

## *Chapter 1*

# **King Fred the Fearless**

Once upon a time, there was a tiny country called Cornucopia, which had been ruled for centuries by a long line of fair-haired kings. The king at the time of which I write was called King Fred the Fearless. He'd announced the 'Fearless' bit himself, on the morning of his coronation, partly because it sounded nice with 'Fred', but also because he'd once managed to catch and kill a wasp all by himself, if you didn't count five footmen and the boot boy.

King Fred the Fearless came to the throne on a huge wave of popularity. He had lovely yellow curls, fine sweeping moustaches and looked magnificent in the tight breeches, velvet doublets, and ruffled shirts that rich men wore at the time. Fred was said to be generous, smiled and waved whenever anyone caught sight of him and looked awfully handsome in the portraits that were distributed throughout the kingdom, to be hung in town halls. The people of Cornucopia were most happy with their new king, and many thought he'd end up being even better at the job than his father, Richard the Righteous, whose teeth (though nobody had liked to mention it at the time) were rather crooked.

King Fred was secretly relieved to find out how easy it was to rule Cornucopia. In fact, the country seemed to run itself. Nearly everybody had lots of food, the merchants made pots of gold, and Fred's advisors took care of any little problem that arose. All that was left for Fred to do was beam at his subjects whenever he went out in his carriage and go hunting five times a week with his two best friends, Lord Spittleworth and Lord Flapoon.

Spittleworth and Flapoon had large estates of their own in the country, but they found it much cheaper and more amusing to live at the palace with the king, eating his food, hunting his stags, and making sure that the king didn't get too fond

of any of the beautiful ladies at court. They had no wish to see Fred married, because a queen might spoil all their fun. For a time, Fred had seemed to rather like Lady Eslanda, who was as dark and beautiful as Fred was fair and handsome, but Spittleworth had persuaded Fred that she was far too serious and bookish for the country to love her as queen. Fred didn't know that Lord Spittleworth had a grudge against Lady Eslanda. He'd once asked her to marry *him*, but she'd turned him down.

Lord Spittleworth was very thin, cunning, and clever. His friend Flapoon was ruddy-faced, and so enormous that it required six men to heave him onto his massive chestnut horse. Though not as clever as Spittleworth, Flapoon was still far sharper than the king.

Both lords were expert at flattery, and pretending to be astonished by how good Fred was at everything from riding to tiddlywinks. If Spittleworth had a particular talent, it was persuading the king to do things that suited Spittleworth, and if Flapoon had a gift, it was for convincing the king that nobody on earth was as loyal to the king as his two best friends.

Fred thought Spittleworth and Flapoon were jolly good chaps. They urged him to hold fancy parties, elaborate picnics, and sumptuous banquets, because Cornucopia was famous, far beyond its borders, for its food. Each of its cities was known for a different kind, and each was the very best in the world.

The capital of Cornucopia, Chouxville, lay in the south of the country, and was surrounded by acres of orchards, fields of shimmering golden wheat, and emerald-green grass, on which pure white dairy cows grazed. The cream, flour, and fruit produced by the farmers here was then given to the exceptional bakers of Chouxville, who made pastries.

Think, if you please, of the most delicious cake or biscuit you have ever tasted. Well, let me tell you they'd have been downright ashamed to serve that in

Chouxville. Unless a grown man's eyes filled with tears of pleasure as he bit into a Chouxville pastry, it was deemed a failure and never made again. The bakery windows of Chouxville were piled high with delicacies such as Maidens' Dreams, Fairies' Cradles, and, most famous of all, Hopes-of-Heaven, which were so exquisitely, painfully delicious that they were saved for special occasions and everybody cried for joy as they ate them. King Porfirio, of neighbouring Pluritania, had already sent King Fred a letter, offering him the choice of any of his daughters' hands in marriage in exchange for a lifetime's supply of Hopes-of-Heaven, but Spittleworth had advised Fred to laugh in the Pluritanian ambassador's face.

'His daughters are nowhere *near* pretty enough to exchange for Hopes-of-Heaven, sire!' said Spittleworth.

To the north of Chouxville lay more green fields and clear, sparkling rivers, where jet-black cows and happy pink pigs were raised. These in turn served the twin cities of Kurdsburg and Baronstown, which were separated from each other by an arching stone bridge over the main river of Cornucopia, the Fluma, where brightly coloured barges bore goods from one end of the kingdom to another.

Kurdsburg was famous for its cheeses: huge white wheels, dense orange cannonballs, big crumbly blue-veined barrels and little baby cream cheeses smoother than velvet.

Baronstown was celebrated for its smoked and honey-roasted hams, its sides of bacon, its spicy sausages, its melting beefsteaks, and its venison pies.

The savoury fumes rising from the chimneys of the red-brick Baronstown stoves mingled with the odorous tang wafting from the doorways of the Kurdsburg cheesemongers, and for forty miles all around, it was impossible not to salivate breathing in the delicious air.

A few hours north of Kurdsburg and Baronstown, you came upon acres of vineyards bearing grapes as large as eggs, each of them ripe and sweet and juicy. Journey onwards for the rest of the day and you reached the granite city of Jeroboam, famous for its wines. They said of the Jeroboam air that you could get tipsy simply walking its streets. The best vintages changed hands for thousands upon thousands of gold coins, and the Jeroboam wine merchants were some of the richest men in the kingdom.

But a little north of Jeroboam, a strange thing happened. It was as though the magically rich land of Cornucopia had exhausted itself by producing the best grass, the best fruit, and the best wheat in the world. Right at the northern tip came the place known as the Marshlands, and the only things that grew there were some tasteless, rubbery mushrooms and thin dry grass, only good enough to feed a few mangy sheep.

The Marshlanders who tended the sheep didn't have the sleek, well-rounded, well-dressed appearance of the citizens of Jeroboam, Baronstown, Kurdsburg, or Chouxville. They were gaunt and ragged. Their poorly nourished sheep never fetched very good prices, either in Cornucopia or abroad, so very few Marshlanders ever got to taste the delights of Cornucopian wine, cheese, beef, or pastries. The most common dish in the Marshlands was a greasy mutton broth, made of those sheep who were too old to sell.

The rest of Cornucopia found the Marshlanders an odd bunch – surly, dirty, and ill-tempered. They had rough voices, which the other Cornucopians imitated, making them sound like hoarse old sheep. Jokes were made about their manners and their simplicity. As far as the rest of Cornucopia was concerned, the only memorable thing that had ever come out of the Marshlands was the legend of the Ickabog.

## *Chapter 2*

# **The Ickabog**

The legend of the Ickabog had been passed down by generations of Marshlanders, and spread by word of mouth all the way to Chouxville. Nowadays, everybody knew the story. Naturally, as with all legends, it changed a little depending on who was telling it. However, every story agreed that a monster lived at the very northernmost tip of the country, in a wide patch of dark and often misty marsh too dangerous for humans to enter. The monster was said to eat children and sheep. Sometimes it even carried off grown men and women who strayed too close to the marsh at night.

The habits and appearance of the Ickabog changed depending on who was describing it. Some made it snakelike, others dragonish or wolflike. Some said it roared, others that it hissed, and still others said that it drifted as silently as the mists that descended on the marsh without warning.

The Ickabog, they said, had extraordinary powers. It could imitate the human voice to lure travellers into its clutches. If you tried to kill it, it would mend magically, or else split into two Ickabogs; it could fly, spurt fire, shoot poison – the Ickabog’s powers were as great as the imagination of the teller.

‘Mind you don’t leave the garden while I’m working,’ parents all over the kingdom would tell their children, ‘or the Ickabog will catch you and eat you all up!’ And throughout the land, boys and girls played at fighting the Ickabog, tried to frighten each other with the tale of the Ickabog, and even, if the story became too convincing, had nightmares about the Ickabog.

Bert Beamish was one such little boy. When a family called the Dovetails came over for dinner one night, Mr Dovetail entertained everybody with what he claimed was the latest news of the Ickabog. That night, five-year-old Bert woke,

sobbing and terrified, from a dream in which the monster's huge white eyes were gleaming at him across a foggy marsh into which he was slowly sinking.

'There, there,' whispered his mother, who'd tiptoed into his room with a candle and now rocked him backwards and forwards in her lap. 'There is no Ickabog, Bertie. It's just a silly story.'

'B-but Mr Dovetail said sheep have g-gone missing!' hiccupped Bert.

'So they have,' said Mrs Beamish, 'but not because a monster took them. Sheep are foolish creatures. They wander off and get lost in the marsh.'

'B-but Mr Dovetail said p-people disappear, too!'

'Only people who're silly enough to stray onto the marsh at night,' said Mrs Beamish. 'Hush now, Bertie, there is no monster.'

'But Mr D-Dovetail said p-people heard voices outside their windows and in the m-morning their chickens were gone!'

Mrs Beamish couldn't help but laugh.

'The voices they heard are ordinary thieves, Bertie. Up in the Marshlands they pilfer from each other all the time. It's easier to blame the Ickabog than to admit their neighbours are stealing from them!'

'Stealing?' gasped Bert, sitting up in his mother's lap and gazing at her with solemn eyes. 'Stealing's very naughty, isn't it, Mummy?'

'It's very naughty indeed,' said Mrs Beamish, lifting up Bert, placing him tenderly back into his warm bed and tucking him in. 'But luckily, we don't live near those lawless Marshlanders.'

She picked up her candle and tiptoed back towards the bedroom door.

'Night, night,' she whispered from the doorway. She'd normally have added, 'Don't let the Ickabog bite,' which was what parents across Cornucopia said to their children at bedtime, but instead she said, 'Sleep tight.'

Bert fell asleep again, and saw no more monsters in his dreams.

It so happened that Mr Dovetail and Mrs Beamish were great friends. They'd been in the same class at school, and had known each other all their lives. When Mr Dovetail heard that he'd given Bert nightmares, he felt guilty. As he was the best carpenter in all of Chouxville, he decided to carve the little boy an Ickabog. It had a wide, smiling mouth full of teeth and big, clawed feet, and at once it became Bert's favourite toy.

If Bert, or his parents, or the Dovetails next door, or anybody else in the whole kingdom of Cornucopia had been told that terrible troubles were about to engulf Cornucopia, all because of the myth of the Ickabog, they'd have laughed. They lived in the happiest kingdom in the world. What harm could the Ickabog do?

The Beamish and Dovetail families both lived in a place called the City-Within-The-City. This was the part of Chouxville where all the people who worked for King Fred had houses. Gardeners, cooks, tailors, pageboys, seamstresses, stonemasons, grooms, carpenters, footmen, and maids: all of them occupied neat little cottages just outside the palace grounds.

The City-Within-The-City was separated from the rest of Chouxville by a high white wall, and the gates in the wall stood open during the day, so that the residents could visit friends and family in the rest of Chouxville, and go to the markets. By night, the sturdy gates were closed, and everyone in the City-Within-The-City slept, like the king, under the protection of the Royal Guard.

Major Beamish, Bert's father, was head of the Royal Guard. A handsome, cheerful man who rode a steel-grey horse, he accompanied King Fred, Lord Spittleworth, and Lord Flapoon on their hunting trips, which usually happened five times a week. The king liked Major Beamish, and he also liked Bert's mother,

because Bertha Beamish was the king's own private pastry chef, a high honour in that city of world-class bakers. Due to Bertha's habit of bringing home fancy cakes that hadn't turned out absolutely perfectly, Bert was a plump little boy, and sometimes, I regret to say, the other children called him 'Butterball' and made him cry.

Bert's best friend was Daisy Dovetail. The two children had been born days apart, and acted more like brother and sister than playmates. Daisy was Bert's defender against bullies. She was skinny but fast, and more than ready to fight anyone who called Bert 'Butterball'.

Daisy's father, Dan Dovetail, was the king's carpenter, repairing and replacing the wheels and shafts on his carriages. As Mr Dovetail was so clever at carving, he also made bits of furniture for the palace.

Daisy's mother, Dora Dovetail, was the Head Seamstress of the palace – another honoured job, because King Fred liked clothes, and kept a whole team of tailors busy making him new costumes every month.

It was the king's great fondness for finery that led to a nasty incident which the history books of Cornucopia would later record as the beginning of all the troubles that were to engulf that happy little kingdom. At the time it happened, only a few people within the City-Within-The-City knew anything about it, though for some, it was an awful tragedy.

What happened was this.

The King of Pluritania came to pay a formal visit to Fred (still hoping, perhaps, to exchange one of his daughters for a lifetime's supply of Hopes-of-Heaven) and Fred decided that he must have a brand-new set of clothes made for the occasion: dull purple, overlaid with silver lace, with amethyst buttons, and grey fur at the cuffs.

Now, King Fred had heard something about the Head Seamstress not being quite well, but he hadn't paid much attention. He didn't trust anyone but Daisy's mother to stitch on the silver lace properly, so gave the order that nobody else should be given the job. In consequence, Daisy's mother sat up three nights in a row, racing to finish the purple suit in time for the King of Pluritania's visit, and at dawn on the fourth day, her assistant found her lying on the floor, dead, with the very last amethyst button in her hand.

The king's Chief Advisor came to break the news, while Fred was still having his breakfast. The Chief Advisor was a wise old man called Herringbone, with a silver beard that hung almost to his knees. After explaining that the Head Seamstress had died, he said:

'But I'm sure one of the other ladies will be able to fix on the last button for Your Majesty.'

There was a look in Herringbone's eye that King Fred didn't like. It gave him a squirming feeling in the pit of his stomach.

While his dressers were helping him into the new purple suit later that morning, Fred tried to make himself feel less guilty by talking the matter over with Lords Spittleworth and Flapoon.

'I mean to say, if I'd known she was seriously ill,' panted Fred, as the servants heaved him into his skin-tight satin pantaloons, 'naturally I'd have let someone else sew the suit.'

'Your Majesty is so kind,' said Spittleworth, as he examined his sallow complexion in the mirror over the fireplace. 'A more tender-hearted monarch was never born.'

‘The woman should have spoken up if she felt unwell,’ grunted Flapoon from a cushioned seat by the window. ‘If she’s not fit to work, she should’ve said so. Properly looked at, that’s disloyalty to the king. Or to your suit, anyway.’

‘Flapoon’s right,’ said Spittleworth, turning away from the mirror. ‘Nobody could treat his servants better than you do, sire.’

‘I *do* treat them well, don’t I?’ said King Fred anxiously, sucking in his stomach as the dressers did up his amethyst buttons. ‘And after all, chaps, I’ve got to look my blasted best today, haven’t I? You know how dressy the King of Pluritania always is!’

‘It would be a matter of national shame if you were any less well-dressed than the King of Pluritania,’ said Spittleworth.

‘Put this unhappy occurrence out of your mind, sire,’ said Flapoon. ‘A disloyal seamstress is no reason to spoil a sunny day.’

And yet, in spite of the two lords’ advice, King Fred couldn’t be quite easy in his mind. Perhaps he was imagining it, but he thought Lady Eslanda looked particularly serious that day. The servants’ smiles seemed colder, and the maids’ curtsies a little less deep. As his court feasted that evening with the King of Pluritania, Fred’s thoughts kept drifting back to the seamstress, dead on the floor, with the last amethyst button clutched in her hand.

Before Fred went to bed that night, Herringbone knocked on his bedroom door. After bowing deeply, the Chief Advisor asked whether the king was intending to send flowers to Mrs Dovetail’s funeral.

‘Oh – oh, yes!’ said Fred, startled. ‘Yes, send a big wreath, you know, saying how sorry I am and so forth. You can arrange that, can’t you, Herringbone?’

‘Certainly, sire,’ said the Chief Advisor. ‘And – if I may ask – are you planning to visit the seamstress’s family, at all? They live, you know, just a short walk from the palace gates.’

‘Visit them?’ said the king pensively. ‘Oh, no, Herringbone, I don’t think I’d like – I mean to say, I’m sure they aren’t expecting that.’

Herringbone and the king looked at each other for a few seconds, then the Chief Advisor bowed and left the room.

Now, as King Fred was used to everyone telling him what a marvellous chap he was, he really didn’t like the frown with which the Chief Advisor had left. He now began to feel cross rather than ashamed.

‘It’s a bally pity,’ he told his reflection, turning back to the mirror in which he’d been combing his moustaches before bed, ‘but after all, I’m the king and she was a seamstress. If *I* died, I wouldn’t have expected *her* to—’

But then it occurred to him that if he died, he’d expect the whole of Cornucopia to stop whatever they were doing, dress all in black and weep for a week, just as they’d done for his father, Richard the Righteous.

‘Well, anyway,’ he said impatiently to his reflection, ‘life goes on.’

He put on his silk nightcap, climbed into his four-poster bed, blew out the candle and fell asleep.

#### *Chapter 4*

## **The Quiet House**

Mrs Dovetail was buried in the graveyard in the City-Within-The-City, where generations of royal servants lay. Daisy and her father stood hand-in-hand, looking down at the grave, for a long time. Bert kept looking back at Daisy as his tearful mother and grim-faced father led him slowly away. Bert wanted to say something to

his best friend, but what had happened was too enormous and dreadful for words. Bert could hardly bear to imagine how he'd feel if his mother had disappeared forever into the cold, hard earth.

When all their friends had gone, Mr Dovetail moved the purple wreath sent by the king away from Mrs Dovetail's headstone, and put in its place the small bunch of snowdrops that Daisy had collected that morning. Then the two Dovetails walked slowly home to a house they knew would never be the same again.

A week after the funeral, the king rode out of the palace with the Royal Guard to go hunting. As usual, everyone along his route came rushing out into their gardens to bow, curtsy, and cheer. As the king bowed and waved back, he noticed that the front garden of one cottage remained empty. It had black drapes at the windows and the front door.

'Who lives there?' he asked Major Beamish.

'That – that's the Dovetail house, Your Majesty,' said Beamish.

'Dovetail, Dovetail,' said the king, frowning. 'I've heard that name, haven't I?'

'Er... yes, sire,' said Major Beamish. 'Mr Dovetail is Your Majesty's carpenter and Mrs Dovetail is – was – Your Majesty's Head Seamstress.'

'Ah, yes,' said King Fred hurriedly, 'I – I remember.'

And spurring his milk-white charger into a canter, he rode swiftly past the black-draped windows of the Dovetail cottage, trying to think of nothing but the day's hunting that lay ahead.

But every time the king rode out after that, he couldn't help but fix his eyes on the empty garden and the black-draped door of the Dovetail residence, and every time he saw the cottage, the image of the dead seamstress clutching that amethyst



The next time King Fred rode out, the black drapes had vanished from the door and the Roach children – four strapping brothers, the ones who'd first christened Bert Beamish 'Butterball' – came running into the front garden and jumped up and down, cheering and waving Cornucopian flags. King Fred beamed and waved back at the boys. Weeks passed, and King Fred forgot all about the Dovetails, and was happy again.

*Chapter 5*

## **Daisy Dove**

For some months after Mrs Dove's shocking death, the king's servants were divided into two groups. The first group whispered that King Fred had been to blame for the way she'd died. The second preferred to believe there'd been some kind of mistake, and that the king couldn't have known how ill Mrs Dove was before giving the order that she must finish his suit.

Mrs Beamish, the pastry chef, belonged to the second group. The king had always been very nice to Mrs Beamish, sometimes even inviting her into the dining room to congratulate her on particularly fine batches of Dukes' Delights or Folderol Fancies, so she was sure he was a kind, generous, and considerate man.

'You mark my words, somebody forgot to give the king a message,' she told her husband, Major Beamish. 'He'd *never* make an ill servant work. I know he must feel simply awful about what happened.'

'Yes,' said Major Beamish, 'I'm sure he does.'

Like his wife, Major Beamish wanted to think the best of the king, because he, his father, and his grandfather before him had all served loyally in the Royal Guard. So even though Major Beamish observed that King Fred seemed quite cheerful after Mrs Dove's death, hunting as regularly as ever, and though Major Beamish knew that the Dovetails had been moved out of their old house to live down by the graveyard, he tried to believe that the king was sorry for

what had happened to his seamstress, and that he'd had no hand in moving her husband and daughter.

The Dovetails' new cottage was a gloomy place. Sunlight was blocked out by the high yew trees that bordered the graveyard, although Daisy's bedroom window gave her a clear view of her mother's grave, through a gap between dark branches. As she no longer lived next door to Bert, Daisy saw less of him in her free time, although Bert went to visit Daisy as often as possible. There was much less room to play in her new garden, but they adjusted their games to fit.

What Mr Dovetail thought about his new house, or the king, nobody knew. He never discussed these matters with his fellow servants, but went quietly about his work, earning the money he needed to support his daughter and raising Daisy as best he could without her mother.

Daisy, who liked helping her father in his carpenter's workshop, had always been happiest in overalls. She was the kind of person who didn't mind getting dirty and she wasn't very interested in clothes. Yet in the days following the funeral, she wore a different dress every day to take a fresh posy to her mother's grave. While alive, Mrs Dovetail had always tried to make her daughter look, as she put it, 'like a little lady', and had made her many beautiful little gowns, sometimes from the offcuts of material that King Fred graciously let her keep after she'd made his superb costumes.

And so a week passed, then a month, and then a year, until the dresses her mother had sewn her were all too small for Daisy, but she still kept them carefully in her wardrobe. Other people seemed to have forgotten what had happened to Daisy, or had got used to the idea of her mother being gone. Daisy pretended that she was used to it too. On the surface, her life returned to something like normal. She helped her father in the workshop, did her schoolwork and played with her best friend, Bert, but they never spoke about her mother, and they never talked about the king. Every night, Daisy lay with her eyes fixed on the distant white headstone shining in the moonlight, until she fell asleep.

## Chapter 6

# The Fight in the Courtyard

There was a courtyard behind the palace where peacocks walked, fountains played, and statues of former kings and queens kept watch. As long as they didn't pull the peacocks' tails, jump in the fountains, or climb the statues, the children of the palace servants were allowed to play in the courtyard after school. Sometimes Lady Eslanda, who liked children, would come and make daisy chains with them, but the most exciting thing of all was when King Fred came out onto the balcony and waved, which made all the children cheer, bow, and curtsy as their parents had taught them.

The only time the children fell silent, ceased their games of hopscotch, and stopped pretending to fight the Ickabog, was when the lords Spittleworth and Flapoon passed through the courtyard. These two lords weren't fond of children at all. They thought the little brats made far too much noise in the late afternoon, which was precisely the time when Spittleworth and Flapoon liked to take a nap between hunting and dinner.

One day, shortly after Bert and Daisy's seventh birthdays, when everyone was playing as usual between the fountains and the peacocks, the daughter of the new Head Seamstress, who was wearing a beautiful dress of rose-pink brocade, said:

'Oh, I *do* hope the king waves at us today!'

'Well, I don't,' said Daisy, who couldn't help herself, and didn't realise how loudly she'd spoken.

The children all gasped and turned to look at her. Daisy felt hot and cold at once, seeing them all glaring.

'You shouldn't have said that,' whispered Bert. As he was standing right next to Daisy, the other children were staring at him too.

'I don't care,' said Daisy, colour rising in her face. She'd started now, so she might as well finish. 'If he hadn't worked my mother so hard, she'd still be alive.'

Daisy felt as though she'd been wanting to say that out loud for a very long time.

There was another gasp from all the surrounding children, and a maid's daughter actually squealed in terror.

'He's the best king of Cornucopia we've ever had,' said Bert, who'd heard his mother say so many times.

'No, he isn't,' said Daisy loudly. 'He's selfish, vain, and cruel!'

'Daisy!' whispered Bert, horrified. 'Don't be – don't be *silly!*'

It was the word 'silly' that did it. 'Silly', when the new Head Seamstress's daughter smirked and whispered behind her hand to her friends, while pointing at Daisy's overalls? 'Silly', when her father wiped away his tears in the evenings, thinking Daisy wasn't looking? 'Silly', when to talk to her mother she had to visit a cold white headstone?

Daisy drew back her hand, and smacked Bert right around the face.

Then the oldest Roach brother, whose name was Roderick and who now lived in Daisy's old bedroom, shouted, 'Don't let her get away with it, Butterball!' and led all the boys in shouts of 'Fight! Fight! Fight!'

Terrified, Bert gave Daisy's shoulder a half-hearted shove, and it seemed to Daisy that the only thing to do was to launch herself at Bert, and everything became dust and elbows until suddenly the two children were pulled apart by Bert's father, Major Beamish, who'd come running out of the palace on hearing the commotion, to find out what was going on.

'Dreadful behaviour,' muttered Lord Spittleworth, walking past the major and the two sobbing, struggling children.

But as he turned away, a broad smirk spread over Lord Spittleworth's face. He was a man who knew how to turn a situation to good use, and he thought he might have found a way to banish children – or some of them, anyway – from the palace courtyard.

## *Chapter 7*

# Lord Spittleworth Tells Tales

That night, the two lords dined, as usual, with King Fred. After a sumptuous meal of Baronstown venison, accompanied by the finest Jeroboam wine, followed by a selection of Kurdsburg cheeses and some of Mrs Beamish's featherlight Fairies' Cradles, Lord Spittleworth decided the moment had come. He cleared his throat, then said:

'I do hope, Your Majesty, that you weren't disturbed by that disgusting fight among the children in the courtyard this afternoon?'

'Fight?' repeated King Fred, who'd been talking to his tailor about the design for a new cloak, so had heard nothing. 'What fight?'

'Oh dear... I thought Your Majesty knew,' said Lord Spittleworth, pretending to be startled. 'Perhaps Major Beamish could tell you all about it.'

But King Fred was amused rather than disturbed.

'Oh, I believe scuffles among children are quite usual, Spittleworth.'

Spittleworth and Flapoon exchanged looks behind the king's back, and Spittleworth tried again.

'Your Majesty is, as ever, the very soul of kindness,' said Spittleworth.

'Of course, some kings,' Flapoon muttered, brushing crumbs off the front of his waistcoat, 'if they'd heard that a child spoke of the crown so disrespectfully...'

'What's that?' exclaimed Fred, the smile fading from his face. 'A child spoke of me... disrespectfully?' Fred couldn't believe it. He was used to the children shrieking with excitement when he bowed to them from the balcony.

'I believe so, Your Majesty,' said Spittleworth, examining his fingernails, 'but, as I mentioned... it was Major Beamish who separated the children... he has all the details.'

The candles sputtered a little in their silver sticks.

'Children... say all manner of things, in fun,' said King Fred. 'Doubtless the child meant no harm.'

‘Sounded like bally treason to me,’ grunted Flapoon.

‘But,’ said Spittleworth swiftly, ‘it is Major Beamish who knows the details. Flapoon and I may, perhaps, have misheard.’

Fred sipped his wine. At that moment, a footman entered the room to remove the pudding plates.

‘Cankerby,’ said King Fred, for such was the footman’s name, ‘fetch Major Beamish here.’

Unlike the king and the two lords, Major Beamish didn’t eat seven courses for dinner every night. He’d finished his supper hours ago, and was getting ready for bed when the summons from the king arrived. The major hastily swapped his pyjamas for his uniform, and dashed back to the palace, by which time King Fred, Lord Spittleworth, and Lord Flapoon had retired to the Yellow Parlour, where they were sitting on satin armchairs, drinking more Jeroboam wine and, in Flapoon’s case, eating a second plate of Fairies’ Cradles.

‘Ah, Beamish,’ said King Fred, as the major made a deep bow. ‘I hear there was a little commotion in the courtyard this afternoon.’

The major’s heart sank. He’d hoped that news of Bert and Daisy’s fight wouldn’t reach the king’s ears.

‘Oh, it was really nothing, Your Majesty,’ said Beamish.

‘Come, come, Beamish,’ said Flapoon. ‘You should be proud that you’ve taught your son not to tolerate traitors.’

‘I... there was no question of treachery,’ said Major Beamish. ‘They’re only children, my lord.’

‘Do I understand that your son defended me, Beamish?’ said King Fred.

Major Beamish was in a most unfortunate position. He didn’t want to tell the king what Daisy had said. Whatever his own loyalty to the king, he quite understood why the motherless little girl felt the way she did about Fred, and the last thing he wanted to do was to get her into

trouble. At the same time, he was well aware that there were twenty witnesses who could tell the king exactly what Daisy had said, and was sure that, if he lied, Lord Spittleworth and Lord Flapoon would tell the king that he, Major Beamish, was also disloyal and treacherous.

‘I... yes, Your Majesty, it’s true that my son Bert defended you,’ said Major Beamish. ‘However, allowance must surely be made for the little girl who said the... the unfortunate thing about Your Majesty. She’s passed through a great deal of trouble, Your Majesty, and even unhappy grown-ups may talk wildly at times.’

‘What kind of trouble has the girl passed through?’ asked King Fred, who couldn’t imagine any good reason for a subject to speak rudely of him.

‘She... her name is Daisy Dovetail, Your Majesty,’ said Major Beamish, staring over King Fred’s head at a picture of his father, King Richard the Righteous. ‘Her mother was the seamstress who—’

‘Yes, yes, I remember,’ said King Fred loudly, cutting Major Beamish off. ‘Very well, that’s all, Beamish. Off you go.’

Somewhat relieved, Major Beamish bowed deeply again and had almost reached the door when he heard the king’s voice.

‘What *exactly* did the girl say, Beamish?’

Major Beamish paused with his hand on the doorknob. There was nothing else for it but to tell the truth.

‘She said that Your Majesty is selfish, vain, and cruel,’ said Major Beamish. Not daring to look at the king, he left the room.

## **The Day of Petition**

*Selfish, vain, and cruel. Selfish, vain, and cruel.*

The words echoed in the king’s head as he pulled on his silk nightcap. It couldn’t be true, could it? It took Fred a long time to fall asleep, and when he woke in the morning he felt, if anything, worse.

He decided he wanted to do something kind, and the first thing that occurred to him was to reward Beamish's son, who'd defended him against that nasty little girl. So he took a small medallion that usually hung around the neck of his favourite hunting dog, asked a maid to thread ribbon through it, and summoned the Beamishes to the palace. Bert, whom his mother had pulled out of class and hurriedly dressed in a blue velvet suit, was struck speechless in the presence of the king, which Fred enjoyed, and he spent several minutes speaking kindly to the boy, while Major and Mrs Beamish nearly burst with pride in their son. Finally, Bert returned to school, with his little gold medal around his neck, and was made much of in the playground that afternoon by Roderick Roach, who was usually his biggest bully. Daisy said nothing at all and when Bert caught her eye, he felt hot and uncomfortable, and shoved the medal out of sight beneath his shirt.

The king, meanwhile, still wasn't entirely happy. An uneasy feeling stayed with him, like indigestion, and again, he found it hard to sleep that night.

When he woke the next day, he remembered that it was the Day of Petition.

The Day of Petition was a special day held once a year, when the subjects of Cornucopia were permitted an audience with the king. Naturally, these people were carefully screened by Fred's advisors before they were allowed to see him. Fred never dealt with big problems. He saw people whose troubles could be solved with a few gold coins and a few kind words: a farmer with a broken plough, for instance, or an old lady whose cat had died. Fred had been looking forward to the Day of Petition. It was a chance to dress up in his fanciest clothes, and he found it so touching to see how much he meant to the ordinary people of Cornucopia.

Fred's dressers were waiting for him after breakfast, with a new outfit he'd requested just the previous month: white satin pantaloons and matching doublet, with gold and pearl buttons; a cloak edged with ermine and lined in scarlet; and

white satin shoes with gold and pearl buckles. His valet was waiting with the golden tongs, ready to curl his moustaches, and a pageboy stood ready with a number of jewelled rings on a velvet cushion, waiting for Fred to make his selection.

‘Take all that away, I don’t want it,’ said King Fred crossly, waving at the outfit the dressers were holding up for his approval. The dressers froze. They weren’t sure they’d heard correctly. King Fred had taken an immense interest in the progress of the costume, and had requested the addition of the scarlet lining and fancy buckles himself. ‘I said, take it away!’ he snapped, when nobody moved. ‘Fetch me something plain! Fetch me that suit I wore to my father’s funeral!’

‘Is... is Your Majesty quite well?’ enquired his valet, as the astonished dressers bowed and hurried away with the white suit, and returned in double-quick time with a black one.

‘Of course I’m well,’ snapped Fred. ‘But I’m a man, not a frivolling popinjay.’

He shrugged on the black suit, which was the plainest he owned, though still rather splendid, having silver edging to the cuffs and collar, and onyx and diamond buttons. Then, to the astonishment of the valet, he permitted the man to curl only the very ends of his moustaches, before dismissing both him and the pageboy bearing the cushion full of rings.

*There,* thought Fred, examining himself in the mirror. *How can I be called vain? Black definitely isn’t one of my best colours.*

So unusually speedy had Fred been in getting dressed, that Lord Spittleworth, who was making one of Fred’s servants dig earwax out of his ears, and Lord Flapoon, who was guzzling a plate of Dukes’ Delights which he’d ordered from the kitchens, were caught by surprise, and came running out of their bedrooms, pulling on their waistcoats and hopping as they put on their boots.

‘Hurry up, you lazy chaps!’ called King Fred, as the two lords chased him down the corridor. ‘There are people waiting for my help!’

*And would a selfish king hurry to meet simple people who wanted favours from him?* thought Fred. *No, he wouldn’t!*

Fred’s advisors were shocked to see him on time, and plainly dressed, for Fred. Indeed, Herringbone, the Chief Advisor, wore an approving smile as he bowed.

‘Your Majesty is early,’ he said. ‘The people will be delighted. They’ve been queuing since dawn.’

‘Show them in, Herringbone,’ said the king, settling himself on his throne, and gesturing to Spittleworth and Flapoon to take the seats on either side of him.

The doors were opened, and one by one, the petitioners entered.

Fred’s subjects often became tongue-tied when they found themselves face-to-face with the real, live king, whose picture hung in their town halls. Some began to giggle, or forgot what they’d come for, and once or twice people fainted. Fred was particularly gracious today, and each petition ended with the king handing out a couple of gold coins, or blessing a baby, or allowing an old woman to kiss his hand.

Today, though, while he smiled and handed out gold coins and promises, the words of Daisy Dovetail kept echoing in his head. *Selfish, vain, and cruel*. He wanted to do something special to prove what a wonderful man he was – to show that he was ready to sacrifice himself for others. Every king of Cornucopia had handed out gold coins and trifling favours on the Day of Petition: Fred wanted to do something so splendid that it would ring down the ages, and you didn’t get into the history books by replacing a fruit farmer’s favourite hat.

The two lords on either side of Fred were becoming bored. They’d much rather have been left to loll in their bedrooms until lunchtime than sit here listening to peasants talking about their petty troubles. After several hours, the last petitioner

passed gratefully out of the Throne Room, and Flapoon, whose stomach had been rumbling for nearly an hour, heaved himself out of his chair with a sigh of relief.

‘Lunchtime!’ boomed Flapoon, but just as the guards were attempting to close the doors, a kerfuffle was heard, and the doors flew open once more.

## *Chapter 9*

# **The Shepherd’s Story**

‘Your Majesty,’ said Herringbone, hurrying towards King Fred, who’d just risen from the throne. ‘There is a shepherd from the Marshlands here to petition you, sire. He’s a little late – I could send him away, if Your Majesty wants his lunch?’

‘A Marshlander!’ said Spittleworth, waving his scented handkerchief beneath his nose. ‘Imagine, sire!’

‘Dashed impertinence, being late for the king,’ said Flapoon.

‘No,’ said Fred, after a brief hesitation. ‘No – if the poor fellow has travelled this far, we shall see him. Send him in, Herringbone.’

The Chief Advisor was delighted at this further evidence of a new, kind, and considerate king, and hurried off to the double doors to tell the guards to let the shepherd inside. The king settled himself back on his throne and Spittleworth and Flapoon sat back down on their chairs, their expressions sour.

The old man who now tottered up the long red carpet towards the throne was very weather-beaten and rather dirty, with a straggly beard, and ragged, patched clothes. He snatched off his cap as he approached the king, looking thoroughly frightened, and when he reached the place where people usually bowed or curtsied, he fell to his knees instead.

‘Your Majesty!’ he wheezed.

‘Your Maaaaaa-jesty,’ Spittleworth imitated him softly, making the old shepherd sound like a sheep.

Flapoon’s chins trembled with silent laughter.

‘Your Majesty,’ continued the shepherd, ‘I have travelled for five long days for to see ye. It has been a hard journey. I has ridden in hayricks when I could, and walked when I couldn’t, and my boots is all holes—’

‘Oh, get on with it, do,’ muttered Spittleworth, his long nose still buried in his handkerchief.

‘—but all the time I was travelling, I thought of old Patch, sire, and how ye’d help me if I could but reach the palace—’

‘What is “old Patch”, good fellow?’ asked the king, his eyes upon the shepherd’s much-darned trousers.

‘’Tis my old dog, sire – or was, I should perhaps say,’ replied the shepherd, his eyes filling with tears.

‘Ah,’ said King Fred, fumbling with the money purse at his belt. ‘Then, good shepherd, take these few gold coins and buy yourself a new—’

‘Nay, sire, thank ye, but it bain’t a question of the gold,’ said the shepherd. ‘I can find meself a puppy easy enough, though it’ll never match old Patch.’ The shepherd wiped his nose on his sleeve. Spittleworth shuddered.

‘Well, then, why have you come to me?’ asked King Fred, as kindly as he knew how.

‘To tell ye, sire, how Patch met his end.’

‘Ah,’ said King Fred, his eyes wandering to the golden clock on the mantelpiece. ‘Well, we’d love to hear the story, but we are rather wanting our lunch—’

‘’Twas the Ickabog that ate him, sire,’ said the shepherd.

There was an astonished silence, and then Spittleworth and Flapoon burst out laughing.

The shepherd's eyes overflowed with tears which fell sparkling onto the red carpet.

'Ar, they've laughed at me from Jeroboam to Chouxville, sire, when I've told 'em why I was coming to see ye. Laughed themselves silly, they have, and told me I was daft in the head. But I seen the monster with me own two eyes, and so did poor Patch, afore he was ate.'

King Fred felt a strong urge to laugh along with the two lords. He wanted his lunch and he wanted to get rid of the old shepherd, but at the same time, that horrid little voice was whispering *selfish, vain, and cruel* inside his head.

'Why don't you tell me what happened?' King Fred said to the shepherd, and Spittleworth and Flapoon stopped laughing at once.

'Well, sire,' said the shepherd, wiping his nose on his sleeve again, 'twas twilight and right foggy and Patch and me was walking home round the edge of the marsh. Patch sees a marshteazle—'

'Sees a what?' asked King Fred.

'A marshteazle, sire. Them's bald rat-like things what lives in the marsh. Not bad in pies if ye don't mind the tails.'

Flapoon looked queasy.

'So Patch sees the marshteazle,' the shepherd continued, 'and he gives chase. I shouts for Patch and shouts, sire, but he was too busy to come back. And then, sire, I hears a yelp. "Patch!" I cries. "Patch! What's got ye, lad?" But Patch don't come back, sire. And then I sees it, through the fog,' said the shepherd in a low voice. 'Huge, it is, with eyes like lanterns and a mouth as wide as that there throne, and its wicked teeth shining at me. And I forgets old Patch, sire, and I runs and runs and

runs all the way home. And next day I sets off, sire, to come and see ye. The Ickabog ate me dog, sire, and I wants it punished!’

The king looked down at the shepherd for a few seconds. Then, very slowly, he got to his feet.

‘Shepherd,’ said the king, ‘we shall travel north this very day to investigate the matter of the Ickabog once and for all. If any trace of the creature can be found, you may rest assured that it shall be tracked to its lair and punished for its impudence in taking your dog. Now, take these few gold coins and hire yourself a ride back home in a haycart!’

‘My lords,’ said the king, turning to the stunned Spittleworth and Flapoon, ‘pray change into your riding gear and follow me to the stables. There is a new hunt afoot!’

## *Chapter 10*

# **King Fred’s Quest**

King Fred strode from the Throne Room feeling quite delighted with himself. Nobody would ever again say that he was selfish, vain, and cruel! For the sake of a smelly, simple old shepherd and his worthless old mongrel, he, King Fred the Fearless, was going to hunt the Ickabog! True, there was no such thing, but it was still dashed fine and noble of him to ride to the other end of the country, in person, to prove it!

Quite forgetting lunch, the king rushed upstairs to his bedroom, shouting for his valet to come and help him out of the dreary black suit and help him into his battledress, which he’d never had the chance to wear before. The tunic was scarlet, with buttons of gold, a purple sash, and lots of medals that Fred was allowed to wear because he was king, and when Fred looked in the mirror and saw how well

battledress became him, he wondered why he didn't wear it all the time. As his valet lowered the king's plumed helmet onto his golden curls, Fred imagined himself painted wearing it, seated on his favourite milk-white charger and spearing a serpentlike monster with his lance. King Fred the Fearless indeed! Why, he half hoped there really was an Ickabog, now.

Meanwhile, the Chief Advisor was sending word throughout the City-Within-The-City that the king was setting off on a tour of the country, and that everyone should be ready to cheer him as he left. Herringbone made no mention of the Ickabog, because he wanted to prevent the king from looking foolish, if he could.

Unfortunately, the footman called Cankerby had overheard two advisors muttering together about the king's strange scheme. Cankerby immediately told the between maid, who spread the word all over the kitchens, where a sausage seller from Baronstown was gossiping with the cook. In short, by the time the king's party was ready to leave, word had spread all through the City-Within-The-City that the king was riding north to hunt the Ickabog, and news was also beginning to leak out into wider Chouxville.

'Is it a joke?' the capital's inhabitants asked each other, as they thronged out onto the pavements, ready to cheer the king. 'What does it mean?'

Some shrugged and laughed and said that the king was merely having fun. Others shook their heads and muttered that there must be more to it than that. No king would ride out, armed, to the north of the country without good reason. What, the worried folk asked each other, does the king know, that we do not?

Lady Eslanda joined the other ladies of the court on a balcony, to watch the soldiers assembling.

I shall now tell you a secret, which nobody else knew. Lady Eslanda would never have married the king, even if he'd asked her. You see, she was secretly in

love with a man called Captain Goodfellow, who was now chatting and laughing with his good friend Major Beamish in the courtyard below. Lady Eslanda, who was very shy, had never been able to bring herself to talk to Captain Goodfellow, who had no idea that the most beautiful woman at court was in love with him. Both Goodfellow's parents, who were dead, had been cheesemakers from Kurdsburg. Though Goodfellow was both clever and brave, these were the days when no cheesemaker's son would expect to marry a highborn lady.

Meanwhile, all the servants' children were being let out of school early to watch the battle party set off. Mrs Beamish the pastry chef naturally rushed to collect Bert, so that he'd have a good spot to watch his father passing by.

When the palace gates opened at last, and the cavalcade rode out, Bert and Mrs Beamish cheered at the top of their lungs. Nobody had seen battledress for a very long time. How exciting it was, and how fine! The sunlight played upon the golden buttons, silver swords, and the gleaming trumpets of the buglers, and up on the palace balcony, the handkerchiefs of the ladies of the court fluttered in farewell, like doves.

At the front of the procession rode King Fred, on his milk-white charger, holding scarlet reins and waving at the crowds. Right behind him, riding a thin yellow horse and wearing a bored expression, was Spittleworth, and next came Flapoon, furiously lunch-less and sitting on his elephantine chestnut.

Behind the king and the two lords trotted the Royal Guard, all of them on dapple-grey horses, except for Major Beamish, who rode his steel-grey stallion. It made Mrs Beamish's heart flutter to see her husband looking so handsome.

'Good luck, Daddy!' shouted Bert, and Major Beamish (though he really shouldn't have done) waved at his son.

The procession trotted down the hill, smiling at the cheering crowds of the City-Within-The-City, until it reached the gates in the wall onto wider Chouxville. There, hidden by the crowds, was the Dovetails' cottage. Mr Dovetail and Daisy had come out into their garden, and they were just able to see the plumes in the helmets of the Royal Guard riding past.

Daisy didn't feel much interest in the soldiers. She and Bert still weren't talking to each other. In fact, he'd spent morning break with Roderick Roach, who often jeered at Daisy for wearing overalls instead of a dress, so the cheering and the sound of the horses didn't raise her spirits at all.

'There isn't really an Ickabog, Daddy, is there?' she asked.

'No, Daisy,' sighed Mr Dovetail, turning back to his workshop, 'there's no Ickabog, but if the king wants to believe in it, let him. He can't do much harm up in the Marshlands.'

Which just goes to show that even sensible men may fail to see a terrible, looming danger.

*Chapter 11*

## **The Journey North**

King Fred's spirits rose higher and higher as he rode out of Chouxville and into the countryside. Word of the king's sudden expedition to find the Ickabog had now spread to the farmers who worked the rolling green fields, and they ran with their families to cheer the king, the two lords and the Royal Guard as they passed.

Not having had any lunch, the king decided to stop in Kurdsburg to eat a late dinner.

'We'll rough it here, chaps, like the soldiers we are!' he cried to his party as they entered the city famed for its cheese, 'and we'll set out again at first light!'

But, of course, there was no question of the king roughing it. Visitors at Kurdsburg's finest inn were thrown out onto the street to make way for him, so Fred slept that night in a brass bed with a duck-down mattress, after a hearty meal of toasted cheese and chocolate fondue. The lords Spittleworth and Flapoon, on the other hand, were forced to spend the night in a little room over the stables. Both were rather sore after a long day on horseback. You may wonder why that was, if they went hunting five times a week, but the truth was that they generally sneaked off to sit behind a tree after half an hour's hunting, where they ate sandwiches and drank wine until it was time to go back to the palace. Neither was used to spending hours in the saddle, and Spittleworth's bony bottom was already starting to blister.

Early the following morning, the king was brought word by Major Beamish that the citizens of Baronstown were very upset the king had chosen to sleep in Kurdsburg rather than their splendid city. Eager not to dent his popularity, King Fred instructed his party to ride in an enormous circle through the surrounding fields, being cheered by farmers all the way, so that they ended up in Baronstown by nightfall. The delicious smell of sizzling sausages greeted the royal party, and a delighted crowd carrying torches escorted Fred to the best room in the city. There he was served roasted ox and honey ham, and slept in a carved oak bed with a goose-down mattress, while Spittleworth and Flapoon had to share a tiny attic room usually occupied by two maids. By now, Spittleworth's bottom was extremely painful, and he was furious that he'd been forced to ride forty miles in a circle, purely to keep the sausagemakers happy. Flapoon, who'd eaten far too much cheese in Kurdsburg and had consumed three beefsteaks in Baronstown, was awake all night, groaning with indigestion.

Next day, the king and his men set off again, and this time they headed north, soon passing through vineyards from which eager grape pickers emerged to wave

Cornucopian flags and receive waves from the jubilant king. Spittleworth was almost crying from pain, in spite of the cushion he'd strapped to his bottom, and Flapoon's belches and moans could be heard even over the clatter of hooves and jingle of bridles.

Upon arrival at Jeroboam that evening, they were greeted by trumpets and the entire city singing the national anthem. Fred feasted on sparkling wine and truffles that night, before retiring to a silken four-poster bed with a swansdown mattress. But Spittleworth and Flapoon were forced to share a room over the inn's kitchen with a pair of soldiers. Drunken Jeroboam dwellers were reeling about in the street, celebrating the presence of the king in their city. Spittleworth spent much of the night sitting in a bucket of ice, and Flapoon, who'd drunk far too much red wine, spent the same period being sick in a second bucket in the corner.

At dawn next morning, the king and his party set out for the Marshlands, after a famous farewell from the citizens of Jeroboam, who saw him on his way with a thunderous popping of corks that made Spittleworth's horse rear and ditch him on the road. Once they'd dusted Spittleworth off and put the cushion back on his bottom, and Fred had stopped laughing, the party proceeded.

Soon they'd left Jeroboam behind, and could hear only birdsong. For the first time in their entire journey, the sides of the road were empty. Gradually, the lush green land gave way to thin, dry grass, crooked trees, and boulders.

'Extraordinary place, isn't it?' the cheerful king shouted back to Spittleworth and Flapoon. 'I'm jolly glad to see these Marshlands at last, aren't you?'

The two lords agreed, but once Fred had turned to face the front again, they made rude gestures and mouthed even ruder names at the back of his head.

At last, the royal party came across a few people, and how the Marshlanders stared! They fell to their knees like the shepherd in the Throne Room, and quite

forgot to cheer or clap, but gaped as though they'd never seen anything like the king and the Royal Guard before – which, indeed, they hadn't, because while King Fred had visited all the major cities of Cornucopia after his coronation, nobody had thought it worth his while to visit the faraway Marshlands.

‘Simple people, yes, but rather touching, aren't they?’ the king called gaily to his men, as some ragged children gasped at the magnificent horses. They'd never seen animals so glossy and well fed in their lives.

‘And where are we supposed to stay tonight?’ Flapoon muttered to Spittleworth, eyeing the tumbledown stone cottages. ‘No taverns here!’

‘Well, there's one comfort, at least,’ Spittleworth whispered back. ‘He'll have to rough it like the rest of us, and we'll see how much he likes it.’

They rode on through the afternoon and at last, as the sun began to sink, they caught sight of the marsh where the Ickabog was supposed to live: a wide stretch of darkness studded with strange rock formations.

‘Your Majesty!’ called Major Beamish. ‘I suggest we set up camp now and explore the marsh in the morning! As Your Majesty knows, the marsh can be treacherous! Fogs come suddenly here. We'd do best to approach it by daylight!’

‘Nonsense!’ said Fred, who was bouncing up and down in his saddle like an excited schoolboy. ‘We can't stop now, when it's in sight, Beamish!’

The king had given his order, so the party rode on until, at last, when the moon had risen and was sliding in and out behind inky clouds, they reached the edge of the marsh. It was the eeriest place any of them had ever seen, wild and empty and desolate. A chilly breeze made the rushes whisper, but otherwise it was dead and silent.

‘As you see, sire,’ said Lord Spittleworth after a while, ‘the ground is very boggy. Sheep and men alike would be sucked under if they wandered out too far.’

Then, the feeble-minded might take these giant rocks and boulders for monsters in the dark. The rustling of these weeds might even be taken for the hissing of some creature.'

'Yes, true, very true,' said King Fred, but his eyes still roamed over the dark marsh, as though he expected the Ickabog to pop up from behind a rock.

'Shall we pitch camp then, sire?' asked Lord Flapoon, who'd saved some cold pies from Baronstown and was eager for his supper.

'We can't expect to find even an imaginary monster in the dark,' pointed out Spittleworth.

'True, true,' repeated King Fred regretfully. 'Let us – good gracious, how foggy it has become!'

And sure enough, as they'd stood looking out across the marsh, a thick white fog had rolled over them so swiftly and silently that none of them had noticed it.

*Chapter 12*

## **The King's Lost Sword**

Within seconds, it was as though each of the king's party was wearing a thick white blindfold. The fog was so dense they couldn't see their own hands in front of their faces. The mist smelled of the foul marsh, of brackish water and ooze. The soft ground seemed to shift beneath their feet as many of the men turned unwisely on the spot. Trying to catch sight of each other, they lost all sense of direction. Each man felt adrift in a blinding white sea, and Major Beamish was one of the few to keep his head.

'Have a care!' he called. 'The ground is treacherous. Stay still, don't attempt to move!'

But King Fred, who was suddenly feeling rather scared, paid no attention. He set off at once in what he thought was the direction of Major Beamish, but within a few steps he felt himself sinking into the icy marsh.

‘Help!’ he cried, as the freezing marsh water flooded over the tops of his shining boots.  
‘Help! Beamish, where are you? I’m sinking!’

There was an immediate clamour of panicked voices and jangling armour. The guards all hurried off in every direction, trying to find the king, bumping into each other and slipping over, but the floundering king’s voice drowned out every other.

‘I’ve lost my boots! Why doesn’t somebody help me? *Where are you all?*’

The lords Spittleworth and Flapoon were the only two people who’d followed Beamish’s advice and remained quite still in the places they’d occupied when the fog had rolled over them. Spittleworth was clutching a fold of Flapoon’s ample pantaloons and Flapoon was holding tight to the skirt of Spittleworth’s riding coat. Neither of them made the smallest attempt to help Fred, but waited, shivering, for calm to be restored.

‘At least if the fool gets swallowed by the bog, we’ll be able to go home,’ Spittleworth muttered to Flapoon.

The confusion deepened. Several of the Royal Guard had now got stuck in the bog as they tried to find the king. The air was full of squelches, clanks, and shouts. Major Beamish was bellowing in a vain attempt to restore some kind of order, and the king’s voice seemed to be receding into the blind night, becoming ever fainter, as though he was blundering away from them.

And then, out of the heart of the darkness, came an awful terror-struck shriek.

*‘BEAMISH, HELP ME, I CAN SEE THE MONSTER!’*

‘I’m coming, Your Majesty!’ cried Major Beamish. ‘Keep shouting, sire, I’ll find you!’

*‘HELP! HELP ME, BEAMISH!’* shouted King Fred.

‘What’s happened to the idiot?’ Flapoon asked Spittleworth, but before Spittleworth could answer, the fog around the two lords thinned as quickly as it had arrived, so that they stood together in a little clearing, able to see each other, but still surrounded on all sides by

high walls of thick white mist. The voices of the king, of Beamish and of the other soldiers were becoming fainter and fainter.

‘Don’t move yet,’ Spittleworth cautioned Flapoon. ‘Once the fog thins a little bit more, we’ll be able to find the horses and we can retreat to a safe—’

At that precise moment, a slimy black figure burst out of the wall of fog and launched itself at the two lords. Flapoon let out a high-pitched scream and Spittleworth lashed out at the creature, missing only because it flopped to the ground, weeping. It was then that Spittleworth realised the gibbering, panting slime monster was, in fact, King Fred the Fearless.

‘Thank heavens we’ve found you, Your Majesty, we’ve been searching everywhere!’ cried Spittleworth.

‘Ick – Ick – Ick—’ whimpered the king.

‘He’s got hiccoughs,’ said Flapoon. ‘Give him a fright.’

‘Ick – Ick – Ickabog!’ moaned Fred. ‘I s-s-saw it! A gigantic monster – it nearly caught me!’

‘I beg Your Majesty’s pardon?’ asked Spittleworth.

‘The m-monster is real!’ gulped Fred. ‘I’m lucky to b-be alive! To the horses! We must flee, and quickly!’

King Fred tried to hoist himself up by climbing Spittleworth’s leg, but Spittleworth stepped swiftly aside to avoid getting covered in slime, instead aiming a consoling pat at the top of Fred’s head, which was the cleanest part of him.

‘Er – there, there, Your Majesty. You’ve had a most distressing experience, falling in the marsh. As we were saying earlier, the boulders do indeed assume monstrous forms in this thick fog—’

‘Dash it, Spittleworth, I know what I saw!’ shouted the king, staggering to his feet unaided. ‘Tall as two horses, it was, and with eyes like huge lamps! I drew my sword, but my

hands were so slimy it slipped from my grasp, so there was nothing for it but to pull my feet out of my stuck boots, and crawl away!’

Just then a fourth man made his way into their little clearing in the fog: Captain Roach, father of Roderick, who was Major Beamish’s second-in-command – a big, burly man with jet-black moustaches. What Captain Roach was really like, we are about to find out. All you need to know now is that the king was very glad to see him, because he was the largest member of the Royal Guard.

‘Did you see any sign of the Ickabog, Roach?’ whimpered Fred.

‘No, Your Majesty,’ he said, with a respectful bow, ‘all I’ve seen is fog and mud. I’m glad to know Your Majesty is safe, at any rate. You gentlemen stay here, and I’ll round up the troops.’

Roach made to leave, but King Fred yelped. ‘No, you stay here with me, Roach, in case the monster comes this way! You’ve still got a rifle, haven’t you? Excellent – I lost my sword and my boots, you see. My very best dress sword, with the jewelled hilt!’

Though he felt much safer with Captain Roach beside him, the trembling king was otherwise as cold and scared as he could ever remember being. He also had a nasty feeling that nobody believed he’d really seen the Ickabog, a feeling that increased when he caught sight of Spittleworth rolling his eyes at Flapoon.

The king’s pride was stung.

‘Spittleworth, Flapoon,’ he said, ‘I want my sword and my boots back! They’re over there somewhere,’ he added, waving his arm at the encircling fog.

‘Would – would it not be better to wait until the fog has cleared, Your Majesty?’ asked Spittleworth nervously.

‘I want my sword!’ snapped King Fred. ‘It was my grandfather’s and it’s very valuable! Go and find it, both of you. I shall wait here with Captain Roach. And don’t come back empty-handed.’

## **The Accident**

The two lords had no choice but to leave the king and Captain Roach in their little clearing in the fog and proceed onto the marsh. Spittleworth took the lead, feeling his way with his feet for the firmest bits of ground. Flapoon followed close behind, still holding tightly to the hem of Spittleworth's coat and sinking deeply with every footstep because he was so heavy. The fog was clammy on their skin and rendered them almost completely blind. In spite of Spittleworth's best efforts, the two lords' boots were soon full to the brim with fetid water.

'That blasted nincompoop!' muttered Spittleworth as they squelched along. 'That blithering buffoon! This is all his fault, the mouse-brained moron!'

'It'll serve him right if that sword's lost for good,' said Flapoon, now nearly waist-deep in marsh.

'We'd better hope it isn't, or we'll be here all night,' said Spittleworth. 'Oh, curse this fog!'

They struggled onwards. The mist would thin for a few steps, then close again. Boulders loomed suddenly out of nowhere like ghostly elephants, and the rustling reeds sounded just like snakes. Though Spittleworth and Flapoon knew perfectly well that there was no such thing as an Ickabog, their insides didn't seem quite so sure.

'Let go of me!' Spittleworth growled at Flapoon, whose constant tugging was making him think of monstrous claws or jaws fastened on the back of his coat.

Flapoon let go, but he too had been infected by a nonsensical fear, so he loosened his blunderbuss from its holster and held it ready.

'What's that?' he whispered to Spittleworth, as an odd noise reached them out of the darkness ahead.

Both lords froze, the better to listen.

A low growling and scrabbling was coming out of the fog. It conjured an awful vision in both men's minds, of a monster feasting on the body of one of the Royal Guard.

'Who's there?' Spittleworth called, in a high-pitched voice.

Somewhere in the distance, Major Beamish shouted back:

'Is that you, Lord Spittleworth?'

'Yes,' shouted Spittleworth. 'We can hear something strange, Beamish! Can you?'

It seemed to the two lords that the odd growling and scrabbling grew louder.

Then the fog shifted. A monstrous black silhouette with gleaming white eyes was revealed right in front of them, and it emitted a long yowl.

With a deafening, crashing boom that seemed to shake the marsh, Flapoon let off his blunderbuss. The startled cries of their fellow men echoed across the hidden landscape, and then, as though Flapoon's shot had frightened it, the fog parted like curtains before the two lords, giving them a clear view of what lay ahead.

The moon slid out from behind a cloud at that moment and they saw a vast granite boulder with a mass of thorny branches at its base. Tangled up in these brambles was a terrified, skinny dog, whimpering and scrabbling to free itself, its eyes flashing in the reflected moonlight.

A little beyond the giant boulder, face down in the bog, lay Major Beamish.

'What's going on?' shouted several voices out of the fog. 'Who fired?'

Neither Spittleworth nor Flapoon answered. Spittleworth waded as quickly as he could towards Major Beamish. A swift examination was enough: the major was stone-dead, shot through the heart by Flapoon in the dark.

‘My God, my God, what shall we do?’ bleated Flapoon, arriving at Spittleworth’s side.

‘Quiet!’ whispered Spittleworth.

He was thinking harder and faster than he’d thought in the whole of his crafty, conniving life. His eyes moved slowly from Flapoon and the gun, to the shepherd’s trapped dog, to the king’s boots and jewelled sword, which he now noticed, half-buried in the bog just a few feet away from the giant boulder.

Spittleworth waded through the marsh to pick up the king’s sword and used it to slash apart the brambles imprisoning the dog. Then, giving the poor animal a hearty kick, he sent it yelping away into the fog.

‘Listen carefully,’ murmured Spittleworth, returning to Flapoon, but before he could explain his plan, another large figure emerged from the fog: Captain Roach.

‘The king sent me,’ panted the captain. ‘He’s terrified. What happ—’

Then Roach saw Major Beamish lying dead on the ground.

Spittleworth realised immediately that Roach must be let in on the plan and that, in fact, he’d be very useful.

‘Say nothing, Roach,’ said Spittleworth, ‘while I tell you what has happened.’

‘The Ickabog has killed our brave Major Beamish. In view of this tragic death, we shall need a new major, and of course, that will be you, Roach, for you’re second-in-command. I shall recommend a large pay rise for you, because you were so valiant – listen closely, Roach – so *very* valiant in chasing after the dreadful Ickabog, as it ran away into the fog. You see, the Ickabog was devouring the poor major’s body when Lord Flapoon and I came upon it. Frightened by Lord Flapoon’s blunderbuss, which he sensibly discharged into the air, the monster dropped Beamish’s body and fled. You bravely gave chase, trying to recover the king’s sword, which was half-buried in the monster’s thick hide – but you weren’t able to recover it, Roach. So

sad for the poor king. I believe the priceless sword was his grandfather's, but I suppose it's now lost forever in the Ickabog's lair.'

So saying, Spittleworth pressed the sword into Roach's large hands. The newly promoted major looked down at its jewelled hilt, and a cruel and crafty smile to match Spittleworth's own spread over his face.

'Yes, a great pity that I wasn't able to recover the sword, my lord,' he said, sliding it out of sight beneath his tunic. 'Now, let's wrap up the poor Major's body, because it would be dreadful for the other men to see the marks of the monster's fangs upon him.'

'How sensitive of you, Major Roach,' said Lord Spittleworth, and the two men swiftly took off their cloaks and wrapped up the body while Flapoon watched, heartily relieved that nobody need know he'd accidentally killed Beamish.

'Could you remind me what the Ickabog looked like, Lord Spittleworth?' asked Roach, when Major Beamish's body was well hidden. 'For the three of us saw it together and will, of course, have received identical impressions.'

'Very true,' said Lord Spittleworth. 'Well, according to the king, the beast is as tall as two horses, with eyes like lamps.'

'In fact,' said Flapoon, pointing, 'it looks a lot like this large boulder, with a dog's eyes gleaming at the base.'

'Tall as two horses, with eyes like lamps,' repeated Roach. 'Very well, my lords. If you'll assist me to put Beamish over my shoulder, I'll carry him to the king and we can explain how the major met his death.'

*Chapter 14*

## **Lord Spittleworth's Plan**

When the fog cleared at last, it revealed a very different party of men to those who'd arrived at the edge of the marsh an hour earlier.

Quite apart from their shock at the sudden death of Major Beamish, a few of the Royal Guard were confused by the explanation they'd been given. Here were the two lords, the king and the hastily promoted Major Roach, all swearing that they'd come face-to-face with a monster that all but the most foolish had dismissed for years as a fairy tale. Could it really be true that beneath the tightly wrapped cloaks, Beamish's body bore the tooth and claw marks of the Ickabog?

'Are you calling me a liar?' Major Roach growled into the face of a young private.

'Are you calling *the king* a liar?' barked Lord Flapoon.

The private didn't dare question the word of the king, so he shook his head. Captain Goodfellow, who'd been a particular friend of Major Beamish's, said nothing. However, there was such an angry and suspicious look on Goodfellow's face that Roach ordered him to go and pitch the tents on the most solid bit of ground he could find, and be quick about it, because the dangerous fog might yet return.

In spite of the fact that he had a straw mattress, and that blankets were taken from the soldiers to ensure his comfort, King Fred had never spent a more unpleasant night. He was tired, dirty, wet, and, above all, frightened.

'What if the Ickabog comes looking for us, Spittleworth?' the king whispered in the dark. 'What if it tracks us by our scent? It's already had a taste of poor Beamish. What if it comes looking for the rest of the body?'

Spittleworth attempted to soothe the king.

'Do not fear, Your Majesty, Roach has ordered Captain Goodfellow to keep watch outside your tent. Whoever else gets eaten, you will be the last.'

It was too dark for the king to see Spittleworth grinning. Far from wanting to reassure the king, Spittleworth hoped to fan the king's fears. His entire plan rested

on a king who not only believed in an Ickabog, but who was scared it might leave the marsh to chase him.

The following morning, the king's party set off back to Jeroboam. Spittleworth had sent a message ahead to tell the Mayor of Jeroboam that there had been a nasty accident at the marsh, so the king didn't want any trumpets or corks greeting him. Thus, when the king's party arrived, the city was silent. Townsfolk pressing their faces to their windows, or peeking around their doors, were shocked to see the king so dirty and miserable, but not nearly as shocked as they were to see a body wrapped in cloaks, tied to Major Beamish's steel-grey horse.

When they reached the inn, Spittleworth took the landlord aside.

'We require some cold, secure place, perhaps a cellar, where we can store a body for the night, and I shall need to keep the key myself.'

'What happened, my lord?' asked the innkeeper, as Roach carried Beamish down the stone steps into the cellar.

'I shall tell you the truth, my good man, seeing as you have looked after us so well, but it must go no further,' said Spittleworth in a low, serious voice. 'The Ickabog is real and has savagely killed one of our men. You understand, I'm sure, why this must not be widely broadcast. There would be instant panic. The king is returning with all speed to the palace, where he and his advisors – myself, of course, included – will begin work at once on a set of measures to secure our country's safety.'

'The Ickabog? Real?' said the landlord, in astonishment and fear.

'Real and vengeful and vicious,' said Spittleworth. 'But, as I say, this must go no further. Widespread alarm will benefit nobody.'

In fact, widespread alarm was precisely what Spittleworth wanted, because it was essential for the next phase of his plan. Just as he'd expected, the landlord waited

only until his guests had gone to bed, then rushed to tell his wife, who ran to tell the neighbours, and by the time the king's party set off for Kurdsburg the following morning, they left behind them a city where panic was fermenting as busily as the wine.

Spittleworth sent a message ahead to Kurdsburg, warning the cheesemaking city not to make a fuss of the king either, so it too was dark and silent when the royal party entered its streets. The faces at the windows were already scared. It so happened that a merchant from Jeroboam, with an especially fast horse, had carried the rumour about the Ickabog to Kurdsburg an hour previously.

Once again, Spittleworth requested the use of a cellar for Major Beamish's body, and once again confided to the landlord that the Ickabog had killed one of the king's men. Having seen Beamish's body safely locked up, Spittleworth went upstairs to bed.

He was just rubbing ointment into the blisters on his bottom when he received an urgent summons to go and see the king. Smirking, Spittleworth pulled on his pantaloons, winked at Flapoon, who was enjoying a cheese and pickle sandwich, picked up his candle and proceeded along the corridor to King Fred's room.

The king was huddled in bed wearing his silk nightcap, and as soon as Spittleworth closed the bedroom door, Fred said:

'Spittleworth, I keep hearing whispers about the Ickabog. The stable boys were talking, and even the maid who just passed by my bedroom door. Why is this? How can they know what happened?'

'Alas, Your Majesty,' sighed Spittleworth, 'I'd hoped to conceal the truth from you until we were safely back at the palace, but I should have known that Your Majesty is too shrewd to be fooled. Since we left the marsh, sire, the Ickabog has, as Your Majesty feared, become much more aggressive.'

‘Oh, no!’ whimpered the king.

‘I’m afraid so, sire. But after all, attacking it was bound to make it more dangerous.’

‘But who attacked it?’ said Fred.

‘Why, you did, Your Majesty,’ said Spittleworth. ‘Roach tells me your sword was embedded in the monster’s neck when it ran— I’m sorry, Your Majesty, did you speak?’

The king had, in fact, let out a sort of hum, but after a second or two, he shook his head. He’d considered correcting Spittleworth – he was sure he’d told the story differently – but his horrible experience in the fog sounded much better the way Spittleworth told it now: that he’d stood his ground and fought the Ickabog, rather than simply dropping his sword and running away.

‘But this is awful, Spittleworth,’ whispered the king. ‘What will become of us all, if the monster has become more ferocious?’

‘Never fear, Your Majesty,’ said Spittleworth, approaching the king’s bed, the candlelight illuminating his long nose and his cruel smile from below. ‘I intend to make it my life’s work to protect you and the kingdom from the Ickabog.’

‘Th-thank you, Spittleworth. You are a true friend,’ said the king, deeply moved, and he fumbled to extract a hand from the eiderdown, and clasped that of the cunning lord.

*Chapter 15*

## **The King Returns**

By the time the king set out for Chouxville the following morning, rumours that the Ickabog had killed a man had not only travelled over the bridge into Baronstown, they’d even trickled down to the capital, courtesy of a cluster of cheesemongers, who’d set out before dawn.

However, Chouxville was not only the furthest away from the northern marsh, it also held itself to be far better informed and educated than the other Cornucopian towns, so when the wave of panic reached the capital, it met an upswell of disbelief.

The city's taverns and markets rang with excited arguments. Sceptics laughed at the preposterous idea of the Ickabog existing, while others said that people who'd never been to the Marshlands ought not to pretend to be experts.

The Ickabog rumours had gained a lot of colour as they travelled south. Some people said that the Ickabog had killed three men, others that it had merely torn off somebody's nose.

In the City-Within-The-City, however, discussion was seasoned with a little pinch of anxiety. The wives, children and friends of the Royal Guard were worried about the soldiers, but they reassured each other that if any of the men had been killed, their families would have been informed by messenger. This was the comfort that Mrs Beamish gave Bert, when he came looking for her in the palace kitchens, having been scared by the rumours circulating among the schoolchildren.

'The king would have told us if anything had happened to Daddy,' she told Bert. 'Here, now, I've got you a little treat.'

Mrs Beamish had prepared Hopes-of-Heaven for the king's return, and she now gave one that wasn't quite symmetrical to Bert. He gasped (because he only ever had Hopes-of-Heaven on his birthday), and bit into the little cake. At once, his eyes filled with happy tears, as paradise wafted up through the roof of his mouth and melted all his cares away. He thought excitedly of his father coming home in his smart uniform, and how he, Bert, would be centre of attention at school tomorrow, because he'd know exactly what had happened to the king's men in the faraway Marshlands.

Dusk was settling over Chouxville when at last the king's party rode into view. This time, Spittleworth hadn't sent a messenger to tell people to stay inside. He wanted the king to feel the full force of Chouxville's panic and fear when they saw His Majesty returning to his palace with the body of one of the Royal Guard.

The people of Chouxville saw the drawn, miserable faces of the returning men, and watched in silence as the party approached. Then they spotted the wrapped-up body slung over the steel-grey horse, and gasps spread through the crowd like flames. Up through the narrow cobbled streets of Chouxville the king's party moved, and men removed their hats and women curtsied, and they hardly knew whether they were paying their respects to the king or the dead man.

Daisy Dovetail was one of the first to realise who was missing. Peering between the legs of grown-ups, she recognised Major Beamish's horse. Instantly forgetting that she and Bert hadn't talked to each other since their fight of the previous week, Daisy pulled free of her father's hand and began to run, forcing her way through the crowds, her brown pigtails flying. She had to reach Bert before he saw the body on the horse. She had to warn him. But the people were so tightly packed that, fast as Daisy moved, she couldn't keep pace with the horses.

Bert and Mrs Beamish, who were standing outside their cottage in the shadow of the palace walls, knew there was something wrong because of the crowd's gasps. Although Mrs Beamish felt somewhat anxious, she was still sure that she was about to see her handsome husband, because the king would have sent word if he'd been hurt.

So when the procession rounded the corner, Mrs Beamish's eyes slid from face to face, expecting to see the major's. And when she realised that there were no more faces left, the colour drained slowly from her own. Then her gaze fell upon the

body strapped to Major Beamish's steel-grey horse, and, still holding Bert's hand, she fainted clean away.

*Chapter 16*

## **Bert Says Goodbye**

Spittleworth noticed a commotion beside the palace walls and strained to see what was going on. When he spotted the woman on the ground, and heard the cries of shock and pity, he suddenly realised that he'd left a loose end that might yet trip him up: the widow! As he rode past the little knot of people in the crowd who were fanning Mrs Beamish's face, Spittleworth knew that his longed-for bath must be postponed, and his crafty brain began to race again.

Once the king's party was safely in the courtyard, and servants had hurried to assist Fred from his horse, Spittleworth pulled Major Roach aside.

'The widow, Beamish's widow!' he muttered. 'Why didn't you send her word about his death?'

'It never occurred to me, my lord,' said Roach truthfully. He'd been too busy thinking about the jewelled sword all the way home: how best to sell it, and whether it would be better to break it up into pieces so that nobody recognised it.

'Curse you, Roach, must I think of everything?' snarled Spittleworth. 'Go now, take Beamish's body out of those filthy cloaks, cover it with a Cornucopian flag, and lay him out in the Blue Parlour. Put guards on the door and then bring Mrs Beamish to me in the Throne Room.'

'Also, give the order that these soldiers must not go home or talk to their families until I've spoken to them. It's essential that we all tell the same story! Now hurry, fool, hurry – Beamish's widow could ruin everything!'

Spittleworth pushed his way past soldiers and stable boys to where Flapoon was being lifted off his horse.

‘Keep the king away from the Throne Room and the Blue Parlour,’ Spittleworth whispered in Flapoon’s ear. ‘Encourage him to go to bed!’

Flapoon nodded and Spittleworth hurried away through the dimly lit palace corridors, casting off his dusty riding coat as he went, and bellowing at the servants to fetch him fresh clothes.

Once in the deserted Throne Room, Spittleworth pulled on his clean jacket, and ordered a maid to light a single lamp and bring him a glass of wine. Then he waited. At last, there came a knock on the door.

‘Enter!’ shouted Spittleworth, and in came Major Roach, accompanied by a white-faced Mrs Beamish, and young Bert.

‘My dear Mrs Beamish... my *very* dear Mrs Beamish,’ said Spittleworth, striding towards her and clasping her free hand. ‘The king has asked me to tell you how deeply sorry he is. I add my own condolences. What a tragedy... what an awful tragedy.’

‘W-why did nobody send word?’ sobbed Mrs Beamish. ‘W-why did we have to find out by seeing his poor – his poor body?’

She swayed a little, and Roach hurried to fetch a small golden chair. The maid, who was called Hetty, arrived with wine for Spittleworth, and while she was pouring it, Spittleworth said:

‘Dear lady, we did in fact send word. We sent a messenger – didn’t we, Roach?’

‘That’s right,’ said Roach. ‘We sent a young lad called...’

But here, Roach got stuck. He was a man of very little imagination.

‘Nobby,’ said Spittleworth, saying the first name that came into his head. ‘Little Nobby... Buttons,’ he added, because the flickering lamplight had just illuminated one of Roach’s golden buttons. ‘Yes, little Nobby Buttons volunteered,

and off he galloped. What could have become of him? Roach,' said Spittleworth, 'we must send out a search party, at once, to see whether any trace of Nobby Buttons can be found.'

'At once, my lord,' said Roach, bowing deeply, and he left.

'How... how did my husband die?' whispered Mrs Beamish.

'Well, madam,' said Spittleworth, speaking carefully, for he knew that the story he told now would become the official version, and that he'd have to stick by it, forevermore. 'As you may have heard, we journeyed to the Marshlands, because we'd received word that the Ickabog had carried off a dog. Shortly after our arrival, I regret to say that our entire party was attacked by the monster.

'It lunged for the king first, but he fought most bravely, sinking his sword into the monster's neck. To the tough-skinned Ickabog, however, 'twas but a wasp sting. Enraged, it sought further victims, and though Major Beamish put up a most heroic struggle, I regret to say that he laid down his life for the king.

'Then Lord Flapoon had the excellent notion of firing his blunderbuss, which scared the Ickabog away. We brought poor Beamish out of the marsh, asked for a volunteer to take news of his death to his family. Dear little Nobby Buttons said he'd do it, and he leapt up onto his horse, and until we reached Chouxville, I never doubted that he'd arrived and given you warning of this dreadful tragedy.'

'Can I – can I see my husband?' wept Mrs Beamish.

'Of course, of course,' said Spittleworth. 'He's in the Blue Parlour.'

He led Mrs Beamish and Bert, who was still clutching his mother's hand, to the doors of the parlour, where he paused.

'I regret,' he said, 'that we cannot remove the flag covering him. His injuries would be far too distressing for you to see... the fang and claw marks, you know...'

Mrs Beamish swayed yet again and Bert grabbed hold of her, to keep her upright. Now Lord Flapoon walked up to the group, holding a tray of pies.

‘King’s in bed,’ he said thickly to Spittleworth. ‘Oh, hello,’ he added, looking at Mrs Beamish, who was one of the few servants whose name he knew, because she baked the pastries. ‘Sorry about the major,’ said Flapoon, spraying Mrs Beamish and Bert with crumbs of pie crust. ‘Always liked him.’

He walked away, leaving Spittleworth to open the door of the Blue Parlour to let Mrs Beamish and Bert inside. There lay the body of Major Beamish, concealed beneath the Cornucopian flag.

‘Can’t I at least kiss him one last time?’ sobbed Mrs Beamish.

‘Quite impossible, I’m afraid,’ said Spittleworth. ‘His face is half gone.’

‘His hand, Mother,’ said Bert, speaking for the first time. ‘I’m sure his hand will be all right.’

And before Spittleworth could stop the boy, Bert reached beneath the flag for his father’s hand, which was quite unmarked.

Mrs Beamish knelt down and kissed the hand over and over again, until it shone with tears as though made of porcelain. Then Bert helped her to her feet and the two of them left the Blue Parlour without another word.

*Chapter 17*

## **Goodfellow Makes a Stand**

Having watched the Beamishes out of sight, Spittleworth hurried off to the Guard’s Room, where he found Roach keeping watch over the rest of the Royal Guard. The walls of the room were hung with swords and a portrait of King Fred, whose eyes seemed to watch everything that was happening.

‘They’re growing restless, my lord,’ muttered Roach. ‘They want to go home to their families and get to bed.’

‘And so they shall, once we’ve had a little chat,’ said Spittleworth, moving to face the weary and travel-stained soldiers.

‘Has anyone got any questions about what happened back in the Marshlands?’ he asked the men.

The soldiers looked at each other. Some of them stole furtive glances at Roach, who’d retreated against the wall, and was polishing a rifle. Then Captain Goodfellow raised his hand, along with two other soldiers.

‘Why was Beamish’s body wrapped up before any of us could look at it?’ asked Captain Goodfellow.

‘I want to know where that bullet went, that we heard being fired,’ said the second soldier.

‘How come only four people saw this monster, if it’s so huge?’ asked the third, to general nods and muttered agreement.

‘All excellent questions,’ replied Spittleworth smoothly. ‘Let me explain.’

And he repeated the story of the attack that he’d told Mrs Beamish.

The soldiers who’d asked questions remained unsatisfied.

‘I still reckon it’s funny that a huge monster was out there and none of us saw it,’ said the third.

‘If Beamish was half-eaten, why wasn’t there more blood?’ asked the second.

‘And who, in the name of all that’s Holy,’ said Captain Goodfellow, ‘is Nobby Buttons?’

‘How d’you know about Nobby Buttons?’ blurted Spittleworth, without thinking.

‘On my way here from the stables, I bumped into one of the maids, Hetty,’ said Goodfellow. ‘She served you your wine, my lord. According to her, you’ve just been telling Beamish’s poor wife about a member of the Royal Guard called Nobby

Buttons. According to you, Nobby Buttons was sent with a message to Beamish's wife, telling her he'd been killed.

'But I don't remember a Nobby Buttons. I've never met anyone called Nobby Buttons. So I ask you, my lord, how can that be? How can a man ride with us, and camp with us, and take orders from Your Lordship right in front of us, without any of us ever clapping eyes on him?'

Spittleworth's first thought was that he'd have to do something about that eavesdropping maid. Luckily, Goodfellow had given him her name. Then he said in a dangerous voice:

'What gives you the right to speak for everybody, Captain Goodfellow? Perhaps some of these men have better memories than you do. Perhaps they remember poor Nobby Buttons clearly. Dear little Nobby, in whose memory the king will add a fat bag of gold to everybody's pay this week. Proud, brave Nobby, whose sacrifice – for I fear the monster has eaten him, as well as Beamish – will mean a pay rise for all his comrades-in-arms. Noble Nobby Buttons, whose closest friends are surely marked for speedy promotion.'

Another silence followed Spittleworth's words, and this silence had a cold, heavy quality. Now the whole Royal Guard understood the choice facing them. They weighed in their minds the huge influence Spittleworth was known to have over the king, and the fact that Major Roach was now caressing the barrel of his rifle in a menacing manner, and they remembered the sudden death of their former leader, Major Beamish. They also considered the promise of more gold, and speedy promotion, if they agreed to believe in the Ickabog, and in Private Nobby Buttons.

Goodfellow stood up so suddenly that his chair clattered to the floor.

'There never was a Nobby Buttons, and I'm damned if there's an Ickabog, and I won't be party to a lie!'

The other two men who'd asked questions stood up as well, but the rest of the Royal Guard remained seated, silent, and watchful.

'Very well,' said Spittleworth. 'You three are under arrest for the filthy crime of treason. As I'm sure your comrades remember, you ran away when the Ickabog appeared. You forgot your duty to protect the king and thought only of saving your own cowardly hides! The penalty is death by firing squad.'

He chose eight soldiers to take the three men away, and even though the three honest soldiers struggled very hard, they were outnumbered and overwhelmed, and in no time at all they'd been dragged out of the Guard's Room.

'Very good,' said Spittleworth to the few soldiers remaining. 'Very good indeed. There will be pay rises all round, and I shall remember your names when it comes to promotions. Now, don't forget to tell your families exactly what happened in the Marshlands. It might bode ill for your wives, your parents and your children if they're heard to question the existence of the Ickabog, or of Nobby Buttons.'

'You may now return home.'

*Chapter 18*

## **End of an Advisor**

No sooner had the guardsmen got to their feet to return home, than Lord Flapoon came bursting into the room, looking worried.

'What now?' groaned Spittleworth, who very much wanted his bath and bed.

'The – Chief – Advisor!' panted Flapoon.

And sure enough, Herringbone, the Chief Advisor, now appeared, wearing his dressing gown and an expression of outrage.

'I demand an explanation, my lord!' he cried. 'What stories are these that reach my ears? The Ickabog, real? Major Beamish, dead? And I've just passed three of the king's soldiers

being dragged away under sentence of death! I have, of course, instructed that they be taken to the dungeons to await trial instead!’

‘I can explain everything, Chief Advisor,’ said Spittleworth with a bow, and for the third time that evening, he related the tale of the Ickabog attacking the king, and killing Beamish, and then the mysterious disappearance of Nobby Buttons who, Spittleworth feared, had also fallen prey to the monster.

Herringbone, who’d always deplored the influence of Spittleworth and Flapoon on the king, waited for Spittleworth to finish his farrago of lies with the air of a wily old fox who waits at a rabbit hole for his dinner.

‘A fascinating tale,’ he said, when Spittleworth had finished. ‘But I hereby relieve you of any further responsibility in the matter, Lord Spittleworth. The advisors will take charge now. There are laws and protocols in Cornucopia to deal with emergencies such as these.

‘Firstly, the men in the dungeons will be given a proper trial, so that we can hear their version of events. Secondly, the lists of the king’s soldiers must be searched, to find the family of this Nobby Buttons, and inform them of his death. Thirdly, Major Beamish’s body must be closely examined by the king’s physicians, so that we may learn more about the monster that killed him.’

Spittleworth opened his mouth very wide, but nothing came out. He saw his whole glorious scheme collapsing on top of him, and himself trapped beneath it, imprisoned by his own cleverness.

Then Major Roach, who was standing behind the Chief Advisor, slowly put down his rifle and took a sword from the wall. A look like a flash of light on dark water passed between Roach and Spittleworth, who said:

‘I think, Herringbone, that you are ripe for retirement.’

Steel flashed, and the tip of Roach's sword appeared out of the Chief Advisor's belly. The soldiers gasped, but the Chief Advisor didn't utter a word. He simply knelt, then toppled over, dead.

Spittleworth looked around at the soldiers who'd agreed to believe in the Ickabog. He liked seeing the fear on every face. He could feel his own power.

'Did everybody hear the Chief Advisor appointing me to his job before he retired?' he asked softly.

The soldiers all nodded. They'd just stood by and watched murder, and felt too deeply involved to protest. All they cared about now was escaping this room alive, and protecting their families.

'Very well, then,' said Spittleworth. 'The king believes the Ickabog is real, and I stand with the king. I am the new Chief Advisor, and I will be devising a plan to protect the kingdom. All who are loyal to the king will find their lives run very much as before. Any who stand against the king will suffer the penalty of cowards and traitors: imprisonment – or death.'

'Now, I need one of you gentlemen to assist Major Roach in burying the body of our dear Chief Advisor – and be sure and put him where he won't be found. The rest of you are free to return to your families and inform them of the danger threatening our beloved Cornucopia.'

*Chapter 19*

## **Lady Eslanda**

Spittleworth now marched off towards the dungeons. With Herringbone gone, there was nothing to stop him killing the three honest soldiers. He intended to shoot them himself. There would be time enough to invent a story afterwards – possibly he could place their bodies in the vault where the crown jewels were kept, and pretend they'd been trying to steal them.

However, just as Spittleworth put his hand on the door to the dungeons, a quiet voice spoke out of the darkness behind him.

‘Good evening, Lord Spittleworth.’

He turned and saw Lady Eslanda, raven-haired and serious, stepping down from a dark spiral staircase.

‘You’re awake late, my lady,’ said Spittleworth, with a bow.

‘Yes,’ said Lady Eslanda, whose heart was beating very fast. ‘I – I couldn’t sleep. I thought I’d take a little stroll.’

This was a fib. In fact, Eslanda had been fast asleep in her bed when she was woken by a frantic knocking on her bedroom door. Opening it, she found Hetty standing there: the maid who’d served Spittleworth his wine, and heard his lies about Nobby Buttons.

Hetty had been so curious about what Spittleworth was up to after his story about Nobby Buttons, that she’d crept along to the Guard’s Room and, by pressing her ear to the door, heard everything that was going on inside. Hetty ran and hid when the three honest soldiers were dragged away, then sped upstairs to wake Lady Eslanda. She wanted to help the men who were about to be shot. The maid had no idea that Eslanda was secretly in love with Captain Goodfellow. She simply liked Lady Eslanda best of all the ladies at court, and knew her to be kind and clever.

Lady Eslanda hastily pressed some gold into Hetty’s hands and advised her to leave the palace that night, because she was afraid the maid now might be in grave danger. Then Lady Eslanda dressed herself with trembling hands, seized a lantern, and hurried down the spiral staircase beside her bedroom. However, before she reached the bottom of the stairs she heard voices. Blowing out her lantern, Eslanda listened as Herringbone gave the order for Captain Goodfellow and his friends to be taken to the dungeons instead of being shot. She’d been hiding on the stairs ever

since, because she had a feeling the danger threatening the men might not yet have passed – and here, sure enough, was Lord Spittleworth, heading for the dungeons with a pistol.

‘Is the Chief Advisor anywhere about?’ Lady Eslanda asked. ‘I thought I heard his voice earlier.’

‘Herringbone has retired,’ said Spittleworth. ‘You see standing before you the new Chief Advisor, my lady.’

‘Oh, congratulations!’ said Eslanda, pretending to be pleased, although she was horrified. ‘So it will be you who oversees the trial of the three soldiers in the dungeons, will it?’

‘You’re very well informed, Lady Eslanda,’ said Spittleworth, eyeing her closely. ‘How did you know there are three soldiers in the dungeons?’

‘I happened to hear Herringbone mention them,’ said Lady Eslanda. ‘They’re well-respected men, it seems. He was saying how important it will be for them to have a fair trial. I know King Fred will agree, because he cares deeply about his own popularity – as he should, for if a king is to be effective, he must be loved.’

Lady Eslanda did a good job of pretending that she was thinking only of the king’s popularity, and I think nine out of ten people would have believed her. Unfortunately, Spittleworth heard the tremor in her voice, and suspected that she must be in love with one of these men, to hurry downstairs in the dead of night, in hope of saving their lives.

‘I wonder,’ he said, watching her closely, ‘which of them it is whom you care about so much?’

Lady Eslanda would have stopped herself blushing if she could, but unfortunately, she couldn’t.

‘I don’t think it can be Ogden,’ mused Spittleworth, ‘because he’s a very plain man, and in any case, he already has a wife. Might it be Wagstaff? He’s an amusing fellow, but prone to boils. No,’ said Lord Spittleworth softly, ‘I think it must be handsome Captain Goodfellow who makes you blush, Lady Eslanda. But would you really stoop so low? His parents were cheesemakers, you know.’

‘It makes no difference to me whether a man is a cheesemaker or a king, so long as he behaves with honour,’ said Eslanda. ‘And the king will be dishonoured, if those soldiers are shot without trial, and so I’ll tell him, when he wakes.’

Lady Eslanda then turned, trembling, and climbed the spiral staircase. She had no idea whether she’d said enough to save the soldiers’ lives, so she spent a sleepless night.

Spittleworth remained standing in the chilly passage until his feet were so cold he could barely feel them. He was trying to decide what to do.

On the one hand, he really did want to get rid of these soldiers, who knew far too much. On the other, he feared Lady Eslanda was right: people would blame the king if the men were shot without trial. Then Fred would be angry at Spittleworth, and might even take the job of Chief Advisor away from him. If that happened, all the dreams of power and riches that Spittleworth had enjoyed on the journey back from the Marshlands would be dashed.

So Spittleworth turned away from the dungeon door and headed to his bed. He was deeply offended by the idea that Lady Eslanda, whom he’d once hoped to marry, preferred the son of cheesemakers. As he blew out his candle, Spittleworth decided that she would pay, one day, for that insult.

*Chapter 20*

## **Medals for Beamish and Buttons**

When King Fred woke next morning and was informed that his Chief Advisor had retired at this critical moment in the country's history, he was furious. It came as a great relief to know that Lord Spittleworth would be taking over, because Fred knew that Spittleworth understood the grave danger facing the kingdom.

Though feeling safer now that he was back in his palace, with its high walls and cannon-mounted turrets, its portcullis and its moat, Fred was unable to shake off the shock of his trip. He stayed shut up in his private apartments, and had all his meals brought to him on golden trays. Instead of going hunting, he paced up and down on his thick carpets, re-living his awful adventure in the north and meeting only his two best friends, who were careful to keep his fears alive.

On the third day after their return from the Marshlands, Spittleworth entered the king's private apartments with a sombre face, and announced that the soldiers who'd been sent back to the marsh to find out what happened to Private Nobby Buttons had discovered nothing but his bloodstained shoes, a single horseshoe and a few well-gnawed bones.

The king turned white and sat down hard on a satin sofa.

'Oh, how dreadful, how dreadful... Private Buttons... Remind me, which one was he?'

'Young man, freckles, only son of a widowed mother,' said Spittleworth. 'The newest recruit to the Royal Guard, and such a promising boy. Tragic, really. And the worst of it is, between Beamish and Buttons, the Ickabog has developed a taste for human flesh – *precisely* as Your Majesty predicted. It is really astonishing, if I may say so, how Your Majesty grasped the danger from the first.'

'B-but what is to be done, Spittleworth? If the monster is hungry for more human prey...'

'Leave it all to me, Your Majesty,' said Spittleworth soothingly. 'I'm Chief Advisor, you know, and I'm at work day and night to keep the kingdom safe.'

‘I’m so glad Herringbone appointed you his successor, Spittleworth,’ said Fred. ‘What would I do without you?’

‘Tish, pish, Your Majesty, ’tis an honour to serve so gracious a king.

‘Now, we ought to discuss tomorrow’s funerals. We’re intending to bury what’s left of Buttons next to Major Beamish. It is to be a state occasion, you know, with plenty of pomp and ceremony, and I think it would be a very nice touch if you could present the Medal for Outstanding Bravery Against the Deadly Ickabog to relatives of the dead men.’

‘Oh, is there a medal?’ said Fred.

‘Certainly there is, sire, and that reminds me – you haven’t yet received your own.’

From an inner pocket, Spittleworth pulled out a most gorgeous gold medal, almost as large as a saucer. Embossed upon the medal was a monster with gleaming ruby eyes, which was being fought by a handsome, muscular man wearing a crown. The whole thing was suspended from a scarlet velvet ribbon.

‘Mine?’ said the king, wide-eyed.

‘But of course, sire!’ said Spittleworth. ‘Did Your Majesty not plunge your sword into the monster’s loathsome neck? We all remember it happening, sire!’

King Fred fingered the heavy gold medal. Though he said nothing, he was undergoing a silent struggle.

Fred’s honesty had piped up, in a small, clear voice: *It didn’t happen like that. You know it didn’t. You saw the Ickabog in the fog, you dropped your sword and you ran away. You never stabbed it. You were never near enough!*

But Fred’s cowardice blustered louder than his honesty: *You’ve already agreed with Spittleworth that that’s what happened! What a fool you’ll look if you admit you ran away!*

And Fred’s vanity spoke loudest of all: *After all, I was the one who led the hunt for the Ickabog! I was the one who saw it first! I deserve this medal, and it will stand out beautifully against that black funeral suit.*

So Fred said:

‘Yes, Spittleworth, it all happened just as you said. Naturally, one doesn’t like to boast.’

‘Your Majesty’s modesty is legendary,’ said Spittleworth, bowing low to hide his smirk.

The following day was declared a national day of mourning in honour of the Ickabog’s victims. Crowds lined the streets to watch Major Beamish and Private Buttons’ coffins pass on wagons drawn by plumed black horses.

King Fred rode behind the coffins on a jet-black horse, with the Medal for Outstanding Bravery Against the Deadly Ickabog bouncing on his chest and reflecting the sunlight so brightly that it hurt the eyes of the crowd. Behind the king walked Mrs Beamish and Bert, also dressed in black, and behind them came a howling old woman in a ginger wig, who’d been introduced to them as Mrs Buttons, Nobby’s mother.

‘Oh, my Nobby,’ she wailed as she walked. ‘Oh, down with the awful Ickabog, who killed my poor Nobby!’

The coffins were lowered into graves and the national anthem was played by the king’s buglers. Buttons’ coffin was particularly heavy, because it had been filled with bricks. The odd-looking Mrs Buttons wailed and cursed the Ickabog again while ten sweating men lowered her son’s coffin into the ground. Mrs Beamish and Bert stood quietly weeping.

Then King Fred called the grieving relatives forward to receive their men’s medals. Spittleworth hadn’t been prepared to spend as much money on Beamish and the imaginary Buttons as he’d spent on the king, so their medals were made of silver rather than gold. However, it made an affecting ceremony, especially as Mrs Buttons was so overcome that she fell to the ground and kissed the king’s boots.

Mrs Beamish and Bert walked home from the funeral and the crowds parted respectfully to let them pass. Only once did Mrs Beamish pause, and that was when her old friend Mr Dovetail stepped out of the crowd to tell her how sorry he was. The two embraced. Daisy wanted to say something to Bert, but the whole crowd was staring, and she couldn’t even catch

his eye, because he was scowling at his feet. Before she knew it, her father had released Mrs Beamish, and Daisy watched her best friend and his mother walk out of sight.

Once they were back in their cottage, Mrs Beamish threw herself face down on her bed where she sobbed and sobbed. Bert tried to comfort her, but nothing worked, so he took his father's medal into his own bedroom and placed it on the mantelpiece.

Only when he stood back to look at it did he realise that he'd placed his father's medal right beside the wooden Ickabog that Mr Dovetail had carved for him so long ago. Until this moment, Bert hadn't connected the toy Ickabog with the way his father had died.

Now he lifted the wooden model from its shelf, placed it on the floor, picked up a poker, and smashed the toy Ickabog to splinters. Then he picked up the remnants of the shattered toy and threw them into the fire. As he watched the flames leap higher and higher, he vowed that one day, when he was old enough, he'd hunt down the Ickabog, and revenge himself upon the monster that had killed his father.

*Chapter 21*

## **Professor Fraudysham**

The morning after the funerals, Spittleworth knocked on the door of the king's apartments again and entered, carrying a lot of scrolls, which he let fall onto the table where the king sat.

'Spittleworth,' said Fred, who was still wearing his Medal for Outstanding Bravery Against the Deadly Ickabog, and had dressed in a scarlet suit, the better to show it off, 'these cakes aren't as good as usual.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, Your Majesty,' said Spittleworth. 'I thought it right for the widow Beamish to take a few days off work. These are the work of the under pastry chef.'

'Well, they're chewy,' said Fred, dropping half his Folderol Fancy back on his plate. 'And what are all these scrolls?'

'These, sire, are suggestions for improving the kingdom's defences against the Ickabog,' said Spittleworth.

‘Excellent, excellent,’ said King Fred, moving the cakes and the teapot aside to make more room, as Spittleworth pulled up a chair.

‘The very first thing to be done, Your Majesty, was to find out as much as we could about the Ickabog itself, the better to discover how to defeat it.’

‘Well, yes, but *how*, Spittleworth? The monster is a mystery! Everyone’s thought it a fantasy all these years!’

‘That, forgive me, is where Your Majesty is wrong,’ said Spittleworth. ‘By dint of ceaseless searching, I’ve managed to find the foremost Ickabog expert in all of Cornucopia. Lord Flapoon is waiting with him in the hall. With Your Majesty’s permission—’

‘Bring him in, bring him in, do!’ said Fred excitedly.

So Spittleworth left the room and returned shortly afterwards with Lord Flapoon and a little old man with snowy white hair and spectacles so thick that his eyes had vanished almost into nothingness.

‘This, sire, is Professor Fraudysham,’ said Flapoon, as the mole-like little man made a deep bow to the king. ‘What he doesn’t know about Ickabogs isn’t worth knowing!’

‘How is it that I’ve never heard of you before, Professor Fraudysham?’ asked the king, who was thinking that if he’d known the Ickabog was real enough to have its own expert, he’d never have gone looking for it in the first place.

‘I live a retired life, Your Majesty,’ said Professor Fraudysham, with a second bow. ‘So few people believe in the Ickabog that I’ve formed the habit of keeping my knowledge to myself.’

King Fred was satisfied with this answer, which was a relief to Spittleworth, because Professor Fraudysham was no more real than Private Nobby Buttons or, indeed, old Widow Buttons in her ginger wig, who’d howled at Nobby’s funeral. The truth was that beneath the wigs and the glasses, Professor Fraudysham and Widow Buttons were the same person: Lord Spittleworth’s butler, who was called Otto Scrumble, and looked after Lord Spittleworth’s

estate while he lived at the palace. Like his master, Scrumble would do anything for gold, and had agreed to impersonate both the widow and the professor for a hundred ducats.

‘So, what can you tell us about the Ickabog, Professor Fraudysham?’ asked the king.

‘Well, let’s see,’ said the pretend professor, who’d been told by Spittleworth what he ought to say. ‘It’s as tall as two horses—’

‘If not taller,’ interrupted Fred, whose nightmares had featured a gigantic Ickabog ever since he’d returned from the Marshlands.

‘If, as Your Majesty says, not taller,’ agreed Fraudysham. ‘I should estimate that a medium-sized Ickabog would be as tall as two horses, whereas a large specimen might reach the size of – let’s see—’

‘Two elephants,’ suggested the king.

‘Two elephants,’ agreed Fraudysham. ‘And with eyes like lamps—’

‘Or glowing balls of fire,’ suggested the king.

‘The very image I was about to employ, sire!’ said Fraudysham.

‘And can the monster really speak in a human tongue?’ asked Fred, in whose nightmares the monster whispered, *‘The king... I want the king... Where are you, little king?’* as it crept through the dark streets towards the palace.

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Fraudysham, with another low bow. ‘We believe the Ickabog learnt to speak Human by taking people prisoner. Before disembowelling and eating its victims, we believe it forces them to give it English lessons.’

‘Suffering Saints, what savagery!’ whispered Fred, who’d turned pale.

‘Moreover,’ said Fraudysham, ‘the Ickabog has a long and vengeful memory. If outwitted by a victim – as you outwitted it, sire, by escaping its deadly clutches – it has sometimes sneaked out of the marsh under cover of darkness, and claimed its victim while he or she slept.’

Whiter than the snowy icing on his half-eaten Folderol Fancy, Fred croaked:

‘What’s to be done? I’m doomed!’

‘Nonsense, Your Majesty,’ said Spittleworth bracingly. ‘I’ve devised a whole raft of measures for your protection.’

So saying, Spittleworth took hold of one of the scrolls he’d brought with him and unrolled it. There, covering most of the table, was a coloured picture of a monster that resembled a dragon. It was huge and ugly, with thick black scales, gleaming white eyes, a tail that ended in a poisonous spike, a fanged mouth large enough to swallow a man, and long, razor-sharp claws.

‘There are several problems to be overcome, when defending against an Ickabog,’ said Professor Fraudyscham, now taking out a short stick and pointing in turn to the fangs, the claws, and the poisonous tail. ‘But the most difficult challenge is that killing an Ickabog causes two new Ickabogs to emerge from the corpse of the first.’

‘Surely not?’ said Fred faintly.

‘Oh, yes, Your Majesty,’ said Fraudyscham. ‘I’ve made a lifelong study of the monster, and I can assure you that my findings are quite correct.’

‘Your Majesty might remember that many of the old tales of the Ickabog make mention of this curious fact,’ interjected Spittleworth, who really needed the king to believe in this particular trait of the Ickabog, because most of his plan relied on it.

‘But it seems so – so unlikely!’ said Fred weakly.

‘It *does* seem unlikely on the face of it, doesn’t it, sire?’ said Spittleworth, with another bow. ‘In truth, it’s one of those extraordinary, unbelievable ideas that only the very cleverest people can grasp, whereas common folk – stupid folk, sire – giggle and laugh at the notion.’

Fred looked from Spittleworth to Flapoon to Professor Fraudyscham; all three men seemed to be waiting for him to prove how clever he was, and naturally he didn’t want to seem stupid, so he said: ‘Yes... well, if the professor says it, that’s good enough for me... but if the monster turns into two monsters every time it dies, how do we kill it?’

‘Well, in the first phase of our plan, we don’t,’ said Spittleworth.

‘We don’t?’ said Fred, crestfallen.

Spittleworth now unrolled a second scroll, which showed a map of Cornucopia. The northernmost tip had a drawing of a gigantic Ickabog on it. All around the edge of the wide marsh stood a hundred little stick figures, holding swords. Fred looked closely to see whether any of them was wearing a crown, and was relieved to see that none were.

‘As you can see, Your Majesty, our first proposal is a special Ickabog Defence Brigade. These men will patrol the edge of the Marshlands, to ensure that the Ickabog can’t leave the marsh. We estimate the cost of such a brigade, including uniforms, weapons, horses, wages, training, board, lodging, sick pay, danger money, birthday presents, and medals to be around ten thousand gold ducats.’

‘Ten thousand ducats?’ repeated King Fred. ‘That’s a lot of gold. However, when it comes to protecting me – I mean to say, when it comes to protecting Cornucopia—’

‘Ten thousand ducats a month is a small price to pay,’ finished Spittleworth.

‘Ten thousand *a month!*’ yelled Fred.

‘Yes, sire,’ said Spittleworth. ‘If we’re to truly defend the kingdom, the expense will be considerable. However, if Your Majesty feels we could manage with fewer weapons—’

‘No, no, I didn’t say that—’

‘Naturally, we don’t expect Your Majesty to bear the expense alone,’ continued Spittleworth.

‘You don’t?’ said Fred, suddenly hopeful.

‘Oh, no, sire, that would be grossly unfair. After all, the entire country will benefit from the Ickabog Defence Brigade. I suggest we impose an Ickabog tax. We’ll ask every household in Cornucopia to pay one gold ducat a month. Of course, this will mean the recruitment and training of many new tax collectors, but if we raise the amount to two ducats, we’ll cover the cost of them, too.’

‘Admirable, Spittleworth!’ said King Fred. ‘What a brain you have! Why, two ducats a month – people will barely notice the loss.’

## *Chapter 22*

# **The House with No Flags**

And so a monthly tax of two gold ducats was imposed on every household in Cornucopia, to protect the country from the Ickabog. Tax collectors soon became a common sight on the streets of Cornucopia. They had large, staring white eyes like lamps painted on the back of their black uniforms. These were supposed to remind everybody of what the tax was for, but people whispered in the taverns that they were Lord Spittleworth’s eyes, watching to make sure everybody paid up.

Once they’d collected enough gold, Spittleworth decided to raise a statue to the memory of one of the Ickabog’s victims, to remind people what a savage beast it was. At first Spittleworth planned a statue of Major Beamish, but his spies in the taverns of Chouxville reported that it was Private Buttons’s story that had really captured the public imagination. Brave young Buttons, who’d volunteered to gallop off into the night with the news of his major’s death, only to end up in the Ickabog’s jaws himself, was generally felt to be a tragic, noble figure deserving of a handsome statue. Major Beamish, on the other hand, seemed merely to have died by accident, blundering unwisely across the foggy marsh in the dark. In fact, the drinkers of Chouxville felt quite resentful towards Beamish, as the man who’d forced Nobby Buttons to risk his life.

Happy to bow to the public mood, Spittleworth had a statue of Nobby Buttons made, and placed it in the middle of the largest public square in Chouxville. Seated on a magnificent charger, with his bronze cloak flying out behind him and a look of determination on his boyish face, Buttons was forever frozen in the act of galloping back to the City-Within-The-City. It became fashionable to lay flowers around the

statue's base every Sunday. One rather plain young woman, who laid flowers every day of the week, claimed she'd been Nobby Buttons' girlfriend.

Spittleworth also decided to spend some gold on a scheme to keep the king diverted, because Fred was still too scared to go hunting, in case the Ickabog had sneaked south somehow and pounced on him in the forest. Bored of entertaining Fred, Spittleworth and Flapoon had come up with a plan.

'We need a portrait of you fighting the Ickabog, sire! The nation demands it!'

'Does it really?' said the king, fiddling with his buttons, which that day were made of emeralds. Fred remembered the ambition he'd formed, the morning he'd first tried on battledress, of being painted killing the Ickabog. He liked this idea of Spittleworth's very much, so he spent the next two weeks choosing and being fitted for a new uniform, because the old one was much stained by the marsh, and having a replacement jewelled sword made. Then Spittleworth hired the best portrait painter in Cornucopia, Malik Motley, and Fred began posing for weeks on end, for a portrait large enough to cover an entire wall of the Throne Room. Behind Motley sat fifty lesser artists, all copying his work, so as to have smaller versions of the painting ready to deliver to every city, town, and village in Cornucopia.

While he was being painted, the king amused Motley and the other artists by telling them the story of his famous fight with the monster, and the more he told the story, the more he found himself convinced of its truth. All of this kept Fred happily occupied, leaving Spittleworth and Flapoon free to run the country, and to divide up the trunks of gold left over each month, which were sent in the dead of night to the two lords' estates in the country.

But what, you might ask, of the eleven other advisors, who'd worked under Herringbone? Didn't they think it odd that the Chief Advisor had resigned in the middle of the night, and never been seen again? Didn't they ask questions, when

they woke up to find Spittleworth in Herringbone's place? And, most importantly of all: did they believe in the Ickabog?

Well, those are excellent questions, and I'll answer them now.

They certainly muttered among themselves that Spittleworth shouldn't have been allowed to take over, without a proper vote. One or two of them even considered complaining to the king. However, they decided not to act, for the simple reason that they were scared.

You see, royal proclamations had now gone up in every town and village square in Cornucopia, all written by Spittleworth and signed by the king. It was treason to question the king's decisions, treason to suggest that the Ickabog might not be real, treason to question the need for the Ickabog tax and treason not to pay your two ducats a month. There was also a reward of ten ducats if you reported someone for saying the Ickabog wasn't real.

The advisors were frightened of being accused of treason. They didn't want to be locked up in a dungeon. It really was much more pleasant to keep living in the lovely mansions which came with the job of advisor, and to continue wearing their special advisor robes, which meant they were allowed to go straight to the head of the queue in pastry shops.

So they approved all the expenses of the Ickabog Defence Brigade, who wore green uniforms, which Spittleworth said hid them better in the marsh weed. The Brigade soon became a common sight, parading through the streets of all of Cornucopia's major cities.

Some might wonder why the Brigade was riding through the streets waving at people, instead of remaining up in the north, where the monster was supposed to be, but they kept their thoughts to themselves. Meanwhile, most of their fellow citizens competed with each other to demonstrate their passionate belief in the Ickabog. They

propped up cheap copies of the painting of King Fred fighting the Ickabog in their windows, and hung wooden signs on their doors, which bore messages like PROUD TO PAY THE ICKABOG TAX and DOWN WITH THE ICKABOG, UP WITH THE KING! Some parents even taught their children to bow and curtsy to the tax collectors.

The Beamish house was decorated in so many anti-Ickabog banners that it was hard to see what the cottage beneath looked like. Bert had returned to school at last, but to Daisy's disappointment, he spent all his breaks with Roderick Roach, talking about the time when they would both join the Ickabog Defence Brigade and kill the monster. She'd never felt lonelier, and wondered whether Bert missed her at all.

Daisy's own house was the only one in the City-Within-The-City that was entirely free of flags and signs welcoming the Ickabog tax. Her father also kept Daisy inside whenever the Ickabog Defence Brigade rode past, rather than urging her to run into the garden and cheer, like the neighbours' children.

Lord Spittleworth noticed the absence of flags and signs on the tiny cottage beside the graveyard, and filed that knowledge away in the back of his cunning head, where he kept information that might one day prove useful.

*Chapter 23*

## **The Trial**

I'm sure you haven't forgotten those three brave soldiers locked up in the dungeons, who'd refused to believe in either the Ickabog or in Nobby Buttons.

Well, Spittleworth hadn't forgotten them either. He'd been trying to think up ways to get rid of them, without being blamed for it, ever since the night he'd imprisoned them. His latest idea was to feed them poison in their soup, and pretend they'd died of natural causes. He was still trying to decide on the best poison to use, when some of the soldiers' relatives turned up at the palace gates, demanding to

speak to the king. Even worse, Lady Eslanda was with them, and Spittleworth had the sneaking suspicion she'd arranged the whole thing.

Instead of taking them to the king, Spittleworth had the group shown into his splendid new Chief Advisor's office, where he invited them politely to sit down.

'We want to know when our boys are going to stand trial,' said Private Ogden's brother, who was a pig farmer from just outside Baronstown.

'You've had them locked up for months now,' said the mother of Private Wagstaff, who was a barmaid in a Jeroboam tavern.

'And we'd all like to know what they're charged with,' said Lady Eslanda.

'They're charged with treason,' said Spittleworth, wafting his scented handkerchief under his nose, with his eyes on the pig farmer. The man was perfectly clean, but Spittleworth meant to make him feel small, and I'm sorry to say he succeeded.

'Treason?' repeated Mrs Wagstaff in astonishment. 'Why, you won't find more loyal subjects of the king anywhere in the land than those three!'

Spittleworth's crafty eyes moved between the worried relatives, who so clearly loved their brothers and sons very deeply, and Lady Eslanda, whose face was so anxious, and a brilliant idea flashed into his brain like a lightning strike. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it before! He didn't need to poison the soldiers at all! What he needed was to ruin their reputations.

'Your men will be put on trial tomorrow,' he said, getting to his feet. 'The trial will take place in the largest square in Chouxville, because I want as many people as possible to hear what they have to say. Good day to you, ladies and gentlemen.'

And with a smirk and a bow, Spittleworth left the astonished relatives and proceeded down into the dungeons.

The three soldiers were a lot thinner than the last time he'd seen them, and as they hadn't been able to shave or keep very clean, they made a miserable picture.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' said Spittleworth briskly, while the drunken warder snoozed in a corner. 'Good news! You're to stand trial tomorrow.'

'And what exactly are we charged with?' asked Captain Goodfellow suspiciously.

'We've been through this already, Goodfellow,' said Spittleworth. 'You saw the monster on the marsh, and ran away instead of staying to protect your king. You then claimed the monster isn't real, to cover up your own cowardice. That's treason.'

'It's a filthy lie,' said Goodfellow, in a low voice. 'Do what you like to me, Spittleworth, but I'll tell the truth.'

The other two soldiers, Ogden and Wagstaff, nodded their agreement with the captain.

'You might not care what I do to *you*,' said Spittleworth, smiling, 'but what about your families? It would be awful, wouldn't it, Wagstaff, if that barmaid mother of yours slipped on her way down into the cellar, and cracked open her skull? Or, Ogden, if your pig-farming brother accidentally stabbed himself with his own scythe, and got eaten by his own pigs? Or,' whispered Spittleworth, moving closer to the bars, and staring into Goodfellow's eyes, 'if Lady Eslanda were to have a riding accident, and break her slender neck.'

You see, Spittleworth believed that Lady Eslanda was Captain Goodfellow's lover. It would never occur to him that a woman might try and protect a man to whom she'd never even spoken.

Captain Goodfellow wondered why on earth Lord Spittleworth was threatening him with the death of Lady Eslanda. True, he thought her the loveliest

woman in the kingdom, but he'd always kept that to himself, because cheesemakers' sons didn't marry ladies of the court.

'What has Lady Eslanda to do with me?' he asked.

'Don't pretend, Goodfellow,' snapped the Chief Advisor. 'I've seen her blushes when your name is mentioned. Do you think me a fool? She has been doing all that she can to protect you and, I must admit, it is down to her that you're still alive. However, it is the Lady Eslanda who'll pay the price if you tell any truth but mine tomorrow. She saved your life, Goodfellow: will you sacrifice hers?'

Goodfellow was speechless with shock. The idea that Lady Eslanda was in love with him was so marvellous that it almost eclipsed Spittleworth's threats. Then the captain realised that, in order to save Eslanda's life, he would have to publicly confess to treason the next day, which would surely kill her love for him stone-dead.

From the way the colour had drained out of the three men's faces, Spittleworth could see that his threats had done the trick.

'Take courage, gentlemen,' he said. 'I'm sure no awful accidents will happen to your loved ones, as long as you tell the truth tomorrow...'

So notices were pinned up all over the capital announcing the trial, and the following day, an enormous crowd packed itself into the largest square in Chouxville. Each of the three brave soldiers took it in turns to stand on a wooden platform, while their friends and families watched, and one by one they confessed that they'd met the Ickabog on the marsh, and had run away like cowards instead of defending the king.

The crowd booed the soldiers so loudly that it was hard to hear what the judge (Lord Spittleworth) was saying. However, all the time Spittleworth was reading out the sentence – life imprisonment in the palace dungeons – Captain Goodfellow stared directly into the eyes of Lady Eslanda, who sat watching, high in the stands,

with the other ladies of the court. Sometimes, two people can tell each other more with a look than others could tell each other with a lifetime of words. I will not tell you everything that Lady Eslanda and Captain Goodfellow said with their eyes, but she knew, now, that the captain returned her feelings, and he learnt, even though he was going to prison for the rest of his life, that Lady Eslanda knew he was innocent.

The three prisoners were led from the platform in chains, while the crowd threw cabbages at them and then dispersed, chattering loudly. Many of them felt Lord Spittleworth should have put the traitors to death, and Spittleworth chuckled to himself as he returned to the palace, for it was always best, if possible, to seem a reasonable man.

Mr Dovetail had watched the trial from the back of the crowd. He hadn't booed the soldiers, nor had he brought Daisy with him, but had left her carving in his workshop. As Mr Dovetail walked home, lost in thought, he saw Wagstaff's weeping mother being followed along the street by a gang of youths, who were booing and throwing vegetables at her.

'You follow this woman any further, and you'll have me to deal with!' Mr Dovetail shouted at the gang, who, seeing the size of the carpenter, slunk away.

## *Chapter 24*

# **The Bandalore**

Daisy was about to turn eight years old, so she decided to invite Bert Beamish to tea.

A thick wall of ice seemed to have grown up between Daisy and Bert since his father had died. He was always with Roderick Roach, who was very proud to have the son of an Ickabog victim as a friend, but Daisy's coming birthday, which was three days before Bert's, would be a chance to find out whether they could repair their friendship. So she asked her father to write a note to Mrs Beamish, inviting her and her son to tea. To Daisy's delight, a note came

back accepting the invitation, and even though Bert still didn't talk to her at school, she held out hope that everything would be made right on her birthday.

Although he was well paid as carpenter to the king, even Mr Dovetail had felt the pinch of paying the Ickabog tax, so he and Daisy had bought fewer pastries than usual, and Mr Dovetail stopped buying wine. However, in honour of Daisy's birthday, Mr Dovetail brought out his last bottle of Jeroboam wine, and Daisy collected all her savings and bought two expensive Hopes-of-Heaven for herself and Bert, because she knew they were his favourites.

The birthday tea didn't start well. Firstly, Mr Dovetail proposed a toast to Major Beamish, which made Mrs Beamish cry. Then the four of them sat down to eat, but nobody seemed able to think of anything to say, until Bert remembered that he'd bought Daisy a present.

Bert had seen a bandalore, which is what people called yo-yos at that time, in a toyshop window and bought it with all his saved pocket money. Daisy had never seen one before, and what with Bert teaching her to use it, and Daisy swiftly becoming better at it than Bert was, and Mrs Beamish and Mr Dovetail drinking Jeroboam sparkling wine, conversation began to flow much more easily.

The truth was that Bert had missed Daisy very much, but hadn't known how to make up with her, with Roderick Roach always watching. Soon, though, it felt as though the fight in the courtyard had never happened, and Daisy and Bert were snorting with laughter about their teacher's habit of digging for bogies in his nose when he thought none of the children were looking. The painful subjects of dead parents, or fights that got out of hand, or King Fred the Fearless, were all forgotten.

The children were wiser than the adults. Mr Dovetail hadn't tasted wine in a long time, and, unlike his daughter, he didn't stop to consider that discussing the monster that was supposed to have killed Major Beamish might be a bad idea. Daisy only realised what her father was doing when he raised his voice over the children's laughter.

‘All I’m saying, Bertha,’ Mr Dovetail was almost shouting, ‘is where’s the proof? I’d like to see proof, that’s all!’

‘You don’t consider it proof, then, that my husband was killed?’ said Mrs Beamish, whose kindly face suddenly looked dangerous. ‘Or poor little Nobby Buttons?’

‘Little Nobby Buttons?’ repeated Mr Dovetail. *‘Little Nobby Buttons?’* Now you come to mention it, I’d like proof of little Nobby Buttons! Who was he? Where did he live? Where’s that old widowed mother gone, who wore that ginger wig? Have you ever met a Buttons family in the City-Within-The-City? And if you *press* me,’ said Mr Dovetail, brandishing his wine glass, ‘if you press me, Bertha, I’ll ask you this: why was Nobby Buttons’ coffin so heavy, when all that was left of him were his shoes and a shin bone?’

Daisy made a furious face to try and shut her father up, but he didn’t notice. Taking another large gulp of wine, he said: ‘It doesn’t add up, Bertha! Doesn’t add up! Who’s to say – and this is just an idea, mind you – but who’s to say poor Beamish didn’t fall off his horse and break his neck, and Lord Spittleworth saw an opportunity to pretend the Ickabog killed him, and charge us all a lot of gold?’

Mrs Beamish rose slowly to her feet. She wasn’t a tall woman, but in her anger, she seemed to tower awfully over Mr Dovetail.

‘My husband,’ she whispered in a voice so cold that Daisy felt goosebumps, ‘was the best horseman in all of Cornucopia. My husband would no sooner have fallen off his horse than you’d chop off your leg with your axe, Dan Dovetail. Nothing short of a terrible monster could have killed my husband, and you ought to watch your tongue, because saying the Ickabog isn’t real happens to be treason!’

‘Treason!’ jeered Mr Dovetail. ‘Come off it, Bertha, you’re not going to stand there and tell me you believe in this treason nonsense? Why, a few months ago, not believing in the Ickabog made you a sane man, not a traitor!’

‘That was before we knew the Ickabog was real!’ screeched Mrs Beamish. ‘Bert – we’re going home!’

‘No – no – please don’t go!’ Daisy cried. She picked up a little box she’d stowed under her chair and ran out into the garden after the Beamishes.

‘Bert, please! Look – I got us Hopes-of-Heaven, I spent all my pocket money on them!’

Daisy wasn’t to know that when he saw Hopes-of-Heaven now, Bert was instantly reminded of the day he’d found out his father was dead. The very last Hope-of-Heaven he’d ever eaten had been in the king’s kitchens, when his mother was promising him they’d have heard if anything had happened to Major Beamish.

All the same, Bert didn’t mean to dash Daisy’s gift to the ground. He meant only to push it away. Unluckily, Daisy lost her grip on the box, and the costly pastries fell into the flowerbed and were covered in earth.

Daisy burst into tears.

‘Well, if all you care about is pastries!’ shouted Bert, and he opened the garden gate and led his mother away.

## *Chapter 25*

# **Lord Spittleworth’s Problem**

Unfortunately for Lord Spittleworth, Mr Dovetail wasn’t the only person who’d started voicing doubts about the Ickabog.

Cornucopia was growing slowly poorer. The rich merchants had no problem paying their Ickabog taxes. They gave the collectors two ducats a month, then increased the prices on their pastries, cheeses, hams, and wines to pay themselves back. However, two gold ducats a month was increasingly hard to find for the poorer folk, especially with food at the markets more expensive. Meanwhile, up in the Marshlands, children began to grow hollow-cheeked.

Spittleworth, who had spies in every city and village, began hearing word that people wanted to know what their gold was being spent on, and even to demand proof that the monster was still a danger.

Now, people said of the cities of Cornucopia that their inhabitants had different natures: Jeroboamers were supposed to be brawlers and dreamers, the Kurdsburgers peaceful and courteous, while the citizens of Chouxville were often said to be proud, even snooty. But the people of Baronstown were said to be plain speakers and honest dealers, and it was here that the first serious outbreak of disbelief in the Ickabog happened.

A butcher called Tubby Tenderloin called a meeting in the town hall. Tubby was careful not to say he didn't believe in the Ickabog, but he invited everyone at the meeting to sign a petition to the king, asking for evidence that the Ickabog tax was still necessary. As soon as this meeting was over, Spittleworth's spy, who had of course attended the meeting, jumped on his horse and rode south, arriving at the palace by midnight.

Woken by a footman, Spittleworth hurriedly summoned Lord Flapoon and Major Roach from their beds, and the two men joined Spittleworth in his bedroom to hear what the spy had to say. The spy told the story of the treasonous meeting, then unfurled a map on which he'd helpfully circled the houses of the ringleaders, including that of Tubby Tenderloin.

'Excellent work,' growled Roach. 'We'll have all of them arrested for treason and slung in jail. Simple!'

'It isn't simple at all,' said Spittleworth impatiently. 'There were two hundred people at this meeting, and we can't lock up two hundred people! We haven't got room, for one thing, and for another, everyone will just say it proves we can't show the Ickabog's real!'

‘Then we’ll shoot ’em,’ said Flapoon, ‘and wrap ’em up like we did Beamish, and leave ’em up by the marsh to be found, and people will think the Ickabog got ’em.’

‘Is the Ickabog supposed to have a gun now?’ snapped Spittleworth, ‘and two hundred cloaks in which to wrap its victims?’

‘Well, if you’re going to sneer at our plans, my lord,’ said Roach, ‘why don’t you come up with something clever yourself?’

But that was exactly what Spittleworth couldn’t do. Cudgel his sneaky brains though he might, he couldn’t think of any way to frighten the Cornucopians back into paying their taxes without complaint. What he needed was proof that the Ickabog really existed, but where was he to get it?

Pacing alone in front of his fire, after the others had gone back to bed, Spittleworth heard another tap on his bedroom door.

‘What now?’ he snapped.

Into the room slid the footman, Cankerby.

‘What do you want? Out with it quickly, I’m busy!’ said Spittleworth.

‘If it pleases Your Lordship,’ said Cankerby, ‘I ’appened to be passing your room earlier, and I couldn’t ’elp ’earing about that there treasonous meeting in Baronstown what you, Lord Flapoon and Major Roach was talking about.’

‘Oh, couldn’t you *help* it?’ said Spittleworth, in a dangerous voice.

‘I thought I should tell you, my lord: I’ve got evidence that there’s a man ’ere in the City-Within-The-City what thinks the same way as those traitors in Baronstown,’ said Cankerby. ‘’E wants proof, just like them butchers do. Sounded like treason to me, when I ’eard about it.’

‘Well, of course it’s treason!’ said Spittleworth. ‘Who dares say such things, in the very shadow of the palace? Which of the king’s servants dares question the king’s word?’

‘Well... as to that...’ said Cankerby, shuffling his feet. ‘Some would say that’s valuable information, some would—’

‘You tell me who it is,’ snarled Spittleworth, seizing the footman by the front of his jacket, ‘and then I’ll see whether you deserve payment! Their name – *give me their name!*’

‘It’s D-D-Dan Dovetail!’ said the footman.

‘Dovetail... Dovetail... I know that name,’ said Spittleworth, releasing the footman, who staggered sideways and fell into an end table. ‘Wasn’t there a seamstress...?’

‘Is wife, sir. She died,’ said Cankerby, straightening up.

‘Yes,’ said Spittleworth slowly. ‘He lives in that house by the graveyard, where they never fly a flag and without a single portrait of the king in the windows. How d’you know he’s expressed these treasonous views?’

‘I ’appened to over’ear Mrs Beamish telling the scullery maid what ’e said,’ said Cankerby.

‘You *happen* to hear a lot of things, don’t you, Cankerby?’ commented Spittleworth, feeling in his waistcoat for some gold. ‘Very well. Here are ten ducats for you.’

‘Thank you very much, my lord,’ said the footman, bowing low.

‘Wait,’ said Spittleworth, as Cankerby turned to go. ‘What does he do, this Dovetail?’

What Spittleworth really wanted to know was whether the king would miss Mr Dovetail, if he disappeared.

‘Dovetail, my lord? ’E’s a carpenter,’ said Cankerby, and he bowed himself out of the room.

‘A carpenter,’ repeated Spittleworth out loud. ‘*A carpenter...*’

And as the door closed on Cankerby, another of Spittleworth’s lightning strike ideas hit him, and so amazed was he at his own brilliance, he had to clutch the back of the sofa, because he felt he might topple over.

## *Chapter 26*

# **A Job for Mr Dovetail**

Daisy had gone to school, and Mr Dovetail was busy in his workshop next morning, when Major Roach knocked on the carpenter’s door. Mr Dovetail knew Roach as the man who lived in his old house, and who’d replaced Major Beamish as head of the Royal Guard. The carpenter invited Roach inside, but the major declined.

‘We’ve got an urgent job for you at the palace, Dovetail,’ he said. ‘A shaft on the king’s carriage has broken and he needs it tomorrow.’

‘Already?’ said Mr Dovetail. ‘I only mended that last month.’

‘It was kicked,’ said Major Roach, ‘by one of the carriage horses. Will you come?’

‘Of course,’ said Mr Dovetail, who was hardly likely to turn down a job from the king. So he locked up his workshop and followed Roach through the sunlit streets of the City-Within-The-City, talking of this and that, until they reached the part of the royal stables where the carriages were kept. Half a dozen soldiers were loitering outside the door, and they all looked up when they saw Mr Dovetail and Major Roach approaching. One soldier had an empty flour sack in his hands, and another, a length of rope.

‘Good morning,’ said Mr Dovetail.

He made to walk past them, but before he knew what was happening, one soldier had thrown the flour sack over Mr Dovetail's head and two more had pinned his arms behind his back and tied his wrists together with the rope. Mr Dovetail was a strong man – he struggled and fought, but Roach muttered in his ear:

‘Make one sound, and it’ll be your daughter who pays the price.’

Mr Dovetail closed his mouth. He permitted the soldiers to march him inside the palace, though he couldn't see where he was going. He soon guessed, though, because they took him down two steep flights of stairs and then onto a third, which was made of slippery stone. When he felt a chill on his flesh, he suspected that he was in the dungeon, and he knew it for sure when he heard the turning of an iron key, and the clanking of bars.

The soldiers threw Mr Dovetail onto the cold stone floor. Somebody pulled off his hood.

The surroundings were almost completely dark, and at first, Mr Dovetail couldn't make out anything around him. Then one of the soldiers lit a torch, and Mr Dovetail found himself staring at a pair of highly polished boots. He looked up. Standing over him was a smiling Lord Spittleworth.

‘Good morning, Dovetail,’ said Spittleworth. ‘I have a little job for you. If you do it well, you’ll be home with your daughter before you know it. Refuse – or do a poor job – and you’ll never see her again. Do we understand each other?’

Six soldiers and Major Roach were lined up against the cell wall, all of them holding swords.

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Mr Dovetail in a low voice. ‘I understand.’

‘Excellent,’ said Spittleworth. Moving aside, he revealed an enormous piece of wood, a section of a fallen tree as big as a pony. Beside the wood was a small table, bearing a set of carpenter's tools.

‘I want you to carve me a gigantic foot, Dovetail, a monstrous foot, with razor-sharp claws. On top of the foot, I want a long handle, so that a man on horseback can press the foot into soft ground, to make an imprint. Do you understand your task, carpenter?’

Mr Dovetail and Lord Spittleworth looked deep into each other’s eyes. Of course, Mr Dovetail understood exactly what was going on. He was being told to fake proof of the Ickabog’s existence. What terrified Mr Dovetail was that he couldn’t imagine why Spittleworth would ever let him go, after he’d created the fake monster’s foot, in case he talked about what he’d done.

‘Do you swear, my lord,’ said Mr Dovetail quietly, ‘do you *swear* that if I do this, my daughter won’t be harmed? And that I’ll be permitted to go home to her?’

‘Of course, Dovetail,’ said Spittleworth lightly, already moving to the door of the cell. ‘The quicker you complete the task, the sooner you’ll see your daughter again.’

‘Now, every night, we’ll collect these tools from you, and every morning they’ll be brought back to you, because we can’t have prisoners keeping the means to dig themselves out, can we? Good luck, Dovetail, and work hard. I look forward to seeing my foot!’

And with that, Roach cut the rope binding Mr Dovetail’s wrists, and rammed the torch he was carrying into a bracket on the wall. Then Spittleworth, Roach and the other soldiers left the cell. The iron door closed with a clang, a key turned in the lock, and Mr Dovetail was left alone with the enormous piece of wood, his chisels and his knives.

*Chapter 27*

## **Kidnapped**

When Daisy arrived home from school that afternoon, playing with her bandalore as she went, she headed as usual to her father's workshop to tell him about her day. However, to her surprise, she found the workshop locked up. Assuming that Mr Dovetail had finished work early and was back in the cottage, she walked in through the front door with her schoolbooks under her arm.

Daisy stopped dead in the doorway, staring around. All the furniture was gone, as were the pictures on the walls, the rug on the floor, the lamps, and even the stove.

She opened her mouth to call her father, but in that instant, a sack was thrown over her head and a hand clamped over her mouth. Her schoolbooks and her bandalore fell with a series of thuds to the floor. Daisy was lifted off her feet, struggling wildly, then carried out of the house, and slung into the back of a wagon.

'If you make a noise,' said a rough voice in her ear, 'we'll kill your father.'

Daisy, who'd drawn breath into her lungs to scream, let it out quietly instead. She felt the wagon lurch, and heard the jingling of a harness and trotting hooves as they began to move. By the turn that the wagon took, Daisy knew that they were heading out of the City-Within-The-City, and by the sounds of market traders and other horses, she realised they were moving into wider Chouxville. Though more frightened than she'd ever been in her life, Daisy nevertheless forced herself to concentrate on every turn, every sound, and every smell, so she could get some idea of where she was being taken.

After a while, the horse's hooves were no longer falling on cobblestones, but on an earthy track, and the sugar-sweet air of Chouxville was gone, replaced by the green, loamy smell of the countryside.

The man who'd kidnapped Daisy was a large, rough member of the Ickabog Defence Brigade called Private Prodd. Spittleworth had told Prodd to 'get rid of the little Dovetail girl', and Prodd had understood Spittleworth to mean that he was to kill her. (Prodd was quite right

to think this. Spittleworth had selected Prodd for the job of murdering Daisy because Prodd was fond of using his fists and seemed not to care whom he hurt.)

However, as he drove through the countryside, passing woods and forests where he might easily strangle Daisy and bury her body, it slowly dawned on Private Prodd that he wasn't going to be able to do it. He happened to have a little niece around Daisy's age, of whom he was very fond. In fact, every time he imagined himself strangling Daisy, he seemed to see his niece Rosie in his mind's eye, pleading for her life. So instead of turning off the dirt track into the woods, Prodd drove the wagon onwards, racking his brains as to what to do with Daisy.

Inside the flour sack, Daisy smelled the sausages of Baronstown mingling with the cheese fumes of Kurdsburg, and wondered which of the two she was being taken to. Her father had occasionally taken her to buy cheese and meat in these famous cities. She believed that if she could somehow give the driver the slip when he lifted her down from the wagon, she'd be able to make her way back to Chouxville in a couple of days. Her frantic mind kept returning to her father, and where he was, and why all the furniture in their house had been removed, but she forced herself to concentrate on the journey the wagon was making instead, to be sure of finding her way home again.

However, hard as she listened out for the sound of the horse's hooves on the stone bridge over the Fluma that connected Baronstown and Kurdsburg, it never came, because instead of entering either city, Private Prodd passed them by. He'd just had a brainwave about what to do with Daisy. So, skirting the city of sausagemakers, he drove on north. Slowly, the meat and cheese smells disappeared from the air and night began to fall.

Private Prodd had remembered an old woman who lived on the outskirts of Jeroboam, which happened to be his hometown. Everyone called this old woman Ma Grunter. She took in orphans, and was paid one ducat a month for each child she had living with her. No boy or girl had ever succeeded in running away from Ma Grunter's house, and it was this that made Prodd decide to take Daisy there. The last thing he wanted was Daisy finding her way back

home to Chouxville, because Spittleworth was likely to be furious that Prodd hadn't done what he was told.

Though so scared, cold and uncomfortable in the back of the wagon, the rocking had lulled Daisy to sleep, but suddenly she jerked awake again. She could smell something different on the air now, something she didn't much like, and after a while she identified it as wine fumes, which she recognised from the rare occasions when Mr Dovetail had a drink. They must be approaching Jeroboam, a city she'd never visited. Through the small holes in the sack she could see daybreak. The wagon was soon jolting over cobblestones again, and after a while it came to a halt.

At once, Daisy tried to wriggle out of the back of the wagon onto the ground, but before she'd hit the street, Private Prodd seized her. Then he carried her, struggling, to the door of Ma Grunter's, which he pounded with a heavy fist.

'All right, all right, I'm coming,' came a high, cracked voice from inside the house.

There came the noise of many bolts and chains being removed and Ma Grunter was revealed in the doorway, leaning heavily on a silver-topped cane – though, of course, Daisy, being still in the sack, couldn't see her.

'New child for you, Ma,' said Prodd, carrying the wriggling sack into Ma Grunter's hallway, which smelled of boiled cabbage and cheap wine.

Now, you might think Ma Grunter would be alarmed to see a child in a sack carried into her house, but in fact, the kidnapped children of so-called traitors had found their way to her before. She didn't care what a child's story was; all she cared about was the one ducat a month the authorities paid her for keeping them. The more children she packed into her tumbledown hovel, the more wine she could afford, which was really all she cared about. So she held out her hand and croaked, 'Five ducat placement fee,' – which was what she always asked for, if she could tell somebody really wanted to get rid of a child.

Prodd scowled, handed over five ducats, and left without another word. Ma Grunter slammed the door behind him.

As he climbed back onto his wagon, Prodd heard the rattle of Ma Grunter's chains and the scraping of her locks. Even if it had cost him half his month's pay, Prodd was glad to have got rid of the problem of Daisy Dovetail, and he drove off as fast as he could, back to the capital.

## *Chapter 28*

# **Ma Grunter**

Having made sure her front door was secure, Ma Grunter pulled the sack off her new charge.

Blinking in the sudden light, Daisy found herself in a narrow, rather dirty hallway, face-to-face with a very ugly old woman who was dressed all in black, a large brown wart with hairs growing out of it on the tip of her nose.

'John!' the old woman croaked, without taking her eyes off Daisy, and a boy much bigger and older than Daisy with a blunt, scowling face came shuffling into the hall, cracking his knuckles. 'Go and tell the Janes upstairs to put another mattress in their room.'

'Make one of the little brats do it,' grunted John. 'I 'aven't 'ad breakfast.'

Ma Grunter suddenly swung her heavy, silver-handled cane at the boy's head. Daisy expected to hear a horrible thud of silver on bone, but the boy ducked the cane neatly, as though he'd had a lot of practice, cracked his knuckles again and said sullenly: 'Orl right, orl right.' He disappeared up some rickety stairs.

'What's your name?' said Ma Grunter, turning back to Daisy.

'Daisy,' said Daisy.

'No, it isn't,' said Ma Grunter. 'Your name is Jane.'

Daisy would soon find out that Ma Grunter did the same thing to every single child who arrived in her house. Every girl was rechristened Jane, and every boy was renamed John. The way the child reacted to being given a new name told Ma Grunter exactly what she needed to know about how hard it was going to be to break that child's spirit.

Of course, the very tiny children who came to Ma Grunter simply agreed that their name was John or Jane, and quickly forgot that they'd been called anything else. Homeless children and lost children, who could tell that being John or Jane was the price of having a roof over their heads, were also quick to agree to the change.

But every so often Ma Grunter met a child who wouldn't accept their new name without a fight, and she knew, before Daisy even opened her mouth, that the girl was going to be one of them. There was a nasty, proud look about the newcomer, and, while skinny, she looked strong, standing there in her overalls with her fists clenched.

'My name,' said Daisy, 'is Daisy Dovetail. I was named after my mother's favourite flower.'

'Your mother is dead,' said Ma Grunter, because she always told the children in her care that their parents were dead. It was best if the little wretches didn't think there was anybody to run away to.

'That's true,' said Daisy, her heart hammering very fast. 'My mother *is* dead.'

'And so is your father,' said Ma Grunter.

The horrible old woman seemed to swim before Daisy's eyes. She'd had nothing to eat since the previous lunchtime and had spent a night of terror on Prodd's wagon. Nevertheless, she said in a cold, clear voice: 'My father's alive. I'm Daisy Dovetail, and my father lives in Chouxville.'

She had to believe her father was still there. She couldn't let herself doubt it, because if her father was dead, then all light would disappear from the world, forever.

'No, he isn't,' said Ma Grunter, raising her cane. 'Your father's as dead as a doornail and your name is Jane.'

'My name—' began Daisy, but with a sudden *whoosh*, Ma Grunter's cane came swinging at her head. Daisy ducked as she'd seen the big boy do, but the cane swung back again, and this time it hit Daisy painfully on the ear, and knocked her sideways.

'Let's try that again,' said Ma Grunter. 'Repeat after me. "My father is dead and my name is Jane."'

'I won't,' shouted Daisy, and before the cane could swing back at her, she'd darted under Ma Grunter's arm and run off into the house, hoping that the back door might not have bolts on it. In the kitchen she found two pale, frightened-looking children, a boy and a girl, ladling a dirty green liquid into bowls, and a door with just as many chains and padlocks on it as the other. Daisy turned and ran back to the hall, dodged Ma Grunter and her cane, then sped upstairs, where more thin, pale children were cleaning and making beds with threadbare sheets. Ma Grunter was already climbing the stairs behind her.

'Say it,' croaked Ma Grunter. 'Say, "My father is dead and my name is Jane."'

'My father's alive and my name is Daisy!' shouted Daisy, now spotting a hatch in the ceiling that she suspected led to an attic. Snatching a feather duster out of the hand of a scared girl, she poked the hatch open. A rope ladder fell, which Daisy climbed, pulling it up after her and slamming the attic door, so that Ma Grunter and her cane couldn't reach her. She could hear the old woman cackling below, and ordering a boy to stand guard over the hatch, to make sure Daisy didn't come out.

Later, Daisy would discover that the children gave each other extra names, so they knew which John or Jane they were talking about. The big boy now standing guard over the attic hatch was the same one Daisy had seen downstairs. His nickname among the other children was Basher John, for the way he bullied the smaller children. Basher John was by way of being a deputy for Ma Grunter, and now he called up to Daisy, telling her children had died of starvation in that attic and that she'd find their skeletons if she looked hard enough.

The ceiling of Ma Grunter's attic was so low that Daisy had to crouch. It was also very dirty, but there was a small hole in the roof through which a shaft of sunlight fell. Daisy wriggled over to this and put her eye to it. Now she could see the skyline of Jeroboam. Unlike Chouxville, where the buildings were mostly sugar-white, this was a city of dark-grey stone. Two men were reeling along the street below, bellowing a popular drinking song.

*'I drank a single bottle and the Ickabog's a lie,  
I drank another bottle, and I thought I heard it sigh,  
And now I've drunk another, I can see it slinking by,  
The Ickabog is coming, so let's drink before we die!'*

Daisy sat with her eye pressed against the spyhole for an hour, until Ma Grunter came and banged on the hatch with her cane.

'What is your name?'

'Daisy Dovetail!' bellowed Daisy.

And every hour afterwards, the question came, and the answer remained the same.

However, as the hours wore by, Daisy began to feel light-headed with hunger. Every time she shouted 'Daisy Dovetail' back at Ma Grunter, her voice was weaker. At last, she saw through her spyhole in the attic that it was becoming dark. She was

very thirsty now, and she had to face the fact that, if she kept refusing to say her name was Jane, there really might be a skeleton in the attic for Basher John to frighten other children with.

So the next time Ma Grunter banged on the attic hatch with her cane and asked what Daisy's name was, she answered, 'Jane.'

'And is your father alive?' asked Ma Grunter.

Daisy crossed her fingers and said:

'No.'

'Very good,' said Ma Grunter, pulling open the hatch, so that the rope ladder fell down. 'Come down here, Jane.'

When Daisy was standing beside her again, the old lady cuffed her around the ear. 'That's for being a nasty, lying, filthy little brat. Now go and drink your soup, wash up the bowl, then get to bed.'

Daisy gulped down a small bowl of cabbage soup, which was the nastiest thing she'd ever eaten, washed the bowl in the greasy barrel that Ma Grunter kept for doing dishes, then went back upstairs. There was a spare mattress on the floor of the girls' bedroom, so she crept inside while all the other girls watched her, and got under the threadbare blanket, fully dressed, because the room was very cold.

Daisy found herself looking into the kind blue eyes of a girl her own age, with a gaunt face.

'You lasted much longer than most,' whispered the girl. She had an accent Daisy had never heard before. Later, Daisy would learn that the girl was a Marshlander.

'What's your name?' Daisy whispered. 'Your *real* name?'

The girl considered Daisy with those huge, forget-me-not eyes.

'We're not allowed to say.'

‘I promise I won’t tell,’ whispered Daisy.

The girl stared at her. Just when Daisy thought she wasn’t going to answer, the girl whispered:

‘Martha.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Martha,’ whispered Daisy. ‘I’m Daisy Dovetail and my father’s still alive.’

### *Chapter 29*

## **Mrs Beamish Worries**

Back in Chouxville, Spittleworth made sure the story was circulated that the Dovetail family had packed up in the middle of the night, and moved to the neighbouring country of Pluritania. Daisy’s former teacher told her old classmates, and Cankerby the footman informed all the palace servants.

After he got home from school that day, Bert went and lay on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He was thinking back to the days when he’d been a small, plump boy whom the other children called ‘Butterball’, and how Daisy had always stuck up for him. He remembered their long-ago fight in the palace courtyard, and the expression on Daisy’s face when he’d accidentally knocked her Hopes-of-Heaven to the ground on her birthday.

Then Bert considered the way he spent his break times these days. At first, Bert had sort of liked being friends with Roderick Roach, because Roderick used to bully him and he was glad he’d stopped, but if he was truly honest with himself, Bert didn’t really enjoy the same things that Roderick did: for instance, trying to hit stray dogs with catapults, or finding live frogs to hide in the girls’ satchels. In fact, the more he remembered the fun he used to have with Daisy, the more he thought about how his face ached from fake-smiling at the end of a day with Roderick, and the

more Bert regretted that he'd never tried to repair his and Daisy's friendship. But it was too late, now. Daisy was gone forever: gone to Pluritania.

While Bert was lying on his bed, Mrs Beamish sat alone in the kitchen. She felt almost as bad as her son.

Ever since she'd done it, Mrs Beamish had regretted telling the scullery maid what Mr Dovetail had said about the Ickabog not being real. She'd been so angry at the suggestion that her husband might have fallen off his horse she hadn't realised she was reporting treason, until the words were out of her mouth and it was too late to call them back. She really hadn't wanted to get such an old friend into trouble, so she'd begged the scullery maid to forget what she'd said, and Mabel had agreed.

Relieved, Mrs Beamish had turned around to take a large batch of Maidens' Dreams out of the oven, then spotted Cankerby, the footman, skulking in the corner. Cankerby was known to everyone who worked at the palace as a sneak and a tattletale. He had a knack of arriving noiselessly in rooms, and peeping unnoticed through keyholes. Mrs Beamish didn't dare ask Cankerby how long he'd been standing there, but now, sitting alone at her own kitchen table, a terrible fear gripped her heart. Had news of Mr Dovetail's treason been carried by Cankerby to Lord Spittleworth? Was it possible that Mr Dovetail had gone, not to Pluritania, but to prison?

The longer she thought about it, the more frightened she became, until finally, Mrs Beamish called out to Bert that she was going for an evening stroll, and hurried from the house.

There were still children playing in the streets, and Mrs Beamish wound her way in and out of them until she reached the small cottage that lay between the City-Within-The-City gates and the graveyard. The windows were dark and the workshop locked up, but when Mrs Beamish gave the front door a gentle push, it opened.

All the furniture was gone, right down to the pictures on the walls. Mrs Beamish let out a long, slow sigh of relief. If they'd slung Mr Dovetail in jail, they'd hardly have put all his furniture in there with him. It really did look as though he'd packed up and taken Daisy off to Pluritania. Mrs Beamish felt a little easier in her mind as she walked back through the City-Within-The-City.

Some little girls were jumping rope in the road up ahead, chanting a rhyme now repeated in playgrounds all over the kingdom.

*'Ickabog, Ickabog, he'll get you if you stop,  
Ickabog, Ickabog, so skip until you flop,  
Never look back if you feel squeamish,  
'Cause he's caught a soldier called Major—'*

One of the little girls turning the rope for her friend spotted Mrs Beamish, let out a squeal and dropped her end. The other little girls turned, too, and, seeing the pastry chef, all of them turned red. One let out a terrified giggle and another burst into tears.

'It's all right, girls,' said Mrs Beamish, trying to smile. 'It doesn't matter.'

The children remained quite still as she passed them, until suddenly Mrs Beamish turned to look again at the girl who'd dropped the end of the skipping rope.

'Where,' asked Mrs Beamish, 'did you get that dress?'

The scarlet-faced little girl looked down at it, then back up at Mrs Beamish.

'My daddy gave it to me, missus,' said the girl. 'When he come home from work yesterday. And he gave my brother a bandalore.'

After staring at the dress for a few more seconds, Mrs Beamish turned slowly away and walked on home. She told herself she must be mistaken, but she was sure she could remember Daisy Dovetail wearing a beautiful little dress exactly like that

– sunshine yellow, with daisies embroidered around the neck and cuffs – back when her mother was alive, and made all Daisy’s clothes.

### *Chapter 30*

## **The Foot**

A month passed. Deep in the dungeons, Mr Dovetail worked in a kind of frenzy. He had to finish the monstrous wooden foot, so he could see Daisy again. He’d forced himself to believe that Spittleworth would keep his word, and let him leave the dungeon after he’d completed his task, even though a voice in his head kept saying, *They’ll never let you go after this. Never.*

To drive out fear, Mr Dovetail started singing the national anthem, over and over again:

*‘Coooorn – ucopia, give praises to the king,*

*Coooorn – ucopia, lift up your voice and sing...’*

His constant singing annoyed the other prisoners even more than the sound of his chisel and hammer. The now thin and ragged Captain Goodfellow begged him to stop, but Mr Dovetail paid no attention. He’d become a little delirious. He had a confused idea that if he showed himself a faithful subject of the king, Spittleworth might think him less of a danger, and release him. So the carpenter’s cell rang with the banging and scraping of his tools and the national anthem, and slowly but surely, a monstrous clawed foot took shape, with a long handle out of the top, so that a man on horseback could press it deep into soft ground.

When at last the wooden foot was finished, Spittleworth, Flapoon, and Major Roach came down into the dungeons to inspect it.

‘Yes,’ said Spittleworth slowly, examining the foot from every angle. ‘Very good indeed. What do you think, Roach?’

‘I think that’ll do very nicely, my lord,’ replied the major.

‘You’ve done well, Dovetail,’ Spittleworth told the carpenter. ‘I’ll tell the warden to give you extra rations tonight.’

‘But you said I’d go free when I finished,’ said Mr Dovetail, falling to his knees, pale and exhausted. ‘Please, my lord. Please. I have to see my daughter... *please.*’

Mr Dovetail reached for Lord Spittleworth’s bony hand, but Spittleworth snatched it back.

‘Don’t touch me, traitor. You should be grateful I didn’t have you put to death. I may yet, if this foot doesn’t do the trick – so if I were you, I’d pray my plan works.’

### *Chapter 31*

## **Disappearance of a Butcher**

That night, under cover of darkness, a party of horsemen dressed all in black rode out from Chouxville, headed by Major Roach. Hidden beneath a large bit of sacking on a wagon in their midst was the gigantic wooden foot, with its carved scales and long sharp claws.

At last they reached the outskirts of Baronstown. Now the riders – members of the Ickabog Defence Brigade whom Spittleworth had chosen for the job – slipped from their horses and covered the animals’ hooves with sacking to muffle the noise and the shape of their prints. Then they lifted the giant foot off the wagon, remounted, and carried it between them to the house where Tubby Tenderloin the butcher lived with his wife, which was luckily a little distance from its neighbours.

Several of the soldiers now tied up their horses, stole up to Tubby’s back door and forced entry, while the rest pressed the giant foot into the mud around his back gate.

Five minutes after the soldiers arrived, they carried Tubby and his wife, who had no children, out of their house, bound and gagged, then threw them onto the wagon. I may as well tell you now that Tubby and his wife were about to be killed, their bodies buried in the woods, in exactly the way Private Prodd had been supposed to dispose of Daisy. Spittleworth only kept alive those people for whom he had a use: Mr Dovetail might need to repair the Ickabog foot if it got damaged, and Captain Goodfellow and his friends might need to be dragged out again some day, to repeat their lies about the Ickabog. Spittleworth couldn't imagine ever needing a treasonous sausage maker, though, so he'd ordered his murder. As for poor Mrs Tenderloin, Spittleworth barely considered her at all, but I'd like you to know that she was a very kind person, who babysat her friends' children and sang in the local choir.

Once the Tenderloins had been taken away, the remaining soldiers entered the house and smashed up the furniture as though a giant creature had wrecked it, while the rest of the men broke down the back fence and pressed the giant foot into the soft soil around Tubby's chicken coop, so that it appeared the prowling monster had also attacked the birds. One of the soldiers even stripped off his socks and boots, and made bare footprints in the soft earth, as though Tubby had rushed outside to protect his chickens. Finally, the same man cut off the head of one of the hens and made sure plenty of blood and feathers was spread around, before breaking down the side of the coop to allow the rest of the chickens to escape.

After pressing the giant foot many more times onto the mud outside Tubby's house, so the monster appeared to have run away onto solid ground, the soldiers heaved Mr Dovetail's creation back onto the wagon beside the soon-to-be-murdered butcher and his wife, remounted their horses, and disappeared into the night.

*hapter 32*

## A Flaw in the Plan

When Mr and Mrs Tenderloin's neighbours woke up the next day and found chickens all over the road, they hurried to tell Tubby his birds had escaped. Imagine the neighbours' horror when they found the enormous footprints, the blood and the feathers, the broken-down back door and no sign of either husband or wife.

Before an hour had passed, a huge crowd had congregated around Tubby's empty house, all examining the monstrous footprints, the smashed-in door, and the wrecked furniture. Panic set in, and within a few hours, news of the Ickabog's raid on a Baronstown butcher's house was spreading north, south, east and west. Town criers rang their bells in the city squares, and within a couple of days, only the Marshlanders would be ignorant of the fact that the Ickabog had slunk south overnight and carried off two people.

Spittleworth's Baronstown spy, who'd been mingling with the crowds all day to observe their reactions, sent word to his master that his plan had worked magnificently. However, in the early evening, just as the spy was thinking of heading off to the tavern for a celebratory sausage roll and a pint of beer, he noticed a group of men whispering together as they examined one of the Ickabog's giant footprints. The spy sidled over.

'Terrifying, isn't it?' the spy asked them. 'The size of its feet! The length of its claws!'

One of Tubby's neighbours straightened up, frowning.

'It's hopping,' he said.

'Excuse me?' said the spy.

'It's *hopping*,' repeated the neighbour. 'Look. It's the same left foot, over and over again. Either the Ickabog's hopping, or...'

The man didn't finish his sentence, but the look on his face alarmed the spy. Instead of heading for the tavern, he mounted his horse again, and galloped off towards the palace.

### *Chapter 33*

## **King Fred is Worried**

Little knowing of the new threat to their schemes, Spittleworth and Flapoon had just sat down to one of their usual sumptuous late-night dinners with the king. Fred was most alarmed to hear of the Ickabog's attack on Baronstown, because it meant that the monster had strayed closer to the palace than ever before.

'Ghastly business,' said Flapoon, lifting an entire black pudding onto his plate.

'Shocking, really,' said Spittleworth, carving himself a slice of pheasant.

'What I don't understand,' fretted Fred, 'is how it slipped through the blockade!'

For, of course, the king had been told that a division of the Ickabog Defence Brigade was permanently camped round the edge of the marsh, to stop the Ickabog escaping into the rest of the country. Spittleworth, who'd been expecting Fred to raise this point, had his explanation ready.

'I regret to say that two soldiers fell asleep on watch, Your Majesty. Taken unawares by the Ickabog, they were eaten whole.'

'Suffering Saints!' said Fred, horrified.

'Having broken through the line,' continued Spittleworth, 'the monster headed south. We believe it was attracted to Baronstown because of the smell of meat. While there, it gobbled up some chickens, as well as the butcher and his wife.'

'Dreadful, dreadful,' said Fred with a shudder, pushing his plate away from him. 'And then it slunk off back home to the marsh, did it?'

‘So our trackers tell us, sire,’ said Spittleworth, ‘but now that it’s tasted a butcher full of Baronstown sausage, we must prepare for it trying to break through the soldiers’ lines regularly – which is why I think we should double the number of men stationed there, sire. Sadly, that will mean doubling the Ickabog tax.’

Luckily for them, Fred was watching Spittleworth, so he didn’t see Flapoon smirk.

‘Yes... I *suppose* that makes sense,’ said the king.

He got to his feet and began roaming restlessly around the dining room. The lamplight made his costume, which today was of sky-blue silk with aquamarine buttons, shine beautifully. As he paused to admire himself in the mirror, Fred’s expression clouded.

‘Spittleworth,’ he said, ‘the people do still *like* me, don’t they?’

‘How can Your Majesty ask such a thing?’ said Spittleworth, with a gasp. ‘You’re the most beloved king in the whole of Cornucopia’s history!’

‘It’s just that... riding back from hunting, yesterday, I couldn’t help thinking that people didn’t seem quite as happy as usual to see me,’ said King Fred. ‘There were hardly any cheers, and only one flag.’

‘Give me their names and addresses,’ said Flapoon through a mouthful of black pudding, and he groped in his pockets for a pencil.

‘I don’t know their names and addresses, Flapoon,’ said Fred, who was now playing with a tassel on the curtains. ‘They were just people, you know, passing by. But it upset me, rather, and then, when I got back to the palace, I heard that the Day of Petition has been cancelled.’

‘Ah,’ said Spittleworth, ‘yes, I was going to explain that to Your Majesty...’

‘There’s no need,’ said Fred. ‘Lady Eslanda has already spoken to me about it.’

'*What?*' said Spittleworth, glaring at Flapoon. He'd given his friend strict instructions never to let Lady Eslanda near the king, because he was worried what she might tell him. Flapoon scowled and shrugged. Really, Spittleworth couldn't expect him to be at the king's side every minute of the day. A man needed the bathroom occasionally, after all.

'Lady Eslanda told me that people are complaining that the Ickabog tax is too high. She says rumours are flying that there aren't even any troops stationed in the north!'

'Piffle and poppycock,' said Spittleworth, though in fact it was perfectly true that there were no troops stationed in the north, and also true that there'd been even more complaints about the Ickabog tax, which was why he'd cancelled the Day of Petition. The last thing he wanted was for Fred to hear that he was losing popularity. He might take it into his foolish head to lower the taxes or, even worse, send people to investigate the imaginary camp in the north.

'There are times, obviously, when two regiments swap over,' said Spittleworth, thinking that he'd have to station some soldiers near the marsh now, to stop busybodies asking questions. 'Possibly some foolish Marshlander saw a regiment riding away, and imagined that there was nobody left up there... Why don't we *triple* the Ickabog tax, sire?' asked Spittleworth, thinking that this would serve the complainers right. 'After all, the monster *did* break through the lines last night! Then there can never again be any danger of a scarcity of men on the edge of the Marshlands and everyone will be happy.'

'Yes,' said King Fred uneasily. 'Yes, that does make sense. I mean, if the monster can kill four people and some chickens in a single night...'

At this moment, Cankerby the footman entered the dining room and, with a low bow, whispered to Spittleworth that the Baronstown spy had just arrived with urgent news from the sausage-making city.

‘Your Majesty,’ said Spittleworth smoothly, ‘I must leave you. Nothing to worry about! A minor issue with my, ah, horse.’

### *Chapter 34*

## **Three More Feet**

‘This had better be worth my while,’ snapped Spittleworth five minutes later, as he entered the Blue Parlour, where the spy was waiting.

‘Your – Lordship,’ said the breathless man, ‘they’re saying – the monster’s – hopping.’

‘They’re saying *what?*’

‘Hopping, my lord – *hopping!*’ he panted. ‘They’ve noticed – all the prints – are made by the same – left – foot!’

Spittleworth stood speechless. It had never occurred to him that the common folk might be clever enough to spot a thing like that. Indeed, he, who’d never had to look after a living creature in his life, not even his own horse, hadn’t stopped to consider the fact that a creature’s feet might not all make the same prints in the ground.

‘Must I think of everything?’ bellowed Spittleworth, and he stormed out of the parlour and off to the Guard’s Room, where he found Major Roach drinking wine and playing cards with some friends. The major leapt to his feet at the sight of Spittleworth, who beckoned him to come outside.

‘I want you to assemble the Ickabog Defence Brigade immediately, Roach,’ Spittleworth told the major, in a low voice. ‘You’re to ride north, and be sure to

make plenty of noise as you go. I want everyone from Chouxville to Jeroboam to see you passing by. Then, once you're up there, spread out, and mount a guard over the border of the marsh.'

'But—' began Major Roach, who'd got used to a life of ease and plenty at the palace, with occasional rides around Chouxville in full uniform.

'I don't want "buts", I want action!' shouted Spittleworth. 'Rumours are flying that there's nobody stationed in the north! Go, now, and make sure you wake up as many people as possible as you go – but leave me two men, Roach. Just two. I have another small job for them.'

So the grumpy Roach ran off to assemble his troops, and Spittleworth proceeded alone to the dungeon.

The first thing he heard when he got there was the sound of Mr Dovetail, who was still singing the national anthem.

'Be quiet!' bellowed Spittleworth, drawing his sword and gesturing to the warder to let him into Mr Dovetail's cell.

The carpenter appeared quite different to the last time Lord Spittleworth had seen him. Since learning that he wasn't to be let out of the dungeon to see Daisy, a wild look had appeared in Mr Dovetail's eye. Of course, he hadn't been able to shave for weeks either, and his hair had grown rather long.

'I said, be quiet!' barked Spittleworth, because the carpenter, who didn't seem able to help himself, was still humming the national anthem. 'I need another three feet, d'you hear me? One more left foot, and two right. Do you understand me, carpenter?'

Mr Dovetail stopped humming.

'If I carve them, will you let me out to see my daughter, my lord?' he asked in a hoarse voice.

Spittleworth smiled. It was clear to him that the man was going slowly mad, because only a madman would imagine he'd be let out after making another three Ickabog feet.

'Of course I will,' said Spittleworth. 'I shall have the wood delivered to you first thing tomorrow morning. Work hard, carpenter. When you're finished, I'll let you out to see your daughter.'

When Spittleworth emerged from the dungeons, he found two soldiers waiting for him, just as he'd requested. Spittleworth led these men up to his private apartments, made sure Cankerby the footman wasn't skulking about, locked the door, and turned to give the men their instructions.

'There will be fifty ducats for each of you, if you succeed in this job,' he said, and the soldiers looked excited.

'You are to follow the Lady Eslanda, morning, noon, and night, you understand me? She must not know you are following her. You will wait for a moment when she is quite alone, so that you can kidnap her without anyone hearing or seeing anything. If she escapes, or if you are seen, I shall deny that I gave you this order, and put you to death.'

'What do we do with her once we've got her?' asked one of the soldiers, who no longer looked excited, but very scared.

'Hmm,' said Spittleworth, turning to look out of the window while he considered what best to do with Eslanda. 'Well, a lady of the court isn't the same as a butcher. The Ickabog can't enter the palace and eat her... No, I think it best,' said Spittleworth, a slow smile spreading over his crafty face, 'if you take Lady Eslanda to my estate in the country. Send word when you've got her there, and I'll join you.'

# Lord Spittleworth's Proposal

A few days later, Lady Eslanda was walking alone in the palace rose garden when the two soldiers hiding in a bush spotted their chance. They seized her, gagged her, bound her hands, and drove her away to Spittleworth's estate in the country. Then they sent a message to Spittleworth, and waited for him to join them.

Spittleworth promptly summoned Lady Eslanda's maid, Millicent. By threatening to murder Millicent's little sister, he forced her to deliver messages to all Lady Eslanda's friends, telling them that her mistress had decided to become a nun.

Lady Eslanda's friends were all shocked by this news. She'd never mentioned wanting to become a nun to any of them. In fact, several of them were suspicious that Lord Spittleworth had had something to do with her sudden disappearance. However, I'm sad to tell you that Spittleworth was now so widely feared, that apart from whispering their suspicions to each other, Eslanda's friends did nothing to either find her, or ask Spittleworth what he knew. Perhaps even worse was the fact that none of them tried to help Millicent, who was caught by soldiers trying to flee the City-Within-The-City, and imprisoned in the dungeons.

Next, Spittleworth had set out for his country estate, where he arrived late the following evening. After giving each of Eslanda's kidnappers fifty ducats, and reminding them that if they talked, he'd have them executed, Spittleworth smoothed his thin moustaches in a mirror, then went to find Lady Eslanda, who was sitting in his rather dusty library, reading a book by candlelight.

'Good evening, my lady,' said Spittleworth, sweeping her a bow.

Lady Eslanda looked at him in silence.

'I have good news for you,' continued Spittleworth, smiling. 'You are to become the wife of the Chief Advisor.'

'I'd sooner die,' said Lady Eslanda pleasantly, and, turning a page in her book, she continued to read.

‘Come, come,’ said Spittleworth. ‘As you can see, my house really needs a woman’s tender care. You’ll be far happier here, making yourself useful, than pining over the cheesemakers’ son, who in any case, is likely to starve to death any day now.’

Lady Eslanda, who’d expected Spittleworth to mention Captain Goodfellow, had been preparing for this moment ever since arriving in the cold and dirty house. So she said, with neither a blush nor a tear:

‘I stopped caring for Captain Goodfellow a long time ago, Lord Spittleworth. The sight of him confessing to treason disgusted me. I could never love a treacherous man – which is why I could never love you.’

She said it so convincingly that Spittleworth believed her. He tried a different threat, and told her he’d kill her parents if she didn’t marry him, but Lady Eslanda reminded him that she, like Captain Goodfellow, was an orphan. Then Spittleworth said he’d take away all the jewellery her mother had left her, but she shrugged and said she preferred books anyway. Finally, Spittleworth threatened to kill her, and Lady Eslanda suggested he get on with it, because that would be far better than listening to him talk.

Spittleworth was enraged. He’d become used to having his own way in everything, and here was something he couldn’t have, and it only made him want it all the more. Finally, he said that if she liked books so much, he’d lock her up inside the library forever. He’d have bars fitted on all the windows, and Scumble the butler would bring her food three times a day, but she would only ever leave the room to go to the bathroom – unless she agreed to marry him.

‘Then I shall die in this room,’ said Lady Eslanda calmly, ‘or, perhaps – who knows? – in the bathroom.’

As he couldn’t get another word out of her, the furious Chief Advisor left.

### *Chapter 36*

## **Cornucopia Hungry**

A year passed... then two... then three, four, and five.

The tiny kingdom of Cornucopia, which had once been the envy of its neighbours for its magically rich soil, for the skill of its cheesemakers, winemakers and pastry chefs, and for the happiness of its people, had changed almost beyond recognition.

True, Chouxville was carrying on more or less as it always had. Spittleworth didn't want the king to notice that anything had changed, so he spent plenty of gold in the capital to keep things running as they always had, especially in the City-Within-The-City. Up in the northern cities, though, people were struggling. More and more businesses – shops, taverns, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, farms, and vineyards – were closing down. The Ickabog tax was pushing people into poverty, and as if that wasn't bad enough, everyone feared being the next to receive a visit from the Ickabog – or whatever it was that broke down doors and left monster-like tracks around houses and farms.

People who voiced doubts about whether the Ickabog was really behind these attacks were usually next to receive a visit from the Dark Footers. That was the name Spittleworth and Roach had given to the squads of men who murdered unbelievers in the night, leaving footprints around their victims' houses.

Occasionally, though, the Ickabog doubters lived in the middle of a city, where it was difficult to fake an attack without the neighbours seeing. In this case, Spittleworth would hold a trial, and by threatening their families, as he had with Goodfellow and his friends, he made the accused agree that they'd committed treason.

Increasing numbers of trials meant Spittleworth had to oversee the building of more jails. He also needed more orphanages. Why did he need orphanages, you ask?

Well, in the first place, quite a number of parents were being killed or imprisoned. As everyone was now finding it difficult to feed their own families, they weren't able to take in the abandoned children.

In the second place, poor people were dying of hunger. As parents usually fed their children rather than themselves, children were often the last of the family left alive.

And in the third place, some heartbroken, homeless families were giving up their children to orphanages, because it was the only way they could make sure their children would have food and shelter.

I wonder whether you remember the palace maid, Hetty, who so bravely warned Lady Eslanda that Captain Goodfellow and his friends were about to be executed?

Well, Hetty used Lady Eslanda's gold to take a coach home to her father's vineyard, just outside Jeroboam. A year later, she married a man called Hopkins, and gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl.

However, the effort of paying the Ickabog tax was too much for the Hopkins family. They lost their little grocery store, and Hetty's parents couldn't help them, because shortly after losing their vineyard, they'd starved to death. Homeless now, their children crying with hunger, Hetty and her husband walked in desperation to Ma Grunter's orphanage. The twins were torn, sobbing, from their mother's arms. The door slammed, the bolts banged home, and poor Hetty Hopkins and her husband walked away, crying no less hard than their children, and praying that Ma Grunter would keep them alive.

