

ONE
(Only name the quest)

“Run! ... Run, you *scaredy cat!* The king will always beat you, Zoltan! And all your dumb ugly creatures too! *Ha!* Just *one* of Arthur’s knights is better than your *whole stupid army!* *Ha, ha ha haaaa!*” Joby laughed in unrestrained exultation, brandishing his wooden sword from the castle walls as the humiliated enemy fled yet another great battle in disarray.

“*Joooooby! ... Joby?*”

Joby’s shoulders slumped, but he ignored his mother’s voice and waved his sword once more at the fleeing horde. “I’ve got better monsters than *you* out of my *cereal!*” he hollered in contempt.

“*Joby. I know you can hear me,*” his mother called, from the side yard this time. “*Did you leave all this stuff on the driveway again?*”

It was the kind of question Joby had never figured out how, or why, he was supposed to answer.

“I don’t *think* so,” he called back lamely, turning reluctantly from the battlefield beyond their backyard fence.

His mother came around the corner of the house carrying a large disk of cardboard in one hand, painted yellow, a red dragon scrawled uncertainly at its center, a banged up book in the other hand, and a tattered red bedspread draped over her arm.

“It must have been some other knight then,” she said with the grim half-smile that meant she was annoyed, but not enough to cause him any real trouble.

Joby remembered having left these encumberments behind in the heat of battle, but, like any knight worth his salt, he knew when to keep his own counsel. Did she really think warriors could run around *cleaning up* in the middle of a *battle*? Girls could be so pathetic!

His mother set his book, cape and shield on the lawn in front of him and said, “If you do find the knight who left these there, please point out that your father could have driven right over them when he comes home. Unless that *other* knight wants tire tracks added to his family crest, he should find someplace better to leave his things.” Her grin

widened. She seemed very pleased with herself for no reason Joby could see, but since this meant he was in even less trouble than he'd thought, he obliged her by grinning back. "You might also tell him," his mother added, "how tired I get of reminding Arthur's knights not to leave their things where someone will break a leg on them."

Her grin faded as she reached up to tuck a stray lock of mahogany hair behind her ear, and went back to whatever she'd been doing.

"*Break a leg on them,*" Joby scoffed quietly, stooping to pick up his things. She *always* said that, as if people were out there snapping limbs off on every little thing they passed. His toys, his books, his trading cards, even his *underwear*? Heaving a long-suffering sigh, he went back to the fence, dragging his cape behind him. God help his mother if she ever got into a *real* battle. She'd find out in a hurry how much more damage a mace could do than any pair of underpants she'd ever seen.

After looking hopefully out over the battlements again, Joby sadly decided that the enemy had truly given up and gone away. He slumped down against the fence, and wondered what to do, almost glad school was starting again soon. He'd heard terrifying stories about what fifth and sixth graders did to fourth graders at recess - especially during the first few weeks; but he was practically dying to be an 'upperclassman' at last. For one thing, he'd finally be allowed to play dodge ball! Sadly, all that was two weeks off yet. Practically forever. At the moment, it seemed practically forever just until lunch.

Almost unconsciously, he opened the book - his most sacred possession; the dog eared, grime smeared, finger smudged, broken-spined, long since loose-leafed tome around which his entire cosmology revolved: "A Child's Treasury of Arthurian Tales." It had been a gift from his Grampa, entrusted to his parents on the day he was born; and the very map and outline of his boyish soul had formed slowly around its contents. Even after nine years of punishing use, a marvelous smell still wafted from its pages whenever it was opened, like some pungent musty incense rising from within the cathedral of his most secret, joyful dreams.

It had long since ceased to matter what page he opened to. Just lifting the treasury's battered cover transported Joby instantly to Arthur's vast shadowed throne room, dappled in misty rays of jeweled illumination streaming from stained glass windows high above his head. He waited, as always, on one knee before the High King's

dais, his eyes cast respectfully toward the black and white marble floor tiles at his feet, his heart filled with the kind of urgent devotion that perhaps only a child can countenance - though here he was no child. Sir Joby was a knight; handsome, brave, and loyal, awaiting, as always, some new adventure in service of the glorious Roundtable and its beloved lord.

At Arthur's command Sir Joby had battled countless tyrants and terrible beasts, withstood searing temptations, and defeated devious wizards, armed with nothing but unyielding faith and courage. In victory, Sir Joby felt his liege lord's approval like a shimmering song through his entire being. And on those rare occasions when the beasts proved too fierce, the wizards too crafty, or the temptations too great, Joby had only to call out for rescue, knowing that Arthur would instantly appear with whatever feats of skill or miraculous power were required to save the day. Joby's heroic liege lord, his finest friend, had never failed him, nor ever would.

"My king," Joby whispered, eyes closed in delicious expectation over the open book, quoting lines he'd long since memorized, "I would serve you with my life. Only name the quest."

* * *

Michael sat alone on the bright summer headlands, gazing out to sea, as still and silent as another pale outcrop of weathered coastal stone. Out wandering the dun-colored cliffs two days before, he had suddenly been taken by the sparkle of afternoon sunlight on the restless Pacific surge beneath him, and sat down to watch awhile. He had neither slept, nor moved, nor blinked since that moment, but given his entire attention to the theater of water, sky and stone constantly transformed before him by sunlight, moonlight, and starlight in the dark breathless hours before dawn ... and day, and dusk and night and dawn again.

He had served his Master here for nearly two hundred years, and still the novelty of so much beauty so completely unmarred by the Dark One's touch had yet to wear thin for him - which is not to say that angels are easily entertained; only that they find more

meaning in the least fragment of shell or surf-polished glass than the most appreciative mortal mind might draw from a Russian novel or a week at the Grand Canyon.

His eyes and the summer sea passed a single shade of blue between them, back and forth, back and forth; a private and familiar rhyme shared by friends too long and well acquainted to have need of words. Back and forth, back and forth: his long ruddy-golden hair matched the tall dry grass around him, step for gentle step, in a long soft dance called by the warm wind sighing past them headed north. He eavesdropped as the ocean whispered sweet cool nothings to distract the land while slyly dragging smooth round stones, one upon another, off the beach into its deep and secret pockets. Back and forth, back and forth; the world around him swayed to rhythms with which he seemed to sway as well, despite his utter stillness.

This reverie was finally broken by a thin column of pale smoke rising from a distant beach hidden behind the cliffs. It was Michael's charge to know what passed in this favored place, down to the silent flutter of moth wings at any evening porch light in the village. But when he cast his quizzical awareness toward the beach, he sensed no one where logic told him someone ought to be. A moment later, above the spot where he'd been sitting, a white gull wheeled on updrafts and turned to glide swiftly toward the mystery.

Arriving there, Michael spread his wings and landed gracefully well down the strand from a grizzled old fisherman in heavy, salt stained waders, standing at the ocean's edge, patiently watching the tip of his long pole. Higher up the beach, a small driftwood fire blazed cheerfully in its ring of smooth gray stones.

Maintaining his disguise, Michael aimed another mental probe. This time the man registered perfectly, his long life wound and stretched within him. A child's simple pleasures; laughing adolescent mischief; early loves; earnest youthful dreams and ambitions; a radiant woman's beaming face; a child held; flashes of joy, gratitude and pride; moments of affection, fear and wonder; griefs endured; losses survived; arrangements made; acceptance; in time contentment; and finally ... the deep and lasting peace that comes to some fortunate few with age. A remarkably lovely life, but nothing unexpected within a very fortunate old man's memory. Yet Michael's concern remained.

The old man's presence should have been as easily detected before. There was nowhere he could have gone to or come from in the few moments it had taken Michael to fly from where he'd first seen smoke. He probed the old man's mind again. Such broad passion and earthy understanding gradually unfolded amidst the small triumphs and crises of a modest life well and wisely lived. It all seemed too perfectly complete. *Too* beautifully drawn. Whatever the old man was, Michael felt certain he was *not* what he seemed; and the presence in this protected refuge of anyone pretending so well to be what he was not could only spell very serious trouble.

The old man reeled in his heavily weighted line, then cast it out again, seeming to relish the labor. An angel's eyes are quick and keen, and Michael's concern suddenly dissolved. He laughed a gull's shrill staccato laugh, spread his wings, and flew to the fisherman's side, where he resumed his human form.

Seeming un-startled by the bird's sudden transformation, the old man merely grimaced in good-natured chagrin.

"Welcome, My Lord," Michael smiled. "I confess, you took me by surprise."

This seemed to please the ancient angler, deepening the leathery filigree of wrinkles around his wide gray eyes into a crinkled smile that barely brushed his lips.

"How'd you guess?" he grumbled.

"Your illusion was too perfect," Michael replied, "though perhaps a moment late in coming. Then you reeled your line in, and I saw you had ...," he smiled, "no bait."

The old man shrugged. "So? Sneaky buggers tease the bait off all the time."

"Nor even any hook, My Lord," Michael chided. "I know few others so in love with fishing for its own sake that even the hook is dispensable."

"Wanna know the secret of long life?" the grizzled old man asked gruffly.

"Assuredly, Lord," Michael replied with as straight a face as he could manage.

"Don't sweat the small stuff." The Creator eyed Michael sagely for a moment, then barked an old man's raspy laugh. "Saw that on a bumper sticker comin' over here. Ain't that a good one? *Don't sweat the small stuff.*" He shook his scruffy head in bemusement. "Too bad the stress-case drivin' that car doesn't read his own liter'ature." He looked joyfully at Michael then. "My friend," he said with soft but fierce affection. "It's

so *good* to see you after so much time.” He reached up to grip Michael’s wide shoulders firmly in his weathered hands. “You look happy.”

“I am,” Michael replied, quietly. “Any sadness I feel is reserved for the world beyond this place. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure, Lord?”

“Let’s talk over breakfast,” the Creator said, nodding toward his little fire. “Had some coffee with Gabe a while ago, but I didn’t get a lot to eat.”

“With pleasure,” Michael replied following him toward the fire ring. “But ... what shall we breakfast *on*?”

“*Fish*, of course,” the old man replied as if Michael hadn’t the sense God gave him. “Fried up fresh with garlic salt and lemon!” He produced a large unblemished lemon and a pale blue saltshaker from one of his small pockets.

“But I see no fish, Lord?” Michael teased. “Did the ‘sneaky buggers’ refuse to hold your empty line bravely in their teeth while you reeled it in?”

The old man’s answer came suddenly, from the air, as a line of pelicans swept in above the beach, each dropping a fish at their feet as it passed. The fourth and last of these offerings, not a small fish, hit Michael squarely on the head before bouncing limply to the sand beside him.

“That,” the old man said with ill-concealed mirth, “is for doubtin’ my skill as a fisherman.” He took a large frying pan from the same small pocket, and placed it on the fire.

“I’m sure I never doubted any such thing!” Michael laughed, raking silver scales from his hair, and handing the somehow already gutted and cleaned fish to God.

“You doubtin’ my word again?” the Creator retorted, laying them in the somehow already greased pan, and seasoning them.

“I doubt you not at all,” Michael smiled back, warming to the game.

“I know,” the old man said, his manner suddenly devoid of play, though no less affectionate. “I trust you too, Michael. I’m countin’ on that trust just now.”

“How could I behold all this,” Michael insisted, arms spread wide at the scene around him, “and not trust the One who made it?”

“You’ve got it pretty bad for this place, haven’t you, Michael.”

“It’s surely the fairest place left on *this* continent,” the angel answered. “I’ve come to love the villagers; especially the children. ... What’s wrong, My Lord? Do you need me elsewhere? I confess, I’ll miss them terribly; but if you ask it, I will gladly -”

“No,” The Creator assured him softly. “You’ll be needed here worse than ever now.” He turned a troubled countenance toward the horizon. “Michael, ... I mean to let our old enemy - yours and mine - in on the secret of this place, and ... well, more or less let him do what he likes about it.”

There was a moment of stunned silence. Even angels can be surprised.

“This?” Michael whispered at last in something close to disbelief. “You’re giving it to *him*?” He searched the timeworn face his master wore for answers, able, barely, to accept, but not to understand. “Have we done something to displease you, Lord?”

“Heavens no!” the old man rasped.

“Then *why*?” Michael pled.

“This morning, I agreed to join that old lamprey in a certain wager. You’ll know the one, I expect.”

“And this place was forfeit? This morning ... and he’s already won? How -”

“Course not,” God growled, patiently. “I haven’t even named my candidate yet. This place is as unknown to him as it ever was. But that’ll have to change before much longer.” The old man’s fog colored eyes fell full on Michael. “Still trust me, friend?”

Michael’s consternation dissolved into contrition. “Of course, My Lord. As much as ever. It’s just that ...” He bowed his head, gazing first at the sand between his feet, then at the fire where their fish were burning. “You *have* taken me *badly* by surprise.”

“I’m sorry, Michael ... deeply sorry. There *are* reasons. You know me at least that well. ... You also know how damned little I can say about it. That slippery eel claims I’ve compromised the wager, I’ll have to forfeit. None of us wants that - ‘specially this time. I only came to warn you, and make sure that when the storm blows in you make no move to stop it, even though the poor lad’s wake’ll surely be full of sharks and worse. You’ve guarded this place well, my friend. You have my heartfelt thanks. But when he comes, you’ll have to let the whole filthy cargo come ashore with him. That’s about all I can say. You, better than most, know the usual rules of this engagement.”

“Then ... I may do nothing,” the angel pled, “but stand and watch all we love here trampled by that pestilent boar?”

“There’s times it doesn’t serve our friends to fight their battles for’em, Michael.”

“But, who *here* knows the first thing about fighting?” Michael pressed in frustration. “Half of them are utter innocents! The rest are refugees! They’ll be helpless as feathers in a gale! If I’m forbidden to interfere -”

“With the *candidate*, Michael. Don’t go belly up on me now. The folks here are still under your care. The wager don’t change that. You’ve many years by *their* reckoning. Mustn’t tell them of the wager itself, of course. That would be blatant grounds for defaulting to old sulfur stacks. But there’s no law sayin’ you can’t teach your little flock to read the weather, and rig a tarp or two against the smell of rain.”

Michael’s troubled heart grew calmer as understanding dawned. “That much I will surely do,” he answered grimly.

“Good. ... I don’t mean to sound insensitive, Michael, but I haven’t seen your wits this addled since that old blowfish made war on heaven.”

Then something else occurred to Michael. “Are they to lose the Cup then?”

“No,” The Creator said. “It stays, if they can keep it.” He sighed heavily, and looked up at the sky in consternation, or a damn good impression of it. “I’ve got pretty deep faith in the boats I build,” he said. Then, more quietly, “May *they* have faith in *me*.”

“How am I to know when it is time to step aside?” Michael asked.

“You’ll know him when the time comes,” The Creator said sadly. “He’ll be pretty banged up and full of leaks by then, I imagine. But you’ll know him. ‘Til then, keep guarding the borders, and teach the villagers ... something of caution. Once it starts, everyone’s on their own.”

There was a long silence on the beach then. Even the surf seemed pensive.

“... He’ll need a friend, Michael. Awful bad, I expect. A whole fleet of friends, if he can find ’em. That’ll likely be harder than it sounds, by then.” The Creator looked out to sea, and Michael wondered if it were tears he saw in the fisherman’s rough gray eyes, or just the watery seep of old age. “You should see him *now*,” the old man sighed. “You’d love him, Michael. You’d love him *fiercely*.”

They were tears all right. And Michael understood them all too well.

* * *

Miriam turned to gaze back through Joby's bedroom doorway at her son's shadow-softened face. Locks of shiny raven hair covered one closed eye. His breath had already fallen into the soft, slow rhythms of sleep, and, under the worn red bedspread which served as Joby's cape by day, he still clutched his precious storybook. She smiled, wishing her father could see how much Joby had come to treasure the simple gift. Her father had always seemed to know precisely what was wanted, quietly providing no more, no less.

As joyful as her own childhood had been, Miriam was certain she'd never shone half so brightly as Joby did. Like a cascade of pennies, images flashed through her mind: Joby standing utterly still to watch a spider spin its iridescent orb, or charging shirtless through the house in summer with all the frightening combustibility little boys so wantonly squander, Joby lost in his storybook, wide blue eyes like whirlpools sweeping streams of dream and glory into the insatiable sea of his imagination. He was an intelligent and thoughtful boy, the sort who might have been cruelly treated by other children, she thought, had he not been such a charismatic little athlete, gleefully pulling a train of other boys behind him half the time, all parroting the things he said and did, for good or ill. Her smile widened. This marvelous, incandescent little boy was all her joy ... he and Frank.

Though Frank sometimes laughed at her 'silly superstitions', Miriam had sensed a kind of ambient brightness around their son from the very day of his birth. Times had been far harder then. Frank's mother had been killed by a drunk driver two months after Miriam and Frank were married, and his father had died eight months later of 'severe angina' - the medical name for a broken heart, Frank had insisted. Frank had been unable to find work both equal to his talent and sufficient to support a family, and as Miriam had grown larger with Joby, he had begun to grow more distant.

Then Joby had been born.

She could still see Frank's radiant expression as he'd held their son at her hospital bedside, a renewed confidence in his voice and gestures, and an affectionate delight in

her that she had feared gone forever. He'd gone home that evening to find a message on the answering machine from an architectural firm he'd applied to three months earlier, offering him a good job more than lucrative enough to meet their needs. Ever since, life had been almost alarmingly kind to them.

Now Frank was a partner in the firm. Surrounded by wonderful friends, they had a lovely home in a pleasant California suburb, completely paid for thanks to the surprising sum left them when Miriam's father had died. With the exception of her father's sudden but peaceful death five years before, they had encountered not a single crisis or hardship since Joby's arrival.

While Frank seemed to take all their remarkable fortune appreciatively in stride, Miriam occasionally found herself wondering what price might be demanded of them later. Now, watching Joby sleep, she found herself chasing that ridiculous thought away again. *Sorry*, she apologized silently to the empty air. *I can't seem to help my silly superstitions. No one's perfect, I suppose.*

Frank topped the stairs just then, coming quietly up behind her to wrap his arms around her waist and kiss the back of her neck before looking in at their sleeping son.

"Dropped off pretty quick, huh?" he whispered.

"It's tiring work," she smiled, "saving the world again every day."

Over dinner, Joby had told them all about routing Zoltan and his horde of evil monsters before lunch, then of being sent by King Arthur to slay two bloodthirsty ogres under the backyard deck before coming in to wash up for dinner. It had been a pretty big day, even for a great knight like their son.

"Did you read to him?" Frank asked.

She nodded. "The last one again. He keeps wanting that one lately. I really don't know why. It's so depressing."

"Arthur's death?" Frank asked.

She nodded again. "I asked him what he liked about it, and he said it was the part about Arthur coming back when the world's in trouble again."

Frank chuckled under his breath. "That boy wants to be a knight so bad. ... I think he'll take the news about Santa okay; but I dread the day we have to tell him Arthur's just a fairy tale too."

She turned and kissed him sweetly on the lips. “That would be a *father’s* job.”

“I would never presume to diminish a woman’s potential like that,” Frank murmured. “Besides, *I’m* the one who’ll have to tell him about sex. What happened to fair distribution of labor?”

Her smile widened, and she put her arms around his neck. “The way things work these days, he’ll be telling *you* about sex.”

“Then we’d better make sure I’m savvy enough not to embarrass us, hadn’t we?” He took her hand and led her smiling toward their own room at the end of the hall.

* * *

“Can’t help her silly superstitions,” Lucifer drawled, watching them tease each other down the hall into their bedroom. “Did you hear that? Oh, the irony!”

Neither the Creator nor Gabriel replied.

“So this is your candidate,” Lucifer mused, gazing down at Joby as the three of them settled invisibly around his bed. “It’s hardly surprising he’s so well behaved. Look at the life you’ve given him! One long, golden stream of blessings! We’ll see how long that cheery disposition lasts when his picnic gets rained on, won’t we.” He looked up at God expectantly. Still no response. “Dying to be a knight, is he? And you’ve decided to grant his wish. I never cease to be astonished at your capacity for *kindness*, Sir. Your proclivity for subjecting innocent children to these rather gruesome trials is rather intriguing. Perhaps I’ve failed to appreciate the *complexity* of your character.”

The Creator only waited patiently without reply. That, Lucifer realized, was what irked him most about God: his smugly passive-aggressive tendencies. The Creator never allowed the anger he must surely be feeling to slip out where anyone might see it. Lucifer found such saccharine duplicity disgusting.

“Who proposes this wager?” Gabriel asked, launching the time worn ritual without preamble.

“I, Lucifer, Angel of Light, Mirror of Dawn, propose this wager.”

“Who joins in this wager?” Gabriel intoned again.

“I do.” the Creator answered.

Between them, Joby sighed in his sleep, and turned to rest facing God.

“Who will witness our agreement,” Lucifer asked in accordance with the ancient rite, “and truthfully attest to its conditions and outcome if so required?”

“I will,” Gabriel answered. “Is this acceptable?”

“It is,” answered the Creator and Lucifer in unison. And it was. Lucifer might despise his younger brother, but the dusky little do-gooder had never demonstrated the wit to lie, and Lucifer doubted him capable of it, even if he wanted to.

“Then speak your terms with care,” Gabriel said, “for each word spoken here will henceforth be binding and immutable. What do you wager, Lucifer?”

“I wager,” Lucifer smiled, “that this candidate, deemed faithful and steadfast to our Lord, will, when put to the test and left to choose of his own free will, unequivocally renounce the Creator, brazenly defy his will, and commit great wickedness instead.”

Joby’s hand moved toward his mouth, as if he might suck his thumb. But the habit had fallen beneath his dignity even in sleep many years before, and the gesture was arrested as suddenly as it had begun.

“What would you claim if this were proven?” Gabriel asked.

“That this creation be immediately and completely expunged from space and time,” Lucifer breathed, overwhelmed by an almost erotic longing, “and another commenced by the Creator in its place, subject to whatever specifications *I* shall advise.”

“Your terms?” Gabriel asked Lucifer.

“First, that the Creator forbid all immortal beings in his service from intervening unless directly asked to do so by the candidate, lest his fate be decided for him by others. Second, given the Creator’s advantage as First Cause, and his supremacy over even me, I propose that he promise not to intervene directly, or by command, or by any word or act which may be construed as expression of his will in this matter for the trial’s duration.”

Gabriel turned to the Creator, forbidden to call him God or Lord within the ritual, and asked, “Are you, content with these terms?”

“I Am.”

There was a moment of astonished silence, during which Lucifer hoped his own surprise wasn’t as transparent as Gabriel’s. He had never expected such conditions to go unchallenged, and wondered uncomfortably what the Creator’s complacency could mean.

“Have you terms to add?” Gabriel asked the Creator uncertainly.

“Only that Lucifer not deprive the candidate of life itself or the power to choose unless and until the boy’s unequivocal failure has been confirmed before valid witness, and that Lucifer’s victory, if any, be achieved before the candidate’s 40th year of life, lest even in triumph the child be deprived of any peace.”

“Are you, Lucifer, content with these conditions?” Gabriel asked.

“Yes,” he replied. The Creator’s terms were frightfully routine. It was sometimes tempting to wonder if his Master had any imagination at all.

“What would you claim if victorious?” Gabriel asked the Creator.

“Restitution to the candidate according to my terms; that the candidate remain completely unmolested by Lucifer or any that serve him for the remainder of his natural life; and that any benefit coming to the candidate or the world at large from this contest remain unchallenged by Lucifer or his servants, so long as the candidate lives.”

“Will you, Lucifer, concede to these conditions if proven wrong?” Gabriel asked.

“I will.”

“One thing remains to seal the wager;” Gabriel proclaimed, “that you make, each, your case to the candidate, himself. For from the first day it has been ordained that mortal men and women shall be free to choose.”

“By right and tradition, the Creator is first,” Lucifer replied, constrained by form to say so, though he preferred this anyway, since it gave him power of rebuttal.

Between them, Joby’s eyes moved rapidly behind their soft, smooth lids, already deep in dream; for it was not to the conscious child that the Creator and his adversary would appeal, but to the deeper self that moved relentlessly like magma beneath the cool, slow crust of Joby’s waking life.

* * *

“My king, I would serve you with my life. Only name the quest.”

Sir Joby knelt again before Arthur’s dais, eyes cast reverently toward the floor, eagerly awaiting his lord’s will.

“Should friendship be hobbled by such formality, Sir Joby? Rise, and add the pleasure of your countenance to that of your courtesy.”

“As Your Majesty wills,” Sir Joby replied, unable to suppress the smile that fountained from deep within him as he rose and looked into the laughing gray eyes of his beloved lord, Arthur, King of Briton, and Master of the Round Table.

“We have much to discuss, Sir Joby, but I would be out in the light and air on such a splendid morning. Will you consent to ride with me a while?”

“I am yours to bid, Sire,” Joby beamed, “but I would be well pleased with such a privilege.”

“Then I extend it on one condition,” Arthur said, “that we put aside the manners of majesty for now, and speak instead as friends. A king may command what he likes, I am told, but I often wonder of late if I am yet allowed friends, or only subjects now.”

“Does the king truly doubt my friendship?” Joby smiled.

“Nay, *the king* does not,” Arthur answered dryly. “Nor do *I*. So pray, for this short while, let us have none of *the king* between us. I will call you Joby, and you shall call me Arthur.”

“As you wish, my - Arthur. I am deeply honored.”

“As am I,” Arthur replied, descending to clasp Joby’s hand.

A moment later, they were riding at a joyful speed through one of Camelot’s lesser gates. Joby dimly remembered the royal stables, the grooming and mounting of horses; but the day was so bright and fair that all else was quickly forgotten. The companionship of his king, and the swiftness and vitality of their horses left Joby giddy with the love of life as glossy ravens scattered before them, cawing complaints as they sought refuge among heavily laden apple trees nearby. It was all so perfect.

After a long and boisterous ride, they stopped to rest their horses within a lofty wood. Joby felt the glade’s deep, cool silence like a large, soft hand upon his shoulder as he dismounted. Rough, ruddy trunks of immense girth soared from burlled bowls half as wide as houses into a dense canopy that cast its own twilight pierced only by occasional shafts of green and silver sunlight. Swept by breezes that did not reach the forest floor, the immense trees swayed together in a ceaseless, solemn dance which seemed to engender the stillness beneath their branches. A liquid trill of bird song from somewhere

deeper in the wood spiraled upward into silence. A tree frog chanted quietly nearby. A squirrel rustled in the branches high above them. These and the wind's voice were the only sounds.

Arthur found a seat on one of the great, mossy tree bowls, and beckoned Joby to come sit beside him. "Joby," he said gravely, "you have served me faithfully on too many occasions to count, and the love you bear me brings me deep joy and gratitude."

"I have no greater satisfaction than knowing we are pleased with one another," Joby replied.

"Nor do I." Arthur said. "I have need of a champion, my friend."

"I would serve you with my life, Sire. Only name the -"

"Yes, yes, I know," Arthur said, waving him to silence with a sad smile. "But I would not have an answer before you've heard me out. This is not *remotely* like before."

"I beg pardon, My Lord. I did not mean to interrupt -"

"None of that, Joby. You promised." The king sighed, then smiled. "I am entangled in a contest, Joby, with my oldest and most formidable enemy. It is a desperate and deadly affair with more than mortal parameters."

"Magic?" Joby asked.

Arthur nodded grimly. "Of the darkest kind. And, as you know, where magic is involved there are strange and immutable conditions laid on all concerned, even kings."

Joby nodded.

"That is why," the king continued, "I can tell you so little; only that the fate of all Camelot is at stake; the enemy is vastly more subtle, powerful, and vicious than any I have ever sent you against; the quest will be long and terrible beyond your imagining; and - mark this well, Joby - I will be utterly unable to aid you in any way whatsoever while it lasts, which may well be half your lifetime. Your entire youth, my friend. Consider it well. Should you fail, we all fail. There will be no rescue this time, no second chances, no further hope at all. Do you understand me?"

After a moment, Joby nodded, daunted despite himself. ... Half a lifetime ... without Arthur's help. "My Lord," Joby began from force of habit. Arthur frowned. "I mean, Arthur ... I am willing to try, but ... how can I hope to win such a contest without your aid? What am I that the fate of all should rest with me alone?"

“You are the friend I trust,” Arthur said, “the champion I choose.” He paused to consider Joby thoughtfully, then said, “Make no mistake, my friend. You owe me *not* this undertaking! I will take no less joy in you should you refuse. It were far better to do so now, than to agree in vain bravado. But, should you agree, know that, though I, myself, can help you not at all, everything else of mine in Camelot, every loyal subject, every inch of my realm, will be at your disposal if you but *ask*.”

“Most of all, hear this, Joby. I know beyond question that you will give everything to this pursuit, but should you fail despite that, the fault will be my own, not yours.”

“This is meant for comfort?” Joby asked, smiling wanly. “That my shame would fall on *you*? Pray, encourage me some more, Arthur. Tell me I am to ride to battle on a giant snail, or minus an arm.”

“It is good to hear you jest,” Arthur grinned, “but nay, Joby; I think I have encouraged you enough. Think on what I’ve said, and answer in your own good time.”

Joby felt no need to think. “I will do this thing for you, Arthur, whatever it is, or die trying.”

“Do not be hasty, Joby. There is time to let it turn.”

“That is my answer, Arthur,” Joby insisted. “That will be my answer tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow after that, until this trial has passed us by if need be.”

For a moment both men were silent, gazes locked. Then Joby recognized the tears in Arthur’s eyes, and looked away lest they be answered in his own.

“There is no other man in Camelot, I think,” Arthur said quietly, “who would have answered so without at least inquiring first after his reward.”

Joby snorted, still not trusting himself to face his king. “Arthur, what reward have you to tempt me with that approaches the honor of ... of your faith in me?”

“Behold my choice,” Arthur whispered to the empty air around them, “and tremble.”

