

# OF MAGIC AND DELUSION

A Tale Whispered to the Author by the One True God

by Richard S. Platz

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# **OF MAGIC AND DELUSION**

**A Tale Whispered to the Author  
by the One True God**

**Dedicated to the Memory of**

**Moses, Jesus, Mohammad,  
Joseph Smith, and L. Ron Hubbard,**

**All Dead,**

**And to all who have heard the whisper  
Of magic and delusion**

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Appearance of Conflict

**S**urrender!” bellowed the mammoth warrior, looming like an unclean gorilla beside his dwarfed, grizzled, and idiotically grinning companion. Bound in motley rags caked with dried blood and filth, the giant scratched and swaggered, an offense to the polished marble of the great throne room. He spat through the cloud of flies surrounding him, and the yellowish spittle caught and ran down a sculptured marble column.

The King of Nod gripped with a fierce determination the exquisitely carved armrests of his throne, his white knuckles concealed by the elegant silk vestments. His jaw was set, his muscles tense, his heart pounding fiercely, but he was unsure of what to do or say. He prayed for inspiration in dealing with this brutal messenger from the barbarian army claiming ancestral rights to his kingdom. The King was still reeling from two staggering blows fate had recently delivered. Two years ago his young queen had quietly bled to death in childbirth, and last year his father had fallen in battle, allowing the regency to devolve untimely upon his unprepared shoulders. Now Barth strutted before him like an angel of doom come to administer a third and fatal coup de grace.

“Lay down your arms and disband your army, or by the vengeance of Allah the Exactor, we’ll crush your kingdom, slaughter your puny soldiers, and rape your whoring wives.” In an involuntary obeisance to his deity, Barth’s powerful hand grasped the hilt of his great broadsword.

Longbow men on each side of the King raised their bows, pointing twenty razor-tipped arrows at the behemoth’s hairy chest.

Barth laughed at them and spat again, for he was the mightiest warrior in the vast and invincible army of the southern wilderness. Had he not been personally appointed by Jabal the Chosen, his mighty warlord, to cross the Great River into Nod and demand absolute

capitulation and return of the rich lands which had been stolen from their ancestors.

The King wished his father were still alive. The Old King would no doubt have done something appropriate, something decisive and worthy of honor and respect. For an instant he felt his father's eyes on him, but when he glanced to the side, it was only Grimm, the wily Chief Advisor who had served the Old King so well, watching him, waiting. Grimm, like his father, like everyone in the throne room, expected something from him, and he feared he was about to disappoint them all.

Suddenly an infant, bare-bottomed, beaming, and bloused in gold lamé with "Kingdom of Nod" embroidered across the back, emerged with surprising agility through the line of bowmen and toddled toward the huge warrior. Plopping down at his feet, the infant gaped up at the hulking monster.

"And murder your children!" boomed Barth, drawing his sword and hoisting it overhead, poised to slice the child in two.

"*Hold fast!*" cried the King, springing to his feet. "That is the Crown Prince of Nod! Sheath your blade or you won't live to carry our reply back to Jabal!" The tips of twenty arrows trembled with the tension of taut bowstrings.

The giant slowly lowered his sword. "And what *is* your reply?"

A terrified wet nurse broke through the phalanx of bowmen, scooped up the bewildered infant, and scurried away to safety.

"We will need time to consider," the King replied, seating himself with a deliberate show of regal ceremony. "What are the terms of our surrender?"

In the shadows of the far corner of the throne room a cloaked figure made some final adjustments to a harness buckled about his waist, closed his robes, fiddled with a small canister in his left hand, and nodded to another figure concealed behind the columns on the opposite side of the large chamber.

Barth spat again. "We demand *total* surrender, and you'll learn the terms as we tell 'em to you." He roared at his own cleverness and, looking down, slapped his absently grinning companion on the back

of the head. Then he turned back to the King. “You have two weeks, and not a day more. By then our boats will be finished, and our warriors ready to cross the Great River. In two weeks we’ll enter your cowardly kingdom, with your permission or without it.” Barth slipped the gleaming broadsword back into his scabbardless belt and turned to leave.

“Wait!” the King called out, searching for a way to stall the messenger a little longer.

Barth stopped and looked back over his shoulder.

“We will have an answer for you before that time,” the King pronounced slowly. In the shadows behind Barth a movement caught his eye. He looked over at Grimm, who nodded silently. The King straightened himself on the throne and cleared his throat like a nervous schoolboy about to recite a difficult lesson. “It is my duty to warn you that you may leave us no choice—”

“No choice but what?” spat Barth, wheeling to face the throne.

“—but to destroy your army,” the King continued evenly. “And that of your evil allies across the mountains to the southeast.”

“Don’t mock me!” snarled the monster, his huge hand again grasping the hilt of his broadsword, “or by the Dogs of the Dead you’ll not live the two weeks to be dethroned!”

A flame was ignited in the dimness behind Barth. Overhead wires twanged softly.

“By what power would you resist our forces?” the giant challenged.

“By the power of the Sorcerer of Nod,” replied the King.

“Who?”

Brilliant flares flashed afire behind the huge warrior, and as he spun around in confusion, out of the flames the cloaked figure arose as gracefully as a bird and flew slowly toward him. Barth fell to one knee and raised his arm to shield his eyes from the blinding light.

“By *my* powers,” thundered the voice of the flying figure, reverberating eerily from two acoustic dishes which had snapped open above him like the shells of an agitated clam. “And by the powers of sorcery. Take back this message: send your troops home from our borders and leave us in peace, or suffer a horrible scourge before a

single soldier has set foot upon the soil of Nod.” The Sorcerer pointed his finger at Barth, and instantly a fireball shot forth from his hand and caromed off the giant’s ragged chