew frightened. Every sound he heard suddenly seemed menacing, and he curled up into a ball so as not to be a target. But his fear grew more intense and he started to cry. It’s me who needs saving! he thought. But how was anyone to find him? Not

knowing, he lay there crying and afraid until at last he fell back asleep.

When next he awoke it was still night and Freddie thought he'd heard something moving. Crouching up, he peered over the blanket. He heard the sound again, he was sure of it.

A coldness that was not of the air gripped him as he lay there listening. Whatever was out there, Freddie could tell that it was coming closer. The sounds were coming clearer and he began to distinguish them, padded movements and a quiet panting. His heartbeat started to pound in his chest.

Then he saw the huge shape of the wolf, coming into view not ten feet away from him. The wolf didn't seem to notice him. Not yet. But, slowly, it came closer. It lifted its giant head so that the moon caught its eyes. They were like blazing yellow fires and Freddie gasped aloud.

The wolf heard him. It looked right at him and Freddie thought that he would die right there. But the wolf seemed intent on torturing him first. Still moving slowly, so terribly sure of itself, it advanced upon Freddie like pure evil taking form.

"No!" Freddie shouted, his reason giving way as he tried to cram himself inside the tree. "Get away from me, please! Go on, get away!"

But the wolf came closer before pausing to look at the ground. Following its gaze, Freddie spotted his bag of food. The wolf must have smelled it, that's why it was there! Freddie cursed himself for having placed it so nearby, then the wolf looked at him once more.

"T. . . Take it!" Freddie cried, close to hysteria. "There's meat and bread and everything, y . . . you can have it all!"

The wolf, for the first time, growled.

And then everything happened at once. Within the trees above him Freddie heard a crashing movement. The wolf growled fearsomely and was matched by Freddie's scream. Then a gigantic shape leapt to the ground with a roar that swallowed all other sound. Before the wolf could move, the shape, whatever it was - and Freddie, still screaming, knew it surely must be a monster - cuffed it on the snout. Instead of attacking, the wolf whimpered, actually staring at the creature sadly. Then it scampered away. With great, leaping strides, the creature

followed it, making sure that it had truly run off. Freddie watched, shocked silent, as the creature roared and waved its arms and jumped about. In the distance, he heard the wolf retreating. At last the creature was satisfied that it had gone. Becoming still, it turned to Freddie.

Freddie screamed anew, but only for a moment, for his scream made the creature flinch. It leapt back a few steps and made a mournful sound. Then, with the quickness of lightning, it sped across the stream to disappear beyond the trees upon the other side.

Casting off his blanket, Freddie stood up, almost wanting to call the creature back. But he didn't, too shocked to do anything for a while but stare at the spot where it had vanished. Only after his mind cleared did he realize that it had saved him from the wolf. But why? What was it? Where the legends concerning the forest really true? Had he really seen a monster? He didn't know and wasn't sure if he wanted to. All he was certain of was that the experience had left him hungry. He went to the bag of food which had caused all the trouble and, still bewildered, had his breakfast as the sun broke free of the horizon.

All that day, as Freddie followed the stream, he thought about the creature. So quickly had it appeared and vanished that Freddie hardly knew what it looked like. He only knew that it was gigantic, eight feet tall, at least, and that its body was coated with shaggy fur. And certainly it was powerful. So why had it seemed frightened when Freddie had screamed at it? What type of creature was it? Until now, he had thought the legends of Wyrddling Forest were nothing more than tales to frighten little children. Even Aunt Megan had said as much. But what if she'd been wrong?

Freddie wished he had some answers. He walked on with his blanket folded in his arms, half wishing that the creature would reappear. But after miles more of walking and still being lost, Freddie spotted no other beast, large or small. And the stream, so far as he could tell, ran in no particular direction and more than once had curved back on itself, adding to his confusion. It seemed pointless to keep on walking, but Freddie didn't have much choice. If he kept moving, he had a chance of finding his way free, whereas to stay in

one place was to give up altogether. That he couldn't do. Somehow he had to get back to Glencastyr and find a way to rescue Mary and King Northrop. He thought of how they must be faring.

Count Vileshoe had said they were to be imprisoned in his dungeon, and Freddie could only imagine how horrible that must be. Lost though he was, at least he still had his freedom, just as Gall had said. So he couldn't give up, no matter what. He had to keep trying to find a way out of the forest.

He walked a bit further until he found another spot to camp for the night. The day was ebbing away. Setting down his blanket within the nook of another tree, he drank some water, then rummaged through the bag of food. The apples had been his breakfast, and for lunch he'd eaten a roll. A few of them remained, plus a fair amount of jerky, but as he looked at what was left Freddie began to think that it wouldn't last as long as he had first hoped. After it ran out, what then?

"Don't think of that!" he commanded himself. "There's food enough, yet. By time you finish it, you'll be out of the forest."

He tried to believe that, and for good measure settled only on more water to still his rumbling stomach. So it was that, exhausted and hungry, Freddie prepared to spend his second night alone in the forest. This time he made sure to hang the food bag in the branch of a tree some distance away from him, not wanting to take any more chances on another encounter with the wolf. Hoping he would be safe, he rolled himself up in the blanket, lay down and fell asleep.

Next morning, he awoke to intense hunger. After two days of living on only meager rations, he was feeling dizzy and had cramps in his stomach. Rubbing his eyes to clear his head, he rose slowly and reached for the water pouch. But even after drinking almost its entire contents he still felt famished.

He stood up to stretch, only to be hit by another wave of dizziness. Steadying himself by holding onto his knees, he took a few deep breaths until the dizziness passed, then reached for his food bag to pull out a roll. It had gone almost stale, but to Freddie it was delicious. He ate it quickly, with a few more gulps of water. Then he ate another one, along with a piece of jerky. His stomach rumbled with satisfaction. *Eat it all!* it seemed to say, and Freddie obeyed,

consuming his remaining supplies. Only after he finished did he realize what he had done.

“Oh, how foolish!” he berated himself. “There's nothing left now, what am I going to do?” He stared into the empty bag as if doing so would somehow refill it. Then, disgustedly, he threw it on the ground. He was out of food and he might as well face it.

“Well,” he sighed. “At least I'm not hungry now. And with the forest so big there's got to be something I can find to eat. I'll just have to go look for it.” Leaving the food bag behind, he gathered up the rest of his gear and set off.

As he continued along the stream, the day grew hotter, and because of all the food he had eaten he soon became tired. He found a spot in the shade and sat down for a rest. After a few minutes he could no longer fight the desire to close his eyes. With his back against a tree, he fell asleep.

Some time later, he woke up startled to find that he'd dozed off. He hadn't meant to and was worried that something had happened. But he quickly discovered that nothing had. Or hadn't it?

From where he sat, Freddie thought he saw something hanging from a branch in the distance, just to his right. Whatever it was, he was certain that it hadn't been there before. He went over to investigate.

It was the food bag, and it was no longer empty. Freddie spun about, to see who had put it there, but saw nobody. Puzzled, he unfastened the bag to find that it was full of blackberries. “Yum!” he cried, after trying one. He dug into the bag and gobbled up a handful, getting juice all over his chin. He didn't care, happy at his good fortune. But then he paused, noticing a pair of footprints.

They were huge, large enough to fit his own feet into them at least five times over. Upon closer inspection, Freddie found that they began right beneath where the bag had been hung, then continued ahead of him along the stream.

Freddie guessed immediately that they belonged to the creature. That meant that it had retrieved his bag, filled it with the berries, and then left it for him to find. But why? And why did its footprints only lead away from the tree, while none led up to it? Obviously the

creature could move through the trees; Freddie had already witnessed that. So why had it taken to the ground after hanging the bag? For that matter, why had it left the bag and berries there at all? Freddie had no idea. All he knew was that this was the second time the creature had helped him and it was about time that he learned what it was. Closing the bag, he went back to collect his blanket and water pouch, then set off following the it's trail.

All the rest of that morning Freddie walked, and well into the afternoon. But all he saw was an occasional squirrel or bird amidst the mass of trees. Yet the creature's tracks remained in sight, still running close to the stream, fueling Freddie's intent to find it. "Hello?" he shouted from time to time. "Can you hear me?" He felt that it could, that it had to be close by, but no one answered.

Pausing here and there to briefly rest and to eat more blackberries, Freddie walked another five miles before the sun began to set. As he came to the end of another day's journey, the stream curved once more and where it did so, the creature's footprints ended. Rather, they led into the stream itself. "Now what?" Freddie said, slapping his thigh in frustration. He went up to the water's edge, wondering if he should cross it.

Then he smelled smoke mingling with the scent of pine. Sniffing the air, he soon realized that it came from around the bend. Instantly, he felt excited and afraid. If there was smoke, there had to be a fire, and that meant that somebody had made it. But who?

As silently as he could, Freddie crept back into the trees to slowly move towards the bend. As he went, he strained to hear any sounds that might provide him with a clue about who or what was in front of him, but all he heard were the ripples of the stream.

He came to the bend and peered through the branches to discover that near the stream's bank someone had made a fire just large enough to cook over. And something *was* cooking there. Freddie's mouth watered as he smelled the trout. His first impulse was to run forward to eat it, but he didn't dare. He stayed where he was, crouched in the undergrowth, searching for signs of whoever might be nearby.

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Twenty. Finally Freddie could take it no longer. Nobody had appeared, and if the trout wasn't taken off the

fire soon it would burn. He stepped out of hiding, then stopped and looked around. Still he saw no one. He took another step, and then another, ready to spring back into the trees should he have to. But a few moments more and he was convinced that there was no one there. Throwing down his gear, he raced forward to gather up the branches that held the trout over the flames. Waiting only a few seconds for it to cool, he picked a piece of it and put it in his mouth. It was hot, but not too hot, and whoever had cooked it had known how to go about it. It tasted wonderful! Freddie settled down on the ground to finish it off. When he finished, he wiped his fingers on his pants and his mouth on his sleeve, then reached for his pouch for a drink of water. As he did so, he again spotted the creature's footprints, and knew immediately who had prepared the meal.

Freddie leapt up, spinning about in all directions, but he saw nothing but trees. In the light of the fire, he studied the ground, noticing that the footprints started out of the stream and then seemed to cross over themselves a few times. Probably because the creature had been gathering kindling, Freddie thought. Finally they came to rest right by the fire. There was no sign of the creature's departure, but with trees all around, Freddie didn't have to be told that it had climbed up one of them. For all he knew, the creature could be looking down at him right now. He knew that he would never spot it. Not unless the creature wished him to, and Freddie was convinced that it didn't. He was also now sure of something else. Though he didn't know why, he knew that the creature was looking out for him and that thought, along with the meal he'd just had, raised his spirits. That night, as he went to sleep, he actually smiled.

“**W**hy haven't you helped us, Freddie?” said Mary, in his dream. She remained chained in Vileshoe's dungeon, along with Northrop, who stared sadly at the floor behind her.

“I thought you would be an heir to be proud of,” the King muttered. “But Freddie, you've just abandoned us.”

“No! Sire! Mary! Please! I wanted to help you, I swear I did!”

But the King and Mary just looked at him, unbelieving.

The door opened and Count Vileshoe entered. "Ah, Freddie," he said kindly. "Checking up on our prisoners, I see. I hope they haven't proved troublesome for you."

"Freddie!" Mary looked at him aghast. "You *are* helping the Count against us!"

Vileshoe laughed. "Of course he is, you little brat! Unlike you, Freddie's quite sensible. He knows the Throne belongs to me."

"That's not true!" Freddie cried. "He's lying, Mary. You must believe me!"

But Mary only looked at him with a broken heart as Vileshoe continued laughing.

"No! No, it isn't true! It isn't true!" Kicking and turning about, Freddie awoke from his nightmare, but doing so gave him no relief. Dream or not, the fact remained that Mary and the King were still imprisoned, and maybe facing something even worse. Very depressed, Freddie rose to face the morning.

The first thing he noticed was that his food bag was again refilled, hanging once more from a branch where he would be sure to see it. And near to where he had slept were new footprints of the creature. But instead of being grateful for again being taken care of, Freddie was engulfed by anger. Lashing out at the bag, he sent it toppling to the ground, spilling its contents of berries. "No!" he shouted at the forest. "This isn't good enough, do you hear me! I don't want you feeding me when my friends are in danger! I'm lost and need to get back to Glencastyr! I have to help my friends! I have to..."

His anger left him, replaced by grief and uncertainty as he realized that, even if he did make it back to Glencastyr, it would not be enough. What hope did he, a little boy, have against Count Vileshoe and his men? Filled with new despair, he threw himself down on the ground, burying his head in his arms and starting to sob.

He remained like that for many minutes as the full force of his predicament finally overwhelmed him. But at last he realized that it was no use looking for answers to what he faced. All he could do was try to survive as best he could. Sniffling back the last of his tears, he sat up, knowing that, despite how miserable he felt, he had to keep

moving. He salvaged the berries still left in his bag, then started to break camp.

Across the stream, he thought he saw something move. He wasn't sure, for beyond the bank the trees cloaked everything in darkness. Still, he felt something was there. If it was the creature, he knew that he would never spot it again if he made a point of searching for it. But maybe he could trick it into revealing itself. It was worth a try. Keeping his head down, he pretended to go back to gathering up his gear. He went about it slowly for a few minutes more, then whipped his head up. Sure enough, there was the creature!

It had crept half out of the trees to spy on him, but as soon as Freddie spotted it, it merged back into the shadows with a cry of alarm.

"Wait!" Freddie pleaded. "Come back! I need your help!" Hearing the sounds of the creature running away, Freddie charged into the stream. It wasn't very deep, but its current was strong, slowing Freddie's progress. "Please!" he called once more. "Whatever you are, I...!" His foot slipped on a mossy rock and he toppled into the stream. "Help!" he sputtered, spitting out water as he tried to rise. He couldn't get his footing and took another dunking. "H-help me!" A third time he fell, but when he finally struggled free of the current he found himself nearly to the stream's other side. And there once more in front of him was the creature, enshadowed by the forest.

"I need your help!" Freddie gasped. "Can you understand me?"

Though it had responded to his cries, the creature seemed frightened by him. For a moment they stared at each other, then once more it fled into the trees.

"No! You can't leave me now!" Soaking wet, Freddie made his way past the stream to follow it, determined that this time it wouldn't escape him. Ahead of him, he could still hear it running. "Stop, please!" Freddie begged, wondering why it was afraid of him. It didn't make sense. Not after the way it had provided for him the past few days.

For an hour more Freddie chased the creature without catching another sight of it, but he knew it was still in front of him by the noise it made as it ran. He hoped he would catch up with it soon. His

clothes were still wet and he'd left his gear behind. If the creature didn't help him now he would be worse off than ever. But he no longer called out, saving his breath for running.

After a while the sounds ahead of him seemed closer, leading Freddie to believe he was at last gaining on the creature. It was then that he had another thought. If the creature truly wanted to escape him, why didn't it simply take to the trees as it had done before? Freddie would never be able to catch it then. More than ever, he was determined to solve this mystery.

Then the only sounds he heard were of his own footsteps. "Oh no," Freddie said, gritting his teeth in an effort to run even faster. Had the creature fled to the trees after all?

A moment more and he discovered what the answer was. The forest gave way to a clearing of boulders, which rose in a jumble to form a hill. In the distance the creature was climbing clumsily. Seeing Freddie, it roared in distress. "Wait!" Freddie called, still unable to see it clearly. But it kept going, forcing Freddie to climb after it.

Because he didn't have to bend so low, Freddie found that it was easier for him to maneuver over the boulders than it was for the creature. Soon the gap between them began to narrow. But then the boulders gave way to a sheer wall of rock, making the progress of both of them far more difficult. Still seeming afraid, the creature struggled on.

By now Freddie was cloaked in sweat, filthy and exhausted. His chest was tight and his legs felt like they would refuse to move at any moment. He leaned against the wall to catch his breath. "Please," he gasped. "Why are you so afraid of me?" Receiving no answer, he pressed on.

The creature disappeared around a bend in the wall, where it gave a loud and anguished moan. Running forward, Freddie discovered why. It had come to a dead end. In front and to each side of it, the rock face rose too high for it to scale. The only direction was back towards Freddie. Like an animal trapped in a cage, the creature leapt frantically from wall to wall, trying to gain purchase. But it was no use. Try as it might, it couldn't manage to secure a grip, and kept slipping back to the ground.

Freddie remained where he was, saddened by the creature's attempts to escape. He couldn't understand how something so large and powerful could be so frightened of him. He wished that he could calm it, but had no idea how to try. He could only stand and watch as the creature kept leaping futilely from one wall to another.

Finally it gave up, slumping to the ground to crouch away from Freddie. Pathetically, it laid its arms across its head, as if to ward off a blow.

"It's all right," Freddie soothed. "I won't hurt you." He stepped forward.

The creature shrieked, then Freddie was shocked to hear it say, "Stay back! Please, leave me alone!"

"You can talk!" Freddie exclaimed, coming even closer.

The creature was shaking, as if it . . . No, Freddie realized, it couldn't be an *It!* . . . as if he was sobbing.

"I said I wouldn't hurt you," said Freddie, moved by the creature's pain.

His face still hidden, the creature pounded the ground. "It doesn't matter what you say!" he wailed. "You don't know!"

Freddie was more puzzled than ever. "Know? What is there to know?" He was now only three feet away from him.

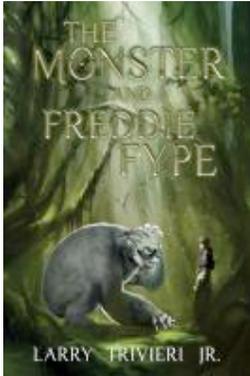
"Never mind!" The creature squeezed himself against the rock. "Please," he begged. "Please, just leave me alone."

"But . . ." Freddie reached out to touch the creature's shoulder. The creature cried out and cringed, but let the hand rest where it was. "But why?"

For a moment, the creature couldn't speak. A terrible groan broke out from him, and then he truly was weeping. His huge, muscled body trembled with his sobs. "Because . . ." he began, his deep voice cracking. And then he shouted out the answer in a wail of agony.

"BECAUSE I'M A MONSTER!"

Then he crouched lower still and his body actually seemed to shrink as his sobs grew even louder.



Peace had long reigned in Glencastyr thanks to Northrop, its beloved king. Then Count Vileshoe and his men seize and imprison the king and his retainers, and banish Northrop's adopted heir Freddie Fype deep into the ominous Wyrddling Forest. But then, Freddie meets a monster... The Monster and Freddie Fype is an enchanting tale of courage, wonder, and the most unlikely of heroes. It is sure to capture the imagination of children of all ages.

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