

Galendor
Ye Dude from Yonder Forest
(Book I of The Galendor Trilogy)

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Dedication

To Jesus for giving me purpose, my wife Joy for the will to keep climbing, and my three best friends, Jay, Michael and Eric through whom my sense of imagination developed. Thank you to Dr. Steven Womack of Wee Creek Press who never stopped believing in Galendor.

CHAPTER ONE: NOT YOUR NORMAL PEDDLERS' CONVENTION

Galendor padded across the creaky floor, hungry for a bowl of Tasty Poofs while Mr. Stove fired up to take off the chill. In doing so, a cozy orange and yellow glow danced a jig around the small stone cottage. The pots and pans awoke in preparation for the morning chores, while the spoons and utensils grabbed another fifteen winks.

Trying to conjure enough spit to wet his dry throat, Galendor worked his cheeks every which way. “Bummer, dude!”

Sir Wicket lay in his wicker basket and took a deep waking breath of the chilled Yonder Forest air. His accent sounded as thick as his morning cottonmouth. “Sakes alive mate, it’s too early for wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

“Well, upon opening the cabinet, I’m wounded by the bitter sting of denial.” He stared droop-eyed at dust and a bit of fuzz on the shelf. “Our cupboards clearly lack the ingredients necessary to sustain life.”

“And your suggested remedy?” Wick yawned.

Neither claimed much responsibility; they slept when

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sleepy and ate when hungry, so Wicket didn't expect much of a plan.

"I seem to recall something about a peddlers' convention going on in Hither. I say we go. You'll earn some cash, I'll set up on a corner to showcase my slick musical styling, and we'll purchase proper provisions to pad our pantry." Galendor aspired to be a great bard, if he could just convince people to accept him. He had a unique way of playing the lyre and often used odd words in an effort to sound smarter; he called them his five-dollar words.

Wicket's ears sprang to attention. "Really? Town? I'm there!" Going to Hither or Yon always meant an opportunity to earn cash playing street games (with the odds stacked in his favor). He brushed his teeth, threw on his red cape, concealed his sword, grabbed his bag o' tricks and zipped out the door.

* * * *

Yonder Forest breathed energy and exhaled life. Colors beamed more brilliantly than in other forests, and something peeked or scurried from every nook and cranny.

Undaunted by nature's beauty, Wicket hopped up and down in the front yard wagging his tail impatiently. "Gaaarr! Hurry it up, slug! I could've shed an entire winter coat by now!"

Galendor shouted, "Look dude, don't get yer pawsies in a wad! Is town going anywhere anytime soon?" He finished donning his gloves and boots saying, "Don't lemme forget, we're stopping by the loboethian village to see if Garoetoth's family needs anything."

With his attention elsewhere, Sir Wicket almost missed a royal messenger toad pulling his family with a rickshaw. "Oh, hey! G'day there mates," Wick shouted neighborly, "how goes it?"

The toad paused. “Tings be gowin’ bettah once we git deep in da foress *wurp!* Strange tings brewin’ at Castle Yorh, we done upt and quit our jobs to git ’way *wurp!*” He nodded, then continued deeper into the wood.

Galendor stepped from the house to a ration of Wick’s ranting. “Well it is about time! Jiminy Piminy, you’re slower than a schoolgirl primping for prom. You never shave that perpetual five o’clock shadow, so I *know* you weren’t spending time on your face.”

“Well my crabby canine cohort, unlike narfs, humans have to wear clothes.” Galendor saw the now distant rickshaw. “Hey, what was the deal with that fine caravan?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t listening for a whole sentence in reply to my greeting. He said something about getting away from the castle. I guess he’s taking the family camping.”

After a manly pose to greet the world and survey all the land to be graced by their presence, the two moved along.

* * * *

En route to the lobothian village, Wicket examined his friend. “What’s with the all-green getup as of late? You’re like a walking stalk of celery with a cape.”

“I theorized that, if I can craft one specific style to perfection, it would become my ‘thing.’ People will see me coming and instantly say, ‘Hey, that’s Ye Dude from Yonder Forest!’”

“Lovely,” Wick sighed.

“Thereto, I’ve heard maidens mention that I’m ‘ruggedly handsome,’ but doesn’t that just mean I’m not cute enough? I don’t know. If the green doesn’t draw ’em in, my mondo, sacred, secret stud dude sunglasses are sure to make women swoon.”

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“Whatever. I’ve lived with you for years, and I don’t think I’ll ever understand human behavior.”

* * * *

The stop at the lobothian village was just long enough to get a shopping list from the blacksmith, Garoetoth and his wife Dara. These wolf-beings were so misunderstood by humans, they hardly ever left the forest. Galendor and Wicket would quite often make shopping runs for them.

* * * *

Nearing the town of Hither, a scene at the city gates set them on edge. “Good grief dude, methinks strange things are afoot,” Galendor said.

Crowds of men gathered together to comb their hair and adjust their clothing. Big, burly, brutish men brushed their teeth and sprayed perfumes in their armpits; a most unsettling sight to say the least!

Sir Wicket’s pitch sounded higher than normal. “Why are they doing that? Are they possessed? Let’s hope it’s not contagious.”

Galendor assessed the situation. “What with all of this hygiene and extra traffic, I’m surmising the goings-on are more than just a peddlers’ convention.”

Hither, the larger of the twin towns of Hither and Yon, held the status of cultural hub in this part of Yorh. If a banquet, royal announcement or carnival needed to happen, it did so in Hither.

Sir Wicket walked to the preening horde. “G’day there friends! What’s all the hubbub about? Or, do you blokes do this all the time?”

One of the heavier, uglier men spoke up in a gravelly voice, “The Princess of Yorh is here today and called for all who could attend. Rumors say she’s on the hunt for a suitor!”

“Aye then, friend...thanks.” Sir Wicket motioned a sort of wave-salute then returned to his friend’s side. “Wow, Galendor! The princess, the head Sheila, the ultimate luscious babe in charge! Look at the crowds she’s brought. Think of the money in there!” Dollar signs rolled in Wicket’s eyes.

“Forget the money! Just think, if the princess heard me play and fell madly in love with my musical musings and manly manner, I’d be set!” Galendor had a dream bubble where all of his ideas resided. In that perfect place, everything always went according to plan.

“Let’s not get your hopes up tooooo high, Galendor. There are hundreds of other guys here thinking the exact same thing. What are the odds of us getting to see her?”

“C’mon Wicket, where’s your focus? We’re a couple of upwardly mobile dudes; one, a bard with righteous sunglasses and a spiffy hat, the other, a sword wielding, wisecracking, bluish dog-looking fellow. The both of whom sport rather excellent capes. We’re *in!*” And with that, they entered the city gates.

* * * *

Hither surged with excitement as beings of every kind walked, scurried, scampered and scooted. Vibrantly colored tapestries and streamers draped buildings welcoming people or inviting them into their shops. A huge banner hailed, “Welcome to Hither, Princess Jessica.”

Several local bands were setting up near the town square’s fountain. Rocker drawn carriages ranging from wooden boxes to silk and velvet canopies rolled by in search

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of parking. (Rockers' hooves grew long, curved gliders like a rocking chair, each foot having its own glider—not attached in the middle.)

The drone of people talking resembled ocean waves as the noise undulated from softer to louder. Sounds of rocker gliders clapping and rolling along the stone streets added rhythm to the pulse of voices.

Sir Wicket mainly noticed the call of the dozens of peddlers selling their wares to the scads of people. He scanned excitedly with a paw shading his eyes from the morning sun. “What shall we do first: grocery shop, buy Garoetoth’s stuff, or go charm the stew out of the princess?”

Galendor knew Wick’s *real* question was, ‘can I go win money off of some rich slob?’

“I suppose we could split and leave each to his own for a while. We’ll meet back here in a couple of hours.” Galendor secretly felt antsy being in crowds alone.

Before they parted, trumpets pealed and a crier belted, “Hear Ye! Hear Ye! Her royal highness, Princess Jessica of the Land of Yorh, now wishes to address the public! All citizens are requested to gather in the town’s square!”

In an instant, the entire township of Hither dropped what they were doing and headed for the square. Jesters, elves, dwarves, ogres, farmers, and middle-aged men of all classes and creeds huddled around a small wooden platform in the center of the street to hear if the rumors were true about the princess taking a suitor. Sir Wicket and Galendor stood in the back.

Trumpets sounded again. “Princess Jessica!”

The crowd grew utterly quiet as all manner of men gasped at the beauty of the princess. She spoke, and the legion of spectators leaned forward to catch every word. “Good people of the Land of Yorh, thank you for your time...”

* * * *

Galendor rustled around. “Wicket, let me get on your shoulders. I can’t see her!”

“What? *No*, you can’t get on my shoulders!” Wick protested.

“Just zip it and lift me up dude. I want to see her!” Galendor grabbed Wick’s right shoulder and placed a knee on the left one to get a foothold and balance.

Wick fought back irritably. “*No!* No stinking way are you getting up there! You’re too heavy!”

Galendor paid no attention to Wick’s protests; he just continued climbing.

“*Man!*” Wicket whined as he balanced Galendor upon his shoulders.

Once steady, Galendor lost all hope of concentration. “Dude...she’s the most awe-inspiring portrait of unfathomable beauty as ever I’ve beheld.” His heart raced.

* * * *

The princess wore a rather simple cornflower blue gown with ribbons encircling her waist. Her flowing auburn hair draped her shoulders, complementing the tiny features of her face. She had a very concerned look about her as her watery eyes sparkled in the noontime sun.

Jessica continued, “I fear a great evil has befallen our castle, and, as a result, my father has come unto a great sickness. The light has gone from his eyes and he no longer laughs. Your once caring and noble king has lost the will to govern. If nothing is done, I fear for the safety of our kingdom. Please help us. If there is any man who can entertain my father and

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lift him from this curse...I will, in return, marry that man and make him heir to the throne.” In saying that, her countenance fell and she began to cry.

* * * *

The crowd, taking no notice of her obvious grief, cheered and rushed off eager to practice whatever skill they could muster. Barbarians and mimes alike sang, yodeled, juggled, and tap-danced away, confident they could win Jessica’s hand.

Sir Wicket shook under Galendor’s weight. Galendor, transfixed by the princess’ innocent beauty, dreamt of running to her and consoling her with wit and song. He dreamt of drying her tears and giving her assurance that everything would be all right. He would be suave and debonair and charm her with his smooth demeanor. These dreams all fell to the wayside as he fell off Wicket onto his backside.

“Galendor...buddy, lose some weight!” Wicket said, stooped over and shaking.

“Dude...Wicket...did you *see* her? She was most awesome. She was...she was...*wow*,” Galendor waxed nonsensically.

“Snap out of it, mate. Princess or not, she’s just a girl. And *no*, I didn’t see her. How could I with two bazillion pounds of oaf on my shoulders!?! Besides, she’s gone.” Sir Wicket pulled Galendor back to reality.

“What? No! She can’t be gone! I haven’t wowed her with my overtly masculine charm! I didn’t sing her a song! I didn’t do anything!”

“Don’t sell yourself short, bro. You fell on your bum... right in front of her,” Wicket reassured with a smile.

“Rats!” Galendor cried.

“C’mon man. I’m almost too pooped to pop and we still

need to grocery shop and get the lobothers their stuff.”

Galendor slouched and stared at the dirt for a time, nursing his bruised ego. Taking a deep, remorseful breath, he dusted himself off. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

* * * *

Wicket ran off to start gaming while Galendor pressed toward the fountain to check out the bands. Three groups had set up and took turns to see who could draw the most people. Galendor toyed with the idea of jumping in and showing off, but needed time to build up the nerves.

“You seem quite pensive, young fella,” came an old crackled voice with an accent as heavy as Sir Wicket’s, yet with much different intonation.

Galendor observed the short man cloaked in a deep brown robe four or five sizes too big for him. The only distinguishable feature on the hooded figure was the presence of a long, gray beard and mustache protruding from the dark hole where a face should have been.

“Just feeling out the local talent. They’re pretty good don’t ya think?” remarked Galendor.

“Phooey! There’s no heart here. They have the music and rhythm, yet they lack spirit. There is no depth, no character, and no charisma! No, they’re not good...in fact, they stink!” The small figure stomped his foot in a fit of emotion.

“Whoa, old dude! I wouldn’t go that far. I mean, yeah, they all sound the same, but that’s what the people want to hear,” Galendor said with a smile, quite shocked at the fire in the little stranger’s voice.

“They *want* to hear it because that’s all there *is* to hear. No one wishes to hear something different because they don’t know *what* different is. Change in style is what we’re

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discussing.”

“Yeah, but if you do things differently, it’s just so hard to get people interested in what you have to offer.” Galendor took the subject personally.

The man pointed his voice right at Galendor. “*You’re* never going to save the kingdom if *you* repeat what everyone else does!”

“Save the kingdom!?! What are you on about, Mr. Mystery Cloak Man? Who said anything about save...?” Galendor turned to face his debater, but only a blank area remained. “Where did you go? Were we finished with our discussion?”

While Galendor spouted off, a small boy stopped at his side. “Hey mister, who are you talking to?”

“That little cloaked dude who was just standing here. Didn’t you see him?” Galendor replied.

The child ran off rather worried. “Mommy, Mommy, there’s a stranger danger man over there!”

“Aw for cryin’ out loud!” Completely confused, Galendor left the conversation behind and sat on a bench, mustering courage

* * * *

Galendor’s confidence actually decreased as he listened to the well-organized bands. Defeated, he set out to find Sir Wicket. “Wicket? Yo, Wick! Where are you?” Within seconds, Wicket came running out of an alley with cash and various items bulging from his game case. “Get into any trouble?” Galendor intuitively knew the answer.

“Oh, I started to with an ogre who didn’t appreciate my card tricks. Luckily for him, you called.”

“Did you procure any capital? It will be most difficult

to do further shopping without it.”

“Did I ever! We’ll be able to get the lobothians their stuff and still be rolling in loot. *Woo hoo!*” Wick jumped and clicked his heels, just to be silly.

“In that case, why don’t we score goodies for Garoetoth’s kids? I’ll get Gretchen her surprise and you can find something for Ladeus.”

* * * *

After an hour, the two met up in the same spot. Galendor had a full sack of goodness, while Wicket held several patterns of cloth for Dara and a strange toy for Ladeus.

“What *is* that thing?” pondered Galendor.

“It’s some crazy new-fangled toy. Here, check it out. It’s a rocker and carriage, right?” Wicket started twisting it. “Now...it becomes...(*flip*)...(twist)...a fully poseable knight with a sword and buckler.”

Galendor, enraptured by utter joy, spat out, “Utmost-neato-transformographic-righteous-budliness!” He and Wicket stared wide-eyed with juvenile grins. “All I got was this crumby music box.” Galendor felt outdone by the super groovy toy, and rightfully so.

“That’s all right, mate. Gretchen likes that sort of thing.” Wick consoled.

Galendor poked his nose into his shopping bag. “I scored the essentials from Ye Olde Food Shoppe: Alchemist Pepper, Cheese Corn Crunchies, Tasty Poofs, some lettuce, and—in the advent of an apocalypse—I got some potted meat food product.”

“*Ew!* Potted meat food product? That’s just nasty.” Wick shriveled his muzzle.

“Well, it’s either that or cannibalism if something ever

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went down.” Galendor laughed.

* * * *

With everything done, the duo decided to depart. Most of the crowds had gone, leaving only a few peddlers and a lot of trash. It had been a good day overall.

Toward the fringes of town, they noticed a small huddled figure crouched in a dark, dirty alley. “Alms, kind sir,” he uttered in a weak, trembling voice. “A bit of kindness is all I ask.”

Sadness flooded Galendor. He’d never seen a beggar, nor been in a situation where he had more than someone else. “Hey, Wick, how much do we have left over?”

“Oh man, we have a killing! I mean I was hot toda... hey, what are you thinking?” Wicket cringed at giving away loot.

“Just hand it over dude.” Galendor reached out his palm.

“Everything?” Wicket whined.

“*Aaahhhttt!*” Galendor interjected, “Just fork it over... and some cloth too.”

“All right, all right, here, take it. I can always make more on the next trip.” Wicket shrugged and closed his eyes so he couldn’t see himself giving away his prizes.

Galendor laid the items in front of the figure. “Here you are. Use it well, and God speed.” He also gave up the groceries, except for the potted meat food product, which he wouldn’t wish on his worst enemy.

“Thank you, sir. The goodness you put in others’ lives will come back into your own.” With that being said, a gnarled hand slowly grabbed the groceries and held them close.

Wicket took a couple of steps back and whispered,

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“Galendor, let’s get home.”

“Yes, let’s.” Galendor shook his head.

* * * *

They made haste for the city gates, very uneasy with what had just transpired. A hooded figure behind a building watched from the shadows. The good deed had not gone unnoticed.

CHAPTER TWO: THE COMMISSION

Coming to the Fork in the Road that would take them home, they ‘tined’ left toward the forest. Traffic laws mandated a large fork be constructed at branching roads with the destinations clearly marked on the tines.

Yonder Forest stood smack-dab in the middle of the land of Yorh, but most humans avoided it due to silly superstitions. Stepping into the serenity of the trees, Galendor relaxed and laughed. “Can you believe people think our forest will swallow their souls?”

“It’s just another facet of your people’s behavior I’ll never fathom. You know, I actually heard someone say that those who live in Yonder Forest marvel potted meat food product. I, for one, do not.”

Galendor feigned gagging. “That’s just nasty. I mean, I’ll eat it, but only as a salty diversion from hunger.”

* * * *

A bit further in, Wicket broke the silence on the big

topic, “What do you think about Princess Jessica’s speech?” Galendor’s eyes winced behind his dark sunglasses.

“The king must have fallen into a super-duper deep state o’ funk for the princess to offer marriage based solely on the grounds of entertainment value. What really gets me is that, just after her speech, some little robed dude was going on about me saving the kingdom and such. I’m currently pondering the thought that the two instances may be linked.”

Wick’s expression deepened. “This does *not* bode well for the fair lady or the kingdom.”

Galendor sighed, “A most egregious situation indeed my little blue buddy. Let us not forget the beggar. Have you ever known someone to be destitute in Yorh?”

“Not in Yorh, nor my native Narfingham. I believe we did right by him, but did you *have* to give away all our food?”

“I was so overcome by non-joyousness, I figured it’d settle my conscience. We can get more tomorrow. Plus, I’m sure we’ll eat at Garoetoth’s.”

Part of Wicket’s friendship entailed goading Galendor to improve. “So, do we head for Castle Yorh and take a crack at winning the hand of the luscious babe in charge?”

Galendor raised his walking stick as if it were a mighty sword. “I would give my right arm just to see the sun glint off her precious hair once more! Alas, I am not good enough. More experienced persons learned in verse and song go before us, and I’m afraid we would waste our time in sojourning to the castle.”

“What? What happened to the ‘upwardly mobile dudes with excellent capes’ who headed through the city gates this morning? Where’s *that* Galendor?”

“I guess I just had a reality check today. I’m utmostly not as triumphant as those bands I heard, and I’m never going to be the suave guy who struts to the princess.” Galendor’s

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dream bubble had burst.

“I surely do see your point, but *what if* we succeeded!? Oodles and gobs of treasure for me, and you could marry that lovely Sheila...it’s a *woo woo* situation!” Wick wiggled his eyebrows up and down.

“I couldn’t marry someone because of some deal, no matter how heart-poundingly pretty she is. There’s that ‘love’ thing and stuff,” Galendor said.

Wicket tried another angle, “Okay, forget all that. It would be *fun*...yes?”

“You know where the Word says, ‘hope deferred maketh the heart sick’? Truth be told, I’m scared to put myself out there too far. What if I get my hopes up just to get rejected one more time? I’m soooooo tired of losing. Currently, I can still dream of seeing Jessica once I have the chutzpa to knock her socks off. Let’s not ruin that dream just yet.”