Joby looked up to see who Arthur spoke to, but saw no one else. A shiver ran down his spine, and he was about to ask if they were alone when Arthur said more loudly, “Come Joby, we must return to Camelot before sunset. The trial is upon us soon enough.”

With one last glance around the clearing, Joby followed Arthur to their horses, fierce pride, swelling affection, and twining dread at war within his breast. He still did not know what task he had agreed to. Longer and more terrible than he could imagine, Arthur had warned. Well, he had no small imagination.

The ride home passed in thoughtful silence. Not until they were just miles from Camelot, trotting through an open riverside stand of alder trees, did Joby speak again.

“How am I to know it, Arthur?”

The king looked at him blankly.

“The test,” Joby said. “What is it? When does it begin? Surely I must know *something* of it beforehand, mustn’t I?”

“I have told you all I may, Joby, lest I violate the trial’s conditions and forfeit all to my opponent at the start.”

“But ... how shall I prepare then? How am I even to recognize the enemy?”

Arthur shrugged. “How is evil ever recognized, Joby? What does it look like? How does one oppose it?”

Joby reined his horse to a halt and stared, beginning to comprehend the true difficulty of his position.

“I told you the trial was long,” Arthur said, and wheeled his horse around to go on. “Come, Joby. The sun slows not at all in deference to our troubles.”

Shaking himself from disbelief, Joby spurred his horse and followed.

Neither of them spoke again until they had stopped on the brow of one last hill overlooking the coastal headlands of Camelot. They had beaten sunset by half an hour, and the scene before them was so beautiful that even Joby’s solidifying distress could not prevent him from being moved.

Graceful stands of pine and cypress, weathered and sculpted by salt and storm, stood nearly black against the green-gold fields and the glittering sea beyond. Out past the cliff tops mammoth stacks of rock thrust up out of the water, their heads bent back above the mist, as if gazing at the sky in prayer. The distant boom and sigh of surf was mixed with the musical bark of seals, the strident cry of seabirds, and, from somewhere, the measured tolling of a bell. Out over the water, long lines of pelicans skimmed the troughs between huge swells moving ponderously toward shore. A high whistling cry

drew Joby's gaze up to find hunting Osprey hanging nearly motionless above the river mouth, waiting for their dinner to swim past below. The air carried scents of iodine, and sea salt, wood smoke and dry wayside herbs, cedar bark, and weathered stone. And rising at the center of it all, the walls and roofs and spires of Camelot.

"Look at it Joby!" Arthur exclaimed. "Is it not lovely?"

"In truth, it is worth ... anything to defend, my Lord," Joby sighed mournfully.

Arthur frowned and turned to look at Joby. "It is always ill advised to fill a bright moment with some future darkness, friend. Your trials, whatever they may be, have not yet begun. Can you not be here now, with me?"

Joby took a deep breath, nodded, then surprised himself by laughing aloud. Arthur was right. Who knew how many more such moments he would be afforded?

"Care to place a wager, my Lord?"

Arthur looked startled.

"I will beat you to that lookout on the river's mouth by three lengths!" Joby shouted, spurring his horse so that he was well away before half the words were spoken.

"You cheat!" Arthur shouted, prodding his mount after Joby's. "That bodes well!"

Joby did beat him, and when the two men had finished laughing and impugning one another's character, they sat their horses quietly in the spreading shadow of a giant old cypress, gazing at the beach below. Well-formed waves stood up and filled with light, like walls of brilliant jade, then tumbled down in creamy gouts of pure white foam, rolling in to spread across the sand before hissing back into the bay.

"You neglected to say what was forfeit if I lost that race," Arthur observed.

"I neglected to think of anything," Joby replied.

"You are truly not much suited to the business of reward, my friend. It is wise to look after one's own interests, I think - at least a little. No one else is likely to."

"This is all I want. ... All I'll ever want," Joby murmured at last, still gazing at the sun-blazed bay and the dark-cliffed, wood-crowned headlands beyond. "To breathe this air, and gaze at all that lies about us here. There is no fairer prize."

"Lovely, yes," Arthur replied. "But is it good?"

"Of course, my Lord," Joby said, wondering if the question were some trick.

"How could this be anything but good?"

Just then, an osprey plunged like thunder into the river mouth, and rose again to flap heavily inland toward its nest, a silver fish hanging in its talons.

“Death just came to some hapless creature there,” Arthur replied. “Life *and* death go on all around us here. The fragrant wood smoke we smell bespeaks the end of some fair tree even as it warms some cheerful hearth. Are you certain all you see is good?”

“As I am certain of anything, my Lord.” Joby answered. Then understanding dawned. “And you think this evil that I am to confront will be as easily recognized?”

“Nay,” Arthur conceded, “though one may learn to know it as certainly, if not as easily. Still, perhaps it was unkind to conjure such dark clouds just when you had let them clear. See? The sun leans down at last to kiss the water. Let us ride out further, you and I, and watch their embrace.”

Moments later they stood together upon the western-most cliff tops, gazing out at one small band of fog poised above the furthest horizon. As the sun fell behind it, its edges burned like molten gold, and elusive rays of peach and salmon, powder blue and palest yellow stretched briefly up into the lavender sky.

As stars began to bloom above twilight’s fire red, green, and cobalt bands, Arthur broke their long silence. “At the worst of times, friend Joby, I look most keenly for whatever beauty may be near at hand, and drink as deeply as I can. I cannot recommend such drafts highly enough for those who would learn to recognize evil, and remain proof against it. Feed your heart, Joby. I trust *your heart* more than I trust the wisest head in Camelot. ... Now come. At the castle they will think us drowned or kidnapped by now. You will have a meal fit to your courage, and a night of peaceful sleep in our finest chambers.”

They had barely entered the castle when Arthur was scolded off to some too long neglected urgency by a flock of long-suffering advisors, leaving Joby to wander on his own until the service of dinner in Arthur’s hall.

* * *

“My congratulations, Sir, on such a *lovely* presentation,” Lucifer fawned as God looked up from Joby’s bed. “*Stunning* use of landscape! But, lovely as they are, spun

glass castles are so easily fractured. Just a little tap is all it takes at times. ... Goodness!” he enthused, glancing theatrically at the Donald Duck wall clock over Joby’s bed. “Is it my turn? So soon?”

Knowing the old stick would never stoop to take the bait, Lucifer plunged into Joby’s dream without waiting for the Creator to reply.

* * *

Joby found himself on a balcony overlooking a moonlit rose garden, distant merriment still audible within the palace behind him. The banquet had been grand ... he thought, ... well, rather vague actually, but definitely grand, ... he was fairly sure. A breath drawn in appreciation of fragrant yellow roses which climbed the trellis from below became yet another sigh. Each sigh had been longer than the last that night.

“That sounded rather laden with care,” offered a grave voice behind him.

Joby whirled to find a tall figure standing in shadow at the balcony’s far end.

“I ... I thought I was alone,” Joby stammered, disconcerted. Then, “I beg pardon. That is rude greeting, but I was -”

“Please!” insisted the other, stepping out into the moonlight. “It is *I* who must apologize, lurking in the shadows so. I was here when you came out, and did not know whether to disturb you or merely keep my peace until you’d gone. Stupid of me really.”

The stranger’s voluminous robes were rich with velvet and gems, his silver-templed mane swept back regally, his brows thick and wise above icy blue eyes so penetrating, even by moonlight, that the strong compulsion to stare into them was quickly at war with an equally uncomfortable urge to look swiftly away.

“I’m at a loss,” Joby said. “You seem familiar, but I cannot summon your name.”

“I am not easily summoned,” the other said, smiling at some private joke with a look so shrewd that Joby knew suddenly who he must be.

“Would you be the king’s adviser, Merlin?”

“Why ... yes! That’s exactly who I am,” the man said, seeming first surprised, then pleased. “How perceptive of you to guess. Most don’t, you know; by design actually. I am often more useful to the king *unrecognized*.” Merlin waved the matter

away with an ingratiating smile. "Be at ease, Sir Joby. I well understand how preoccupied you must be given the perilous quest you have undertaken. And I must say, I am well pleased with the king's excellent choice of champions. I have long been an admirer of yours, myself."

Joby's eyes widened. "You know of my quest?"

Merlin offered a self-deprecating smile. "Who *would* know, if not the king's *highest* advisor?"

"Well, yes. Of course," Joby blushed. "I... I am deeply flattered by your esteem, though I would take even greater comfort in knowing what, precisely, I am such an excellent choice *for*."

"Perhaps I can assist you then," Merlin replied.

"I would be deeply in your debt," Joby sighed. "But the king has made it plain that I may be told nothing of my ordeal beforehand."

"Not by himself," Merlin smiled. "That *is* one of the conditions laid upon him in this matter. But not all are subject to such restrictions. Myself for instance."

"*You* can tell me what this concerns?" Joby blurted. "It is allowed?"

"I can," Merlin smiled, "and it is. Ask what you will."

"Thank God we meet!" Joby crowed.

"Indeed," Merlin smiled.

"Well, to begin, with whom must I contend?"

Merlin's smile vanished. He seemed almost to shrink in upon himself. "You demand the cruelest answer first. Are you steeled to hear it, Sir Joby?"

Joby nodded, though Merlin's expression sent shivers down his spine.

"Evil itself, Sir Joby," Merlin whispered, as if afraid to speak the words aloud. "God's own enemy."

Joby felt his mouth fall slowly open. "Surely, ... you cannot mean -"

"The devil," Merlin said more resolutely. "You are sent on your king's behalf to oppose the devil himself. May God and all his angels go with you."

"How ... how can a mere man ... defeat the *devil*?" Joby murmured in dismay.

"I cannot say," Merlin sympathized. "But it must be possible, or Arthur would not have sent you, would he? He loves you deeply, ... does he not?"

No longer trusting his legs, Joby turned to lean against the balustrade. "If I fail ..." he said miserably, "all is lost. ... For Arthur. For Camelot. That is what he said. ... But how can I hope to succeed?"

"Now, now, Sir Joby!" Merlin protested. "Despair at the very beginning can lead to nothing good! You must not fail, and so you shant! Come, walk with me in the garden below, and I will arm you with what advice I may. What say you, *brave* Sir Joby? Will you not entertain some *little* portion of the hope both I and Arthur place in you?"

Abashed, Joby, gazed down at the flagstones. "You are right, Merlin. I .. I am deeply ashamed to have wilted so before the first faint breath of battle. I *will* succeed, for my lord, Arthur, and now, for you as well!"

"That's better!" Merlin laughed. "I should be honored to have any part in the outcome of your trial! Come! Let us away to the garden!"

Merlin took Joby's arm like an old uncle, already advising as they stepped into the torch-lit corridor.

"Vigilance must be your cornerstone, Sir Joby. The enemy you face will exploit every weakness you expose, leverage any smallest flaw, so you must steel yourself to offer him none! This may seem impossible at first; but those who claim perfection is unattainable are weak and lazy men who care only to justify their own poor quality. You *can* attain it, Sir Joby. But there must be *nothing* you are unprepared to sacrifice. Not even your own heart! *Especially* your own heart. God's own Son laid down his very life. You must be prepared to do no less."

Merlin turned to face Joby at the garden's entrance. "Sir Joby, believe me when I say that no one wants to see this fight won more earnestly than I do. Nor has anyone greater confidence in you than I have. In you I find nothing but hope for victory."

"I thank heaven for your candor," Joby replied. "The truths you speak are grim, but I would rather face any doom fully illuminated, than concealed in shadows. You have greatly steadied my resolve, Merlin. If it is the end of my life that I am pledged to, then for Arthur's sake, so be it."

Merlin nodded sagely. "If you are steadfast, you will not fail to realize my brightest hopes for you. I *feel* it, sir! I *feel* it! Come now," he smiled, turning toward the

garden door. “Let us put such sad concerns aside, and revel in the scent of roses while we may.”

* * *

“Of course, the trick is knowing precisely where that tap must be administered,” Lucifer chortled, looking up in turn from Joby’s bed.

“Shall we finish?” Gabriel asked flatly.

“Has no one here any sense of *humor*?” Lucifer protested sadly.

“If our solemn ritual seems a laughing matter to you,” Gabriel said, “it can yet be declared null and void.”

“Heaven forbid,” Lucifer drawled. “By all means, continue.”

“The candidate’s consent having been attained,” said Gabriel unhappily, “will you, Lucifer, submit to this wager and all its conditions as stated in my presence, bound by every word thereof, win or lose?”

“I will.”

“And will you,” Gabriel asked the Creator, “submit to this wager and all its conditions as stated in my presence, bound by every word thereof, win or lose?”

“I will.”

“The wager is sealed,” Gabriel said dolefully, “which none, even God Almighty may unsay. The contest begins. ... By right and custom, Lucifer is granted first blow.”

“Done that,” Lucifer sighed, examining his nails. “Why not leave our young hero to enjoy that peaceful night’s rest you promised, Lord? God knows, he’ll need it.”

But when Lucifer looked up, both the Creator and Gabriel were gone already, leaving him feeling snubbed and vindictive. Thinking to take it out on the Creator’s pathetic little champion, Lucifer attempted to rejoin his dream, only to find himself nursing a hellish headache after banging his being against the barriers the Creator had placed, as promised, to guard Joby’s sleep that night.

“Enjoy whatever pretty dream he’s left you child,” Lucifer sneered. “It’ll be his *last* favor for a *very long time!*”

Then Lucifer was gone as well, leaving only the slightest stink of brimstone to dissipate over Joby's peaceful, softly smiling form.

* * *

Sunlight was streaming through Joby's windows when he woke feeling deliciously rested and intensely excited. He'd really been there! He was sure of it! Everything had been so real! And the way he'd been able to talk! Just like someone from his book! Trying to remember how he'd done that, he found his memories of Camelot already vanishing in the sunlight.

Quick! Quick! Quick!, he thought, scrambling from his bed. *Write it down!*

Yanking open drawers, and scattering piles, Joby found a few crinkled sheets of wide ruled newsprint and the iridescent stub of a Disneyland pencil, then rushed to his desk. But the courtly words were already gone, and the very ideas were fading fast.

I woud rather fite my enemy in the lite then in the shadoes, Joby scrawled, recalling the scent of roses.

He waited, pencil poised, face scrunched in fierce concentration, then lunged to write again.

You must be brave and give up your hart.

...

You must be ... What?... vijilint. Yes, that was the word. What did it mean? *You must be perfect Sir Joby or the enemy will win!*

But these were all Merlin's words. What Joby wanted most to capture were Arthur's. *Think, think, think!* What had *Arthur* said?

...

What dose evil look like Sir Joby? ... Yes! How do you fite it? Yes! Yes! What else? Then he remembered, and his face went slack with worry.

I cannot help you anymore Sir Joby. If you fale we all do.

I have to fight the devil, Joby thought, all by myself. He stared at the sheet of paper before him. Was this all he had left? ... No. The words had fled. Perhaps he'd only imagined talking like that. But he still remembered riding with Arthur through the fields

and hills. He remembered the solemn grove, and the bird song spiraling up into echoes, the swaying trees, and the laughter and love in Arthur's eyes. He remembered Camelot on the sea, the seal song and the bird cries, the waves of burning jade, and the sunset - especially the sunset. Arthur had placed the fate of all this in Joby's hands. The words were gone, but Joby knew the core. The rest he would figure out somehow. Hadn't Arthur said there would be clues?

One last fragment came to mind then.

Drink alot of beutey Sir Joby. ... Feed your hart.

When nothing more came, Joby stood up with his little bit of writing and went to find his mother. Merlin had said he must be perfect. He figured he'd better start with this.

He found her in the kitchen making cinnamon rolls.

"Mom, will you check if I spelled these right?"

"Good morning, Joby! ... You sure slept late. Must have had good dreams, huh?"

Joby smiled. "It was the best dream ever! I went to Camelot. ... But I was forgetting everything, so I wrote it down. Can you check what I wrote, please?"

He handed the paper to his mother, who smiled and began to read. Joby watched her purse her lips, raise her brows, smile, then concentrate and frown again.

"What's this word?" she asked, holding the paper down so he could see it.

"Vijilint," Joby told her. "That's what Merlin said."

"Vigilant!" she exclaimed. "My goodness, Joby! Where did you hear that?"

"I told you; from Merlin. ... What does it mean?"

"Well, it means ... paying very close attention, I guess, or being very careful."

"That's what I thought," Joby said. "How do you spell it?"

"How 'bout I finish reading this first," his mother smiled.

As she reached the bottom of the page, Joby saw her eyes go moist and pink.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She looked up, seeming startled. "This is what you dreamed, dear?"

Joby nodded uneasily. "... Is something in my dream bad?"

"No! No, Joby," she said reaching down to wrap him in a hug. "It's just ... I had no idea little boys had such big ideas. Drink beauty? Feed your heart? Did you really think of that all by yourself?"

“No,” he admitted. “Arthur told me. ... Do you know what it means?”

She shook her head. “No better than you do, I’m sure. But it’s a beautiful idea, and I’m glad you wrote it down.” She squeezed him again. “There’s just no end to you, is there, sweetheart!”

“I want to get a book,” Joby said, pulling away from her embrace, “like the one Amy Holten has, with no words in it, so I can write these down, and all the other clues too. But first I want to make sure it’s all spelled right.”

“Well, your spelling’s good enough for government work,” his mother said, setting the paper down to go back to her baking. “Why don’t we get some breakfast in you first. I’ll put these rolls in, then we’ll get you some juice while -”

“No!” Joby protested. “You need to check my spelling! There can’t be any mistakes! Merlin said I have to be perfect to win the contest!”

His mother looked startled.

“Joby, ... no one’s perfect.”

“I know it’s hard,” he frowned. “but I have to. ... Merlin said I can.”

“You’d really rather do *spelling* than have cinnamon rolls?” she asked.

Joby nodded gravely.

“Well, ... all right,” she said softly. “I’d be the last one to stand between you and academic excellence. Let’s go over here, where we won’t get food on it.”

* * *