Wick gave in to apathy. “You’re right. Plus, it would stink to walk that far anyway.”

“Absolutely!” Galendor felt relief once Wick dropped the subject.

* * * *

Deeper into the forest, the atmosphere became brazenly strange. Nothing scurried, and the only noises were whispers in the pine needles and the eerie squeak of the trees.

The air seemed heavy, almost as if it were visible with a yellow tinge. Every rock, leaf, flower, blade of grass, and tree could be seen with the utmost clarity; no distance blurring or fading of colors. The unutterably odd situation caused both to have heaviness in their chests as they tried to breathe.

Galendor peered over his sunglasses for a clearer view. “What unsavoriness is this; the calm before a massive storm?”

“I’m feeling all closed in, like I’m in a container or large box.” Wicket wheezed.

The twosome froze dead in their tracks as the air became too thick for movement. Their vision bent and warped into a spiral, then waved like a ripple in water. Tremendous thunder clapped, followed by a magnificent flash with arching and sparking like colorful fireworks.

Bbbbbzzzzaaaatttt! Rumble, Rumble.

The forest returned to its normal state of animals playing, chirping, and chattering, and the air no longer had a yellowish tint. Only one thing seemed out of the ordinary - the short little man now standing in front of them! He wore baggy brown robes, and his hat probably should have been pointed, but couldn’t quite make it. Under this hat flowed long white hair and bushy eyebrows. A pair of thick blue lenses sat above a big round nose shadowing a long white mustache and beard.

“You ever heard tell of a *mugician*, boy?” he asked.

“Uhhh...I’ve heard of a *ma-gician*, does that count?”

“*Mew-jih-shun*...mew...mew like a small cat! A *musical ma-gician!*” he shouted.

“Say what?” mused Galendor.

“I’m a magician of music. Mugician Lord Bill is my title, but you can call me Mugician Lord Bill!”

“Okay. Mugician Lord B...”

“On second thought, don’t call me at all; it’d take up too much time. You are the one who has been chosen, *nay* I say! *You* are the Chosen One!”

“I’m the chosen wha...”

“There you go, *blah, blah, blah*, wasting time when there’s no time to waste! Now shut yer yap and listen! The king has fallen under no ordinary doldrums, *nooo!* ’Tis an enigmatic

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sickness the likes of which I've not seen. You must journey to find three others like yourself. Focus on the finding of the three. Only then will you be able to seek out Phorsyard the Keeper and eventually put on a concert for the king, but again, your sole goal is three souls. I shall guide you on occasion, but for now, away with you! Go! Fly away! Be gone!"

"All right, all right, *all right!* We were just heading that way," Galendor whined as the little man began pushing him.

"Off with me then!" And with that, Mugician Lord Bill vanished.

Poof!

Galendor had his hands in his pockets, staring at the now empty area. Wicket stood speechless with his paws on his hips. Galendor rolled forward onto his toes then rolled back to his flat-footed, slouched position.

Wicket's muzzle pursed. "*Mmm-hhhmmm.*"

"Yep. I'm not gonna lie, I'm a little freaked out right here," Galendor confided.

"Let's just get to the lobothian village. I think we need some normalcy," Wick said as he picked up his gaming bag and the supplies he'd dropped.

* * * *

The charm and intricate details of the lobothian town never ceased to amaze. Galendor thought that if outsiders could just see the water features and exquisite gardens accentuating the surrealistic architecture of the houses, they might see the lobothians for who they really were.

Windows glowing warmly invited visitors to the thatch and slate roofed houses as chimneys puffed wisps of smoke.

Aromas of lunches caused Galendor's tummy to rumble: smoked meats, bread baking, and wood burning. Both Galendor and Sir Wicket stood, sniffed, and drooled. These were some of the simple pleasures of life.

Lobothian children scattered and played in the afternoon sun. Boys chased girls, others ran from them. A few played with rocks and sticks while girls dressed dolls. When Sir Wicket and Galendor arrived, all of the children stopped what they were doing and flocked to them shouting, "Yaaayyy!"

Galendor warned, "Crumb snatchers dead ahead dude!"

"I think there are some rug rats mixed in as well."

Wicket set down his armload and darted about; tackling a few kids grouped together.

"Play us a song, Ye Bard of Yonder Forest!" Scads of kids huddled among Galendor's legs.

"Okay, okay, just give me some space, ya knothead!"

He laughed as he reached for his lyre. Galendor played the instrument in a direct and fast style that the children enjoyed. The song sounded whimsical and the children smiled.

'Ye do not taketh from the pond of fish.'

'Ye hath not given to the...pond of fi-ish!'

'Ye do not taketh from the pond of fish.'

'Lest ye be wet ah...'

After his lyrics, he played something he called a riff. The children roared with laughter and applause. "Play us another, pleeease?"

"I would, but we're here to see Garoetoth, and then we need to get home." Galendor made a funny face as he raised his shoulders and hands in defeat.

"Aww!" The children sulked, but quickly returned to

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their games.

* * * *

The lobothian smithy worked miracles with ore. A metal didn't exist that he couldn't wield with splendor. His wolf-like head atop his 6'7" dark gray human body definitely made him seem like a creature from a childhood nightmare. His soft blue eyes and gentle nature proved more than enough to reassure his status as a pretty decent chap.

Billows of smoke rolled upwards from Garoetoth's shop, and the rhythmic, almost musical clang of his hammer upon anvil rang through the streets. Galendor joked, "Hey man, is this what they mean by Heavy Metal?"

"Galendor! My old friend!" The clanging stopped. "How art thou and Sir Wicket this fine afternoon?" Garoetoth's speech sounded proper, like royalty.

"I cannot complain on this utmostly jubilacious morn that has been set before us, dude." Galendor shook hands, though the giant's muscled grip eclipsed his meager offering.

"Splendid! Let us converse and break bread; we have plenty." Garoetoth had a contagious energy about him.

Galendor smiled. "Yes! Let us sup and make merry!"

* * * *

Garoetoth's family garden grew flowers from a magic peddler. Little yellow ones sang in beauty shop harmony while blue and red tube-like flowers played a tune. The plants uprooted themselves to dance and enjoy their party. A swaybacked rooftop gave the house a whimsical appeal. Its intricately detailed iron and oak door secured it in a fashion most becoming a blacksmith.

Dara kept the inside immaculate. As beautiful and refined a lady as one could meet, she would have passed for any fine woman at a human court—if not for her canine facial features.

As Sir Wicket and Galendor entered, a heavenly aroma grabbed their noses and carried them into the room.

Garoeth's two children, Gretchen and Ladeus attacked. "Uncle Galendor! Sir Wicket! *Yay!*"

Wicket quickly whipped around with a mid-air twist, effectively turning the tables on Ladeus. "Thought you could get one over on the old Knight of Narfingham, didn't ya?"

"Sir Wicket, do you think I could ever be as fast as you?" the boy asked.

"Well, if you eat your veggies, obey your parents, and do your homework...*naw*, you'll never be as fast as me." Wick laughed, shaking his head.

Dara smiled at him and took her supplies off his hands.

"Uncle Galendor," Gretchen beamed with a smile, "do you like my new dress? Mother crafted it for me on my birthday. She says it makes me look mature. What do you think?"

With one hand on his heart, the other toward space, Galendor declared, "You are the epitome of radiance and aesthetic bliss."

She giggled and ran into the next room, surely blushing, though it was hidden by her furry face. It was all too apparent that she had a crush on Galendor, which he considered flattering.

"All right everyone, soup's on! Kids, get washed up! You too Garoeth, you're absolutely filthy." Dara placed her hands on her hips. "Galendor, Sir Wicket, welcome! You know where the sinks are."

"Mom," questioned Ladeus, "why'd you say, 'soup's on?' I thought we were having chicken and toast and stuff. I hate soup!"

Galendor—Ye Dude from Yonder Forest

“We *are* having chicken and such. ‘Soup’s on’ is just an expression saying it’s time to eat,” Dara explained.

“*Ooohh, IIII sssee!*” Ladeus walked off into the next room, displaying his newly acquired tidbit of youthful information. “*Gretchen*, hurry up! Soup’s on, and *no*, we’re not having soup, it’s just an expression!”

* * * *

Wicket and Galendor sat contentedly at the large wooden table when Gretchen and Ladeus scampered in.

“Hey mom, watch this!” Ladeus shouted as he scratched behind Wicket’s ear, causing his leg to bounce.

“A little to the left there, mate,” Wicket instructed.

Gretchen approached with a pale pink bow. “Galendor, will you put this in my hair?”

“Um...sure I will. Come here.” Galendor, not being one for dainty things, hadn’t the foggiest idea how to put a bow in someone’s hair.

“That’s enough, children. Leave our guests alone. It’s time to eat.” Dara turned her head to holler at Garoeth, still washing up, “Hurry dear, it’s on the table!” She had prepared a large bird, along with eggs and lightly browned toast, juice, and some fruit.

Garoeth came in, stood at the back of his chair, and closed his eyes. “Great is our thanks as we owe much to thee. Bless our house, friends, and food...*amen.*”

Grace being said, the feasting commenced. The food tasted so wonderful, Galendor had a tough time taking a break from scarfing. “Man, oh man, this meal...it’s *d-e-licious!*”

“Hey Daddy, the next time someone goes to town for us, can I get some new chemicals and herbs for my science kit?” Ladeus asked before turning to Sir Wicket. “I’m going to

be an alchemist someday.”

“Father, may I get some lip colorant and eye shading too?” Gretchen wanted so badly to grow up and be like her mother.

Garototh spoke firmly but kindly, “We shall not burden our friends, children. Ladeus, thou canst wait until the date of your birth, and Gretchen, thou art not of the age for beautification.”

“Rats!” Ladeus said, kicking the air.

“Yes, Father.” Gretchen nodded.

* * * *

When the only noises were chewing, slurping and the clinking of metal utensils on ceramic plates, Galendor let the music box play. Gretchen’s eyes beamed. “Is that for me?”

“For you, my sweet.” He offered the trinket with a polite bow.

“I love this,” she whispered and held it to her heart. Ladeus searched the two with sad, pitiful eyes.

Wicket converted his toy from a wagon to a knight while making a strange noise like clearing his throat down a musical scale.

“*Oh yeah, that’s mine!*” Wick had no time before Ladeus nabbed it and ran to the other room.

Dara glared at her guests who desperately fought to avoid eye contact with her. Galendor slid back from the table to give his newly filled potbelly some stretching room. “Dara, that had to be one of the utmost taste-o-licious feasts as ever there was!”

“Too right!” Wicket added, toveling his muzzle. Dara placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands with a smile.

Galendor—Ye Dude from Yonder Forest

Galendor stared at his plate, unable to conjure an excuse to leave the table. Dara sipped her coffee. “Wow, it’s not like you to sit this long after a meal. Something weighing heavy on your heart?” she asked.

“Must be that female intuition one hears so much about,” Galendor answered, “but, yes, my noggin’s all aflutter.” He proceeded to detail the day’s events; from the princess to Mugician Lord Bill’s kingdom-saving challenge, and the vagabond. “I’ve always thought Yorh a place of harmony, but methinks there are dark shadows looming. What’s your opinion?”

Dara and Garoeth looked at each other the way parents do before dropping heavy knowledge on their kids. Dara answered, “Sweetie, nothing is ever perfect. Just because you’ve not seen much darkness doesn’t mean it’s not always been there. Do you think all is right in the world when our people can’t safely go to town or let our kids play with humans?”

“Of course I don’t feel that’s right! So, are you saying that all is not coming to an end and take today’s revelations with a grain of salt?”

Garoeth added, “Doest thou trust the words of this Mugician Lord? Art thou convicted to champion our fair lady’s plight?”

“Bill seems a bit loopy, but I would *loooove* to see Jessica again. Lemme squat and watch for a few.” Galendor breathed a small sigh of relief.

“Whatever you decide, do keep us informed,” Dara said. Galendor and Wick began cleaning the table, but Dara wouldn’t have it. “*Aht!* I want to sit and enjoy my coffee. You’re excused. And, thank you for getting my supplies.”

Garoeth walked them to the door and waved goodbye. “Fare thee well, ’til our paths cross once more...dudes!” With that, he smiled and closed the door.

CHAPTER THREE: A RELUCTANT START

Home finally, Ye Olde Mister Stove crackled away, glowing with warm, comforting light. “Rough day out there, yes?” He spoke in a low and cheery golden voice.

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin, Stove,” Wicket said, taking off his cape and collapsing in his basket.

“Well then, let me cook up some comfort food. What did you get at the store, Galendor?”

“Here, cook this,” Galendor said bluntly as he heaved a brick of red substance onto the stovetop.

“Ahhh, potted meat food product. You guys *do* realize this stuff smells bad, right?” Stove asked.

Galendor nodded. “Try eating it, dude.”

“No thanks! Luckily, my enchantment doesn’t cause me to have to eat.”

“Well, luckily, we don’t need to eat now, either. We just feasted at Garoetoth’s table.” Galendor did a back-flop onto his bed.

Wicket had squinted eyes and a furrowed brow since entering the house. “Let’s piece this out. What do you think

Galendor—Ye Dude from Yonder Forest

Bill meant by three others like you? Who in the name of sense is ‘Phorsyard the Keeper’, and if the king is sick, shouldn’t someone be searching for a Chosen Doctor? The whole thing sounds absurd to me.” Wick peered over the side of his basket.

“It certainly does indeed! Furthermore, I believe I will continue lying here, maximizing my relaxation efforts, thus demonstrating my distaste for a quest. In fact, I believe if we forget the whole thing, it shall go away. Ability to pop out of thin air or not, let Baggy Robes McGee find some other Chosen Dude, as I’m not up to it.” Galendor crossed his arms behind his head.

“Would someone like to tell me what you’re going on about? What quest? What short guy? Who’s the Chosen One, and for what?” Ye Olde Mister Stove didn’t like being left in the dark.

Galendor updated Stove, adding, “Frankly, I think that Lord Bill dude is full of bologna which—as you know—is one step short of potted meat food product, and that’s not a very good thing of which to be full.” Galendor placed his hat over his face to further relax.

Stove reassured, “Sounds like an opportunity to get out and do something good, Galendor.”

“Traipsing around the kingdom doesn’t sound very advantageous to me,” Galendor refuted.

Mr. Stove started to make a counterpoint, but a knocking at the front door interrupted him.

Wicket sprang from his basket. “I’ll get that!” He leaned on one foot with his ear to the door and sang, “Whooo iiis iiiit?”

“Toad-o-gram for mister ‘Ye Dude’ in care of Yonder Forest *wurp*.”

Wicket opened the door to see a large toad on a small bicycle. The toad stretched out his arm. “That’ll be half a silver

please.”

“Half a silver? *Half* a silver!” Wick barked. “Flaming bags of cow cookies! The postal service is just getting too expensive these days!” Wicket fumed to and from the money cup on his nightstand and paid the toad in disgust.

The messenger forked the letter over with a small, “*wurp*,” and pedaled away.

Sir Wicket handed the letter to Galendor. Enclosed were some strange drawings of a contraption unlike anything he had ever seen. Wicket sometimes enjoyed figuring out puzzles, so Galendor passed them along. “Can you make heads or tails of this, Wick?”

Wick scrutinized the papers. “Near as I can figure, these are schematics for a sound amplification device.”

“Radical!” Galendor chuckled. “How’d ya come up with that brilliant deduction?”

Wicket pointed to some large bold print. “It says right here, ‘*sound, amplification device.*’ You see?” While Galendor sat dumbfounded at the marvel of science, Wicket double-checked the envelope. “There’s something else in there, what does it say?”

Galendor dug around and produced a short note. “The letter enclosed reads as follows: ‘Stop lollygagging with your stove, get out of the house, and start your quest! Keep these drawings until you find the one who can use them. P.S. I wouldn’t eat the potted meat food product if I were you. Starving would be much better!’”

The message visibly spooked Galendor. He stared at the letter. “Wicket, this is a most jarring occurrence. Clairvoyant or kook, in my considered opinion, we shall not be getting much rest tonight.”

Wicket stood ready. “Well, what’ll we do? He’s not leaving us alone.”

Galendor—Ye Dude from Yonder Forest

Galendor stretched out on his bed with the sinking feeling of dread. After staring at the ceiling and playing through multiple scenarios in his mind, he sat up. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. We’re going to give this thing our best shot. Then, when my best proves not enough—as always—we will be rid of this persistent, vertically challenged foofenheimer! And if by some miracle we do succeed at whatever this quest is, then I shall ask Princess Jessica to hold hands and eat funnel cakes! Pack all of our stuff while I go to the shed and get Li’l Red.” Galendor marched straight out the door.

“Too right!” Wicket shouted as he threw stuff from every corner of the house into a pile.

Stove flared, stoked by the new rush of energy in the room. “That’s the spirit! I’ll keep the home fires burning until your return.”

* * * *

The evening sun cast calming orange rays through the thick trees as dew sparkled on the flowers and blades of grass. The smoke from Ye Olde Mister Stove rose slowly and hovered. The night would be calm.

As Galendor reached the rickety old shingled shed, he couldn’t help but feel a little excited. Throwing laziness aside, calling on Li’l Red meant a long, potentially overwhelming journey might be in store. What if this whole deal wasn’t a farce? If it did pan out, he could see the princess again. “*Woo hoo!*”

Digging through the shed revealed that it hadn’t been dug through in quite some time. A small, dusty tarp in the corner covered something obviously wonderful.

“Hey Li’l Red! C’mon out, little fella,” Galendor whispered.

“*Squeak squeak!*” A fiery cherry-red wagon came swooshing out.

“Whoa! Slow down there, hot rod! We’ve got a long task ahead of us, so don’t go pooping yourself out too fast! Are you up to it?”

“Squeaky squeak!”

Galendor squatted and brushed spider webs and dirt off of the excited little vehicle. “Well, alrighty then, my bodaciously righteous Li’l Red Wagon, let’s pack up and move out!”

“*Squeak.*”

* * * *

Wicket finished locking the house as Galendor and Li’l Red came around the corner. “Are you sure we’re all ready, Wick?”

The narf stood at the base of a pile o’ stuff. “Ready as we’re ever gonna be. Do we have a plan?”

“Lord Bill said to find three others like me. I figure he wasn’t speaking of utmostly cool gents but rather musically inclined. My guess is for us to head south, deeper into the Yonder Forest. There were people from every corner of the map in town today, and yet this Bill guy picked on us. So, keeping to these enchanted woods might yield a more desirable candidate.”

“And you’ve surmised all this in these few minutes? Lovely, just lovely.” Wick crinkled his muzzle in reaction to Galendor’s logic.

After painstakingly throwing everything into Li’l Red, the two, plus wagon, trekked south and west into the setting sun.

* * * *

Galendor—Ye Dude from Yonder Forest

Nightfall didn't come too quickly; it came about the same time it always did—right when the sky got dark. The chirping of birds changed to the fiddle of crickets, and happy sounds of playing animals turned to the eerie calls of owls and things that go *gurrp* in the night. With capes flowing behind them and the constant rattling of Li'l Red Wagon, the trio moved steadily through the ever-cooling air.

After a few hours, Galendor stopped the caravan. "Let's camp here for the night. This huge crag of rocks blocks our southerly passage, and these tall spruce and pine trees create a nice shelter all around." He gathered and piled wood while Sir Wicket spread blankets on a nice flat area.

Galendor fiddled in his pockets. "I'm trying to find some matches. Do you have any?"

"I'm a narf. Where am I gonna store matches?" Wicket sneered.

"How am I going to light a fire without matches?"

Wicket stopped setting up camp. "Why don't you go rub two sticks together!"

"How about I rub my two fists together on your face, jerky!" Galendor snapped.

The long, tiring day and the whole situation in general had taken its toll on both of them. Before the argument escalated, Li'l Red rolled to the rocks, squeaked, and banged his backside against them. Each time he did, a small flash occurred.

"Squeak squeaky."

"Not now, Wagon! Can't you see I'm fixin' to whelp this mutt?"

"Fat chance flabby man!" Wick danced around like a boxer, fists ready.

"*Squeak!*"

Li'l Red rammed the rocks until the banging and

the subsequent flashes broke Wicket's concentration. "Hey, Galendor...sparks." Wick put his guard down and pointed.

Galendor relaxed his stance. "Well, I'll be. Get some dry leaves while I gather twigs."

All hostilities were forgotten as the two gathered kindling. After light-headedness from blowing, and a sore, dented backside of Wagon, a nice little fire blazed. The new light caused their shadows to jump on the rocks and trees.

"A sad thing it is to blemish the memory of our fine lobothian meal so many hours ago, but keeping our energy up will be most important. Break out the potted meat food product, Wick, and let us partake of the nutrients therein."

"I guess when you're hungry, anything sounds good." Wicket took out the package of food product and continued, "What is your plan for food when this runs out?"

Galendor answered, "Well, along the way I'm sure we can find plants and berries. People around here may be generous enough to feed us, plus I'm sure there will be towns down this way. My main concern is how to find three people crazy or stupid enough to follow us. I plan to go to sleep and face it anew tomorrow."

Wicket yawned and stretched his arms and legs. "I'm all for that."

After finishing their meal of salty processed meat scraps, they brushed their teeth and lay down to sleep. The ground definitely wasn't Galendor's bed, nor Sir Wicket's basket, but it felt great all the same to stretch out and relax. The day had held more activity than a whole week.

* * * *

Galendor drifted off into peaceful slumber listening to the fire crackle and jump, though it slowly died. A breeze blew

through the pine needles, making a rushing noise like a distant waterfall. He slept still, dreaming of wooing Jessica with a fantastic song played on a really cool instrument that his mind must have invented.

Sir Wicket, on the other hand, did not sleep so still. He kicked and kicked his legs as most sleeping dogs do, but he kept throwing his arm as if wielding a sword.

When Wick awoke in a cold sweat, he found Galendor smiling in his sleep and Li'l Red sitting contently. "That's the last time I eat *that* stuff before bed."

Ever the pyromaniac, Sir Wicket noticed the fire needed stoking. "I'll get a nice fire going here," he spoke his inner dialogue. "Oooh, there's a big log; I'll put that right on top. Next, I'll build up the outside with these smaller logs in order to contain the heat. Finally, I'll build up the structure by forking tons of twigs into the area between the small outer logs and the big one in the middle...there, now that's an inferno!" Indeed, it was. The fire reached high into the sky and snapped sharply instead of happily crackling.

Wicket convinced himself there was no greater thing than his fire, disregarding the fact that very bright light at night brings out the mischievous will-o-the-wisps. They glowed bright green or yellow and emitted a high-pitched buzzing sound as they ransacked everything in Li'l Red and stirred up the coals causing dangerous sparks to fly. Groups of Wispies gathered together and tried to fly off with blankets, pots, pans, and even Li'l Red!

"Squeak!"

"Rats! Wispies...I hate Wispies!" Sir Wicket whispered. "Well I'm gonna make me some crispy Wispies!"

His fire must have been of the highest caliber, for in no time at all, the area was swarmed. Surely their buzzing would wake Galendor, but for the moment, he remained asleep.

Wicket took a burning ember and ran all over the camp batting the luminescent pests.

After nearly half an hour of buzzing, dodging and zooming, Wicket managed to bat them all back with his expert sticksmanship. Panting and leaning on his trusty weapon, he gaped at Galendor who remained fast asleep.

Wicket yawned loudly as he returned to his blanket, “*Aaahhhgghhh!*”

“Huhh...wha...wuz zaht?” Galendor poked his head up from his sleep.

“Oh, you have got to be *kidding* me!” Sir Wicket frowned at him in disgusted disbelief.

“What was that noise? It sounded like a bear or something.” Galendor sleepily surveyed the area.

“Go back to bed, man. I was just yawning,” Wick jeered.

“You go to bed too, dude. We’ve got a long day ahead of us. And hey...put that fire out a little, would ya?” Galendor added, “We don’t need any will-o-the-wisp attacks tonight.”

Wicket agreed hastily, “Yeah, sure thing.” He leaned closer to Li’l Red. “Not a word, Wagon. Not a word.”

“Squeak.”

The sleepy narf poured water on the fire and tried to salvage what sleep he could from the already long night.

Li’l Red remained happy that he no longer sat in the shed.

CHAPTER FOUR:

TOOTS MCPIFFEN

Mornings are a strange thing. Sometimes, they come too soon, and other times, they happen right when they should. In either case, they always seem to arrive at the same time the sun comes up.

For Galendor, morning broke with clear detail and fresh air. He hopped up with a spring in his step and whistled a fine tune.

Wicket, on the other hand, arose hunched over and threw rocks at the sun in hopes of knocking it back down for a while. “*Feh!* The sun’s too bright and I can’t see it well enough to hit it!”

Galendor asked with a smile and a stretch, “What’s-a-matter there, big guy? Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?”

“How could I? There’s no bed here, just ground; lots and lots of ground, hence no *side* on which to wake!”

“Weeelll, I’ll take that as a *yes* my crazy, cranky comrade.” Galendor leaned closer and asked, “Constipated?”

“No! I’m quite regular, thank you very much! I just

couldn't sleep last night, that's all!" Wicket stomped around with his eyes squinted shut and picked up his belongings.

"I had the best dream about Princess Jessica. Do you want to hear it?"

"No! I dreamt I was attacked by a 30-foot chunk of living potted meat food product and the only way to defeat it was to eat it to death!"

"Wow...enough said friend. I didn't know. I'm here for you, dude."

* * * *

After ensuring the coals were out and all their stuff was placed in Li'l Red Wagon, the trio proceeded on their way. The rising sun felt mostly toasty upon their chilled shoulders.

Butterflies flittered and played above a family of frolicking fuzzy things resembling otters. The cuteness of this scene wore thin on grumpy Sir Wicket. "Does this blooming forest always have to be so...so...*happy*?"

Neither Galendor nor Wagon paid any attention to him, for 'twas a well-known fact that he'd have to get glad in the same fur in which he got mad.

The trees eventually thinned, revealing a dirt path with freshly made tracks and thin wagon ruts.

"You ever been this deep in the woods?" Wick's hackles rose slightly.

"Naw. Have you?" Galendor found nothing familiar.

"Huh-uh. Nor have I ever seen prints like these." Wicket took a knee. "These appear to be rocker tracks, but I've never seen any this small. As for these others, they don't resemble any deer or boar I've encountered." He pointed to tiny cleft prints.

"Well, whomever or whatever they may be, let's hope

Galendor—Ye Dude from Yonder Forest

they are nice and willing to feed us generous amounts of the tastiness.” Galendor patted his empty tummy.

* * * *

Within a few minutes of travel, they happened upon a village carved into the giant trees. Each dwelling’s door only came waist high. On neatly groomed dirt streets, knee-high rockers stood, hitched to posts or mini carriages. People, two to three feet tall with human torsos, tiny horns, and goat legs milled about wearing sunglasses and carrying brass saxanhorns.

Wicket raised an eyebrow. “They must be decent folk, what with the sunshades and all, but do you reckon we just walk up and say ‘howdy y’all’?”

“Before we do that, why don’t you don sunglasses? It may be a custom here.” Galendor wanted to circumvent a cultural clash.

Wicket dug around in his satchel. “Here are mine, and an extra-large pair for Li’l Red.”

“Squeak squeak?”

“Yes sir, you are now the coolest wagon in all the land!” Galendor answered.

“*Squeak!*” Wagon rolled with extra confidence.

The three sauntered in, but as they reached the center of the main thoroughfare, no one paid them any mind. They observed the little fawn people running into stationary objects and fumbling to find door handles. Many bumped into each other and tripped on obvious obstacles.

“Squeaky squeak, squeak?”

Galendor answered, “Yeah, I suppose they could be blind.”

Sir Wicket pointed, “We’re about to find out, I think. Someone’s coming right at us.”

One of the pygmy satyrs, humming a tune, walked right into Galendor's knee. "Whoa!" said the little man in a slow, airy voice. "Who grew a tree in the middle of the road, and why wasn't it here when I walked by earlier?"

Galendor stooped over. "Greetings and salutations, my small friend."

The creature's eyebrows raised and he laughed. "Ha, ha...far out man, a talking tree. Say something again, oh gnarly talking timber."

"My name is Galendor, Ye Dude from Yonder Forest. My friend here is Sir Wicket of Narfingham, and this other swell fellow is our most premium Li'l Red Wagon."

"A tree named Galendor and his buds; wait 'til I tell my friends what I ran into...cooooo!"

By now, Galendor was a trifle irritated at the whole tree thing. "Look, foo foo head, I'm a dude, not a tree." Galendor slid the little guy's shades to his nose. "You see? No tree, just me."

"Heavy..." His jaw dropped. "What did you eat to get so big?"

"Surely nothing this morning; I'll tell you *that* right now," Galendor grumbled.

"Well, what manner of beast are you?" asked the fawn with his jaw still dropped.

"I'm a human, Wicket's a narf, and Li'l Red is clearly a wagon."

"Yeah, pull the other one, Holmes! Humans are mystical giants out of Pephop's Fables."

"No faking, dude, I'm just as human as they come. Well, except I have mondo sacred secret stud dude sunglasses and a neat-o cape." Galendor struck a stalwart pose then pointed to his cape and glasses.

"*No way!* A real, live human! My homies will flip their

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lids!” The satyr bowed a knee. “My name is Unkel. What can I do for such a figment and his friends?”

Wicket stepped quickly to this question, “We haven’t eaten since last night, and I’m fixing to chow dirt for nourishment. Can you spare a morsel or ten?”

“Hey buds, mi tree es su tree. Let’s eat!”

* * * *

They followed Unkel to a relatively small tree home. Wooden planks littered the yard from one end to the other. Smaller ones had wheels, and larger ones were rounded at the ends with one side having a fin-like piece protruding.

“What’s with the funk-tastic wood?” Galendor was intrigued.

“They like...came to me in a vision.” Unkel waved his hands as if weaving a spell. “This winged fairy creature came down and said, ‘*Hey man, grab a saw and cut some timber or something.*’ Then my vision focused on these boards, and I knew my destiny lay in processed wood products. The next thing I recall from my vision was a fat fairy in a diaper shooting my rump with an arrow as he floated by. And so, I’ve built the objects of my dream and vowed that, if I ever have another, I’ll smack down the little twerp who shot me.”

Galendor picked up a board and asked, “What are you supposed to do with ’em?”

“I can’t figure that part out. You can have one of each, and if you come up with anything, get back to me.” Unkel replied as he unlocked his door and popped inside.

Li’l Red stayed out in the yard, happy that he no longer sat in the shed.

* * * *

Galendor had to squeeze to get in, but could sit if he slouched. Sir Wicket had an easier time, yet also needed to hunker down. The pipe from Unkel's stone oven followed a staircase up through the tree. Clothes were scattered about the room, and a good layer of dust proved that Unkel spent more time woodworking than cleaning.

An odd tapping noise from above eventually wore on Wicket's nerves. "So there, mate, what's that noise a-rap-tap-tapping upstairs?"

"Oh, that's the exterminator service. Some homes have had greebley bug problems, so we've hired in the professionals." Unkel sang their slogan, "'Woodpecker Pest Exterminators. Pain in the neck? Call Peck!' I don't know which is worse, the greeblies or the constant knocking."

Unkel put his saxanhorn in the corner and dished some stew into bowls. It smelled delicious, but anything at this point would have, as the two were famished. Sir Wicket and Galendor ate heartily and Unkel puffed up his chest that the mythological human enjoyed his cooking.

Galendor nodded to the musical instrument. "I see you wield a mighty saxanhorn. So, can I assume that you wail?"

"No way, bud. I don't know one end from the other," Unkel replied.

"So why do you have it?" Galendor frowned.

"It's the rules, bro. All must carry saxanhorn and sunglasses."

Galendor felt on edge. Surely *this* of all places would house another player. "Does anyone around here play music at all? My friends and I are on a mission to save the kingdom, and we need somebody who can play."

"What? We live in a kingdom? And it needs saving? Far out!" Unkel's people evidently never left the forest. "You

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need to talk to the *Profit*. He can help you find someone, I'm sure of it."

"The Prophet?" Galendor and Wicket asked.

"He's the wise old bud who we pattern our town after. He watches the forest and advises us. He's our hero." Unkel stood reverently.

"Sounds like a decent chap. How do we find him?" questioned Wick.

"He lives down a hidden road, and doesn't like visitors, but you can try. Why don't you have another bowlful and then I'll lead you there."

Wicket offered his bowl with a smile. "Sweeeet!"

* * * *

Tummies full, they squeezed out of the small home and stretched, sending slouched bones cracking. Galendor placed one hand over his heart. "Thanks for all your hospitality. 'Twas a most courteous gesture on your part, I must say."

"No problemo. It's not every day I can converse with a myth. If a bully ever has your arm pinned behind your back, just yell my name and I'll be there for you buds, all right?"

"Okay. A most random thought, but, okay," Galendor replied.

"Put 'er there!" Unkel reached out his hand and the two exchanged fives, on the side, up high, and down low.

* * * *

The trees leading to the Profit's house grew so densely that only a few beams of light could peek through. Sounds changed from cheery chirping and squeaking to deeper, calmer whoops and wogs. These weren't spooky or menacing, just

uncommonly different. Galendor wondered if this was even still part of the Yonder Forest. “Mellow.”

“What?” Sir Wicket jumped out of a daze he had lulled himself into.

“This is a very mellow place, Wick. I’m almost falling asleep over here.”

“I know what you mean, man. I’m dragging my tail, literally.” Sir Wicket yawned.

“Squeak squeaky squeak?”

Galendor thought for a moment. “No, I don’t really think it’s *more* enchanted per se, just way serene.”

The silence between the occasional *girp* and *wog* was replaced by the faint melancholy song of a saxanhorn.

Galendor spied a small sign posted above the door of a tree, ‘*Toots.*’ He spoke with a grin, “With the name of Toots, this dude is either gastrointestinally challenged, or he can toot a mean horn. Since it doesn’t reek out here and someone is tearing it up with a saxanhorn, I believe I shall go with the second option.” He continued, “Without further ado and if there be no objections, I shall knock upon the door.”

“Go right ahead.”

“Squeak!”

Galendor gave the door a few good thumps at which the music stopped.

“*What!?*” came a grumpy-sounding question.

“My name is Galendor, Ye Dude from Yonder Forest. My companions and I are traveling far and wide on a mission to save the kingdom. We seek high and low for three who are versed in song!” Galendor tried his best to sound grandiose and official.

“Well keep seeking, ya dig? I don’t see visitors!” barked the voice within the tree.

Galendor tried to be coy, “We’re not visitors dude,

Galendor—Ye Dude from Yonder Forest

we're seekers. The king has fallen into a deep funk and the land is soon to go to pot. We need members for our band."

"Seeking or visiting, *I don't see* anyone!" The voice grew even grumpier.

"Friend, we traveled all day yesterday and all morning. We have to find three people who can play an instrument and *clearly* you can! So, unless somebody else was playing the blues earlier, we're not leaving. And if that be the case, then please send the other somebody out here and we'll be grateful to speak with them." Galendor grew more fervent in his speech. "I don't even want to be on this stinking quest, but if we succeed, I can win the admiration of Princess Jessica! In summary, we're staying on your porch day and night until we start getting some cooperation out here, and *that* is how the cow is eating the cabbage!"

"Telling it *like* it is!" shouted Wicket, pumped from the spirited speech.

After a brief silence, rustling could be heard inside the tree, and the voice less grumpy asked, "Did you say Jesse?"

Galendor, taken aback by the sudden change in tone, cautiously replied, "Well, technically I said Princess Jessica, and then something about your porch and cows eating cabbage."

More rustling preceded descending footsteps. The door opened slowly to reveal a dwarf with a long white beard and mustache. He wore a red shirt, bluish canvas pants, long blue knit hat and black boots with large brass buckles. Atop his fat round nose sat a decently crafted pair of dark sunshades. "My name is Toots McPiffin. Let's rap."

"Aha! And you said you don't see visitors." Galendor smirked triumphantly.

"I don't! I don't see much of anything actually. My eyes don't work anymore."

Galendor felt lower than a snake's belly in a wheel rut.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know, dude.”

Toots laughed it off. “Don’t sweat it, man. You cats can come on in.” He gestured for them to follow.

“Cats? Where? I will *not* associate with cats!” Wick growled as he scoured for the felines.

“Chiill, maaan,” laughed Toots, “it’s just an expression ya dig? You’ve *got* to be a narf.”

“How’d you guess?” Wicket squinted and turned his head in suspicion, as the dwarf’s eyesight was supposedly gone.

“I can smell you...” Toots walked into his house, leaving the door open for the rest.

“What!?” Wicket sniffed his armpits. Galendor chuckled and shrugged.

* * * *

Once they found their places inside, Toots walked around, opening cabinets and navigating obstacles as if he saw everything. He poured some sort of steaming liquid into cups and offered it to the two.

Toots opened in conversation, “So, what’s this kingdom saving jive you’re laying out?”

Galendor took a sip of the warm drink. “Hey, that’s tasty!” He then recounted the story thus far.

Toots lowered his head, obviously deep in thought. He scratched his chin through his thick beard. “I haven’t talked with people for a while, so I suppose life has finally caught up with me. I knew Jessica as a wee lass. I used to live at Castle Yorh, where I watched over her and played music in the king’s courts. The king, queen, and their daughter were the closest things to family I ever had.” The little dwarf placed his hands on his head and lowered it to the table.

Galendor and Wicket paid careful attention to his story.

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“When the queen disappeared, Jesse really depended on me to be there for her when the king could not. As my sight faded away, I could still play fine, but I had a hard time getting around. One day, while carrying some dishes to the kitchen, young Jesse sat playing in the path I took. I dropped dishes all over her and she got cut pretty bad. Everyone knew it was just an accident, but I didn’t want to stay any longer knowing I could hurt her. So, I packed up and left. The far side of Yonder Forest is remote enough that I could be out of people’s way, and they could be out of mine!”

Wicket empathized, “That’s a bum rap, guy. The king’s physician couldn’t help your eyes?”

“Naw, the damage had been done long before, when I was a crystak miner. We didn’t know it at the time, but the light those things channeled really tore us old-timers up.”

“Oh, man,” Wicket’s eyes bugged out. “Crystaks! I bet those things brought a pretty penny when they were still around!” Wicket couldn’t stay on topic when money came into play.

“Wick-et! Let’s focus on the whole ‘saving the kingdom’ thing. Toots, it definitely sounds like you’ve been dealt a rough hand, dude. If the situation were different I’d leave you alone, but we need that crazy horn you blow.” Galendor continued, “Besides, I’m sure the king and princess will be glad to see ya!”

Toots slapped his hands down on the table. “Maybe I have played the blues long enough. Doggone it, it’s time to get out of this hog wallow of pity and get the stank blowed off o’ me! I’m in!”

“That’s it? That’s all the more convincing it takes? Bonus! Wicket, that’s one down!”

“Okay,” Wick nodded, “two more to go. Mr. Toots, do you have any goodies you need to take along?” Wicket rubbed

his paws together, looking for stuff.

“Just call me Toots, man. All I need is my saxanhorn and some clean skivvies. I’ll be right back.” Toots zipped about as if a huge weight had been lifted.

* * * *

Wicket and Galendor wriggled back out of the door to stretch again. Toots came out shortly with a case and a handful of undershorts.

“Squeak?” muttered Wagon reluctantly.

Galendor answered, “Yes, I’m sure they’re clean drawers.” He whispered to Toots, “They are *clean*, aren’t they?”

“Well yes!” Toots spun around, irked by the question.

“Hey, another thing,” Wick tapped Toots on the shoulder, “what about your little satyr mates? Are they going to be okay without you?”

“Eh, they’ll be fine. You can leave a little note saying I’ve taken a vacation and will be back soon.” Toots smiled. “And where will this vacation be leading us today?”

Galendor breathed deeply. “That is a question for which I have no answer. Therefore, we shall walk in the direction which leads to some place we’ve not before been.”

CHAPTER FIVE: FALLING OFF THE EDGE OF ETERNITY

The three, now made four, headed deeper into the wood and away from the afternoon sun. Toots followed Li'l Red Wagon, holding on occasionally for guidance. Galendor had never seen a blind person, and found it particularly amazing that Toots rarely stumbled.

“Hey McPiffen, have you ever been out this way? Is there anything to be wary of?” Wick asked.

“Can't say I have. Walking through the forest ain't my bag, know what I mean?”

Galendor interrupted, “Something just popped into mind. Why do those little satyr dudes call you the Prophet?”

“Not prophet, my man—*pro-fit*,” corrected Toots.

“Say what?” Galendor and Wick asked in unison.

“Their town is a tourist trap for folks in the area who come to hear the mysterious ‘Blues Forest.’ The satyrs dress up like jazz players for show while I play outside for a time. They make a tasty profit and keep the trespassers away, save for you two!”

“And here I thought you were going to have some crazy

foresight or something the way Unkel carried on.” Galendor laughed.

“Unkel...ha ha! Now *there* is a case for ya! That cat’s about four measures shy of a symphony. Is he still making boards?”

“Sure is,” Galendor smiled. “We’re packin’ two of ’em in Wagon!” They all had a good laugh and continued through the dense forest.

* * * *

Taking a breather, Galendor removed his boots to cool his feet while Toots sat under a tree and felt the breeze. Sir Wicket dug through Li'l Red Wagon to further examine Unkel’s boards.

Galendor took interest in Wick’s painstaking analysis. “So, whatcha figure?”

“Well, this long one with a fin...I have *no* clue. The shorter one with wheels must be some sort of conveyance thingy.” Wicket illustrated with his paws. “See, you lay it down on the flat side, then if you had several more, you could line them up single file. That way, if you had a heavy...I don’t know...box, or something, you could slide it along on the wheels.”

“Brilliant! Too bad we only have one and nothing upon which to slide.” Galendor approved of the revelation.

Toots made hurried movements with his eyebrows raised at the center. “Check it, guys; I’d like to stay and rest some more, but something smells dead around here. I think we should scam.”

“I don’t smell anything,” replied Galendor, sniffing. “Do you, Wicket?”

Before Sir Wick could reply, Toots was sniffing and

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following the scent. “Right here! Man, there is a dead animal right here!”

Wicket fell over Wagon giggling, and even Li'l Red squeak-laughed. Galendor rushed to see Toots standing over his boots. “Um, you’re right dude.” Galendor blushed in embarrassment and hurriedly put his boots back on. “I didn’t see it there when we stopped. Let’s move on.”

“I didn’t need to see it, you know. My other senses are at a heightened state of awareness. Almost supernatural isn’t it?” Toots marched off proudly.

“You bet,” agreed Galendor, “supernatural.” He mumbled to Wick, “Not a word, Wicket. Not one word.”

* * * *

Light flooded as the trees thinned. The late afternoon sun at their backs cast orange, pink, and purple shades through the sporadic clouds. Before them blazed a land with colors of red and orange.

“Well, I’ll be a suck egg mule!” Wick shouted.

Toots jumped at the odd turn of phrase. “What’s that all about?”

“We’ve just come out of the forest and are on the edge of the Really Hot Desert,” Wick said, flabbergasted.

“No!” Toots replied, “We’ve walked that far? I never realized I lived so deep in the forest.”

A great canyon blocked any further passage southward, which was fine because they had no intention to trek through a desert.

Galendor and Wick peered into the deep crevasse. “Hey, I bet we can get an awesome echo from up here.” Galendor cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “*Hellooo!*” Both he and Wicket turned an ear to listen for the reply. Sure

enough, soon an echo came back.

“*Hellooo!*”

“That’s great!” shouted Wicket. “*Hellooo!*” He offered. Again, they both turned an ear with a smile.

The reply came, “Stop it you *copycat!*”

Galendor and Toots laughed at the unexpected voice. Wick bore teeth. “Who dares sass the great Sir Wicket of Narfingham?” No answer came.

Wicket snarled and raised his sword high in the air. “Show yourself, knave, that I may smite you with your due comeuppance! The nerve to call the great Sir Wicket of Narfingham a *cat*, be it a copy or otherwise!”

“You’re looking right at me, you flea-bitten ninny!” echoed the voice.

A little slobber flew as Wick yelled, “All I’m seeing right now is a giant canyon!”

“A cookie...give this creature a cookie right now! You are indeed a sharp one, and you deserve a cookie for the sharpness!”

“I got your sharpness right here, mister tectonic fault line, *in the form of my sword!* Now, I don’t know who or what you may be, but when Sir Wicket of Narfingham yells, ‘*Hellooo,*’ he expects a proper echo, and you will satisfy that requirement right *now!*” Wicket shook as his anger grew. Everyone else smiled in amusement at this uncanny exchange.

The canyon backed off, “All right, all right. You’ll yell, I’ll echo, we’ll all be happy.”

Vindicated, Wick cleared his throat, cupped his paws to his mouth and shouted, “*Hellooo!*”

The canyon responded, “*Hellooo!*” then a long pause ending with, “you *nit!*”

“That does it!” Wick blurted as he took his sword and started hacking away at the edge of the cliff.

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“Okay, we’re moving on,” interrupted Galendor. He leaned over the ravine. “We’re leaving now!”

“Good on ya! Be sure to take Coo-coo Poopatinkers with you!” voiced the canyon.

Galendor grabbed Wick by the tail and dragged him away. Wicket kept chopping and screamed, “Your mother was a sewage ditch!”

The canyon replied, “What’s that scent you’re wearing, Eau de Meow?”

“Erode!” fired Wicket.

“Take a flea bath!” quipped the canyon.

Toots interjected, “Enough! Both o’ ya!”

As the troupe traveled off, the canyon remarked, “Come back and see us sometime...guided tours every day at noon.”

* * * *

Even though his attention had turned from the canyon, Wick’s voice didn’t de-escalate. “Where *are* we headed, anyway?”

Toots scratched his head under the cuff of his hat. “If memory serves me correctly, the Taerg Plains are supposed to border the Really Hot Desert on its northern side.”

Wicket eventually became rational, but still spoke in quick, short tones, “You know what I think? I think somebody somewhere ought to have a map! A map of...of Yorh...that’s what I think!”

* * * *

In an hour or two, the sands and the scrub brush at the ends of the desert turned into green and yellow prairie grass. The sun neared completion of its array of colors and headed off

to bed. Crickets' fiddles and the hush of a slight breeze across the grasses replaced the hoots and howls of nighttime back in Yonder Forest. As night progressed, a small fingertip-shaped moon shed just enough light to cast outlines on dark figures.

Galendor lowered his dark glasses. "Would ya just look at that sky! I don't recall ever seeing these billions and billions of stars."

"Yes, Galendor, it's a beauty," Wick replied. "But, you know what? I can't see a thing out here *except* those billions and billions of stars. I'm thinking camping sounds pretty good."

"Squeakity, squeak squeaky, *EEK!*"

Galendor saw Wagon's point. "I suppose you're right. We *are* out in the open, and *would* be vulnerable to the things that go 'bump' in the night."

Wicket countered, "Yes, but if there were any civilization around, wouldn't we see lights or something out here in the black?"

"Hold on a minute," blurted Toots, "I smell fire. It's a faint smell, but it's on the wind in that direction." He pointed, but no one could see the direction.

"Are you sure? I can't smell a thing," Galendor said.

Wick defended, "No, Galendor, I think he's right. I can just make out something, but I couldn't tell you from where."

Toots came back, "I'm giving you the fat and skinny, I can tell where." He instructed, "Hey, Wick, you walk in front of me while I hold your shoulder, dig? With our smart and sassy sniffers, we should be able to lead the blind."

"Sounds like a plan," Wick agreed.

So, the two smell masters blazed a trail through the darkness, sniffing and snorting as if they had some sort of runny nose disease. The sounds were enough to make both Li'l Red and Galendor giggle.

Toots grumbled in response to their laughter. "*Sniff...*"

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You think...*snort*...it's funny now...*whiff, snork*... but you just...*wheeze*...wait until we're...*whiff*...back in civilization...*snort*."

Sure enough, after a short while, the crew crested a long, sloping valley. The near pitch-blackness of night allowed them to see small firelights dotting what must have been miles and miles of lowland plains.

Wicket stated, "It is literally all downhill from here. Let's head for the closest light!"

"Faaarr *out!*" slurred Toots, lightheaded from all the sniffing. "I'm sitting in the wagon now. I'm beat!"

Galendor agreed. "Let's all pile on and arrive at our destination in style. Are you up for it, Li'l Red?"

"Squeak!"

Wicket hung his feet off the front edge of Wagon while straddling the steering handle. Galendor sat crosswise on top of Unkel's boards and all the other packed stuff. Toots leaned back on Galendor's legs while hanging his own legs off the backside.

"Onward *ho!*" Wicket shouted with a haughty smile as he pointed forward. Again, any gestures of grandeur were wasted, as no one could see in the dark.

Li'l Red let out a loud, low-pitched *creak*.

"I said, onward *ho!*" Wicket repeated with the same enthusiasm.

Once again, there came a loud *creak*, from Wagon, but no movement.

"Why aren't we onward *ho-ing?*" mused Galendor.

"Squeakity squeak, eek, *eeeeee!*" The weight was too much to move.

Toots figured a push was needed, so he hopped out to oblige. "Okay Red, on three. One...two...three...push!"

Red wiggled from side to side and creaked a low-

pitched groan that turned into a squealing symphony of stress. Once Wagon moved on his own, Toots hopped aboard.

Li'l Red had no problems staying in motion due to the incline of the hill. The tall grasses of the prairie went *thupita, thupita, thupita* on his front end, then made a *ssrrrr, sssrrr* sound as it brushed his underside. Red's wheels kept a slow and steady rhythm of *EEK-EEK-EEK-EEK*.

The wind blew softly upon the riders' faces as the crew steadily made their way down the hill under the diamond-encrusted tapestry of the night sky.

"This is nice," mentioned Galendor innocently.

"Hear! Hear!" Toots and Wicket shouted in concurrence. Though unseen in the darkness, all smiled wide childlike grins as the simple pleasure of a wagon ride eased the tensions of a long day.

* * * *

It has been said that ignorance is bliss. It has also been said that ignorance of the law excuses no one, which includes the law of gravity. Blissful ignorance of the inevitable and constant acceleration of gravity would not save the group from the steadily increasing incline of the hill.

Soon, the soothing slow sounds of the grasses on the wagon turned to a rapid *whap, whap, whap!* The gentle breeze became a constant wind and the methodical *EEK-EEK* of Li'l Red's wheels turned into a steady *EEEEEEEE!* As the once smooth ride got ever bumpier, the passengers began gripping the sides tightly.

Wicket, being out front, took special interest in the changes. "You know; we've had a slight gain in forward momentum."

Galendor replied, "I concur, and might I add, if our

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status continues to change in such a way, much calamity may befall us.”

Toots rocked back and forth slightly, “Oh man, this is not good. This is *not* good at all.”

Li'l Red Wagon vibrated violently at the constant acceleration, causing all visible lights to jiggle and blur. He was soon rendered helpless to stop or even slow down, and all were at the mercy of the hill! Faster and faster they raced, much like a stone thrown from a catapult without any regard for what lay in its path.

Galendor and Wicket began seeing thousands of tiny lights appearing right in front of them. “Are those Wispies?” Wick barked.

Galendor answered, “No, I think they’re fireflies!”

“I hate Wispies!” Wicket finished.

Hearing their voices broke Toots’ concentration. He shouted in a panicked frenzy, “Oh man-o-man-o-man-o-man-o-man-o-man!”

The swarm of bioluminescent bugs created a diversion for the two sighted riders entering a galaxy of greenish fuzzy light streaks. Those streaks were a great velocity indicator, as Galendor could not only feel the speed, but also see the light trails fly upwards as Wagon shot downwards.

Wick achieved the panic level of uncontrollable babbling. “This was not a good idea at all, in fact if I had to do it over again I probably would have stayed at the top of the hill, that’s what I would have done, I mean who gets into a wagon with no brakes and goes down a hill when they don’t even know how steep the hill is, for goodness sake you just don’t go down a hill in a wagon when the hill is steep, not at all...”

Galendor yelled and grabbed Wicket’s tail to snap him out of his delirium. “Get it together dude! We must focus on what we’re *going* to do, not what we’ve already done!” With

every passing moment, the wagon drove faster and faster. The vibrations intensified fiercely, and the squeak of the wheels reached a nearly inaudible pitch. The whap of the grass had become a constant *kkkkkkk!*

Toots balled himself into a fetal position and rocked back and forth. “We’re gonna die, we’re gonna die, we’re gonna die, we’re gonna die!”

Suddenly, there came a loud *bam*, and all sound stopped, all vibrations stopped, and all sensation ceased.

* * * *

Shock is a funny thing. At the height of fear, all time seems to stop and a mere instant can go on indefinitely.

Toots, unable to see the fireflies in the air, was absolutely convinced they had all, in fact, just died. He felt a bit disappointed, as he hoped his blindness wouldn’t carry over into the afterlife. Seeing no white tunnel of light, he figured he’d just continue sitting in a ball until God came and got him.

* * * *

The others weren’t so tragically puzzled. The little lights stopped zooming, their green glow revealed every detail of the crew’s predicament. Wagon appeared to be suspended in a star field like the one in the night sky. Galendor and Wicket wondered at the sight, completely confounded by the beauty and utter silence surrounding them. Galendor was even able to mutter, “Whoa...cool.”

In that same instant, Wicket’s eyes widened. “Wait a tick...” They hadn’t fallen off the edge of eternity, or slipped unwillingly into the great unknown. “*We’re in the...*” Before he could finish his sentence, everyone’s tummies went *woo-hoo*

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as Wagon plummeted back to Earth after ramping over a rock. Wick finished as the others joined, "...aaaiirrr!"

"Aaaaahhhhh!"

"Oooooohhhhh!"

"Sssqqquuuueeaaakk!"

Wham!

Li'l Red and his cargo came down with horrendous force. "Rats! That's not healing anytime soon!" cried Galendor.

Wicket whined, "Okay, that just sprained my tail!"

"Oh man!" Toots readied his hands near his mouth, "I think I'm gonna spew!"

Alas, there would be no rest for the weary, as they continued to plummet faster and ever-faster toward the firelight.

"Creakity eekity squeak squeak squeee!"

Wicket, still gripping tightly to the front handle, shouted, "Galendor, what did Wagon just say?"

"He said...he's taken a major beating...and can't go on like this!" Galendor leaned forward to keep from yelling, "How're we goin' ta stop this thing? We need a plan."

Sir Wicket, being a knight and all, could strategize under pressure. "Right! All grave situations...call for a plan! We must be men of action; we must not bow to the pressures before us! We shall take our destinies into our own..."

"Dude! If you can't think of anything, just say so!" Galendor fussed.

"All right, all right, I can't think of anything just yet! Hey, wait..."

"What do ya got?" Both Galendor and Toots leaned forward.

"We still have that long board with a fin on the back, right?" Wick asked.

Toots answered, “Yeah man, we’re sittin’ on it.”

“Well, if you two can finagle it so that fin is in the ground, we can dig in and get this thing stopped! Meanwhile, I’ll be helping Li’l Red stay as straight as possible.”

“A fine plan indeed!” Galendor patted Wick on the back. Right away Toots and Galendor shifted to get the pointed fin of the board to face downward. The rough ride and small seating area made it tough to get the board situated.

“Okay Toots, you hold the board down, since you’re on the back,” Galendor instructed.

“The board *is* being held down brother.” Toots informed, holding it in place.

Galendor rebutted, “We’re not slowing down! Hey, Wicket, Toots has the board off the back but we’re still blasting toward the bottom!”

“Blimey! There must not be enough weight to make the fin dig in.”

Galendor leaned over to Toots. “I can hold the thing steady if you’d want to climb on top and weigh that sucker down.”

Toots wasted no time shimmying. “Whatever, as long as we stop this crazy train!”

Wagon rocked, rolled, jittered and shook as he flew downward. The firelight grew closer and closer at an alarming rate. Toots’ weight pushed the fin into the hillside, making a loud *kkkkkkkkk* as it tore through the small rocks and grass.

All onboard jolted forward at the burst of deceleration, but held off celebration until convinced a grizzly fate had been foiled. A few hundred yards later, Li’l Red squealed to a dusty stop near a stone grain silo.

* * * *

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Wicket slid off of the front, knees shaking, and kissed the ground. Toots rolled off the board and flipped on his back, breathing heavily, while Galendor tiptoed about, straightening his kinks and cramps.

Weakness and tiredness only added to the stress relief that came when sore muscles finally unclenched. As if some unseen force mercilessly tickled them, they broke into slaphappy laughter.

Toots' long beard and mustache couldn't conceal his smile as he picked up an imaginary pencil and parchment. "*Ha ha*, note to self...*hee, hee, hee*... whenever anyone comes to the door, wearing a cape, asking you to go on a quest...*snick*... the answer is *no!* *Woo, hoo, hoo!*"

Galendor snickered with a wide grin, "*Ho, ho*... Here's a thought: never follow a small blind dude into a wagon set to go down a giant hill! *Bwah, ha, ha, ha-hoo, hoo!*"

Toots bantered on, "You're the reason we're out here... in the first place *tee, hee, hee!*"

"It wasn't my idea! I was told to do this by a small dude, looking just like you, but wearing a robe!"

Their eyes watered, and faces turned beet red as they erupted into hysterics. A conversation that normally would have hurt feelings and sparked anger became a humorous way to vent the day's frustration.

Galendor rotated his jaw. "Oh, my face hurts! It hurts!"

Toots gasped for air. "My tummy is cramping, I've laughed so hard."

Wicket wiped tears from his eyes. "My face and tummy hurt, but not only from laughing, I'm running on empty."

Calming down and able to think a little more clearly, Toots caught his breath and motioned toward Li'l Red. "There should be a can of beans in the back of Wagon near my stuff. You can crack that bad boy open."

“Great!” Wicket foraged through the disheveled pile. Finding the can, he lifted it high in the air as if finding some great ancient treasure. “I got the thiiing!” He skillfully cut it open and placed it in the fire with a mischievous grin. “I think we should stoke the fire up a bit to keep it burning.”

“Slow down there, Prince Arson,” Galendor warned, “The last thing we need are Wispies.”

“Oh egads and little catfish, they’re a nasty lot.” Toots shuddered.

Wicket only threw some chibbles of wood in the flames. “You know, it’s really weird that no one’s around, what with the fire and all.”

Toots speculated, “You said there is a silo nearby, right? Well, it’s probably from farmers who moved on and didn’t put it out. Are the beans ready?”

“I think so.” Wick dragged the hot can out of the fire with his sword and let it cool for a minute or two.

* * * *

After all had partaken of the nutrients, they each laid down around the fire. Galendor slept to the west, Wicket to the east and Toots to the south. Wagon sat north between the fire and the silo.

“Squeak...”

“Goodnight, Wagon,” Galendor answered. “Go to sleep now.” However, the squeak had come from the south, not the north where Wagon parked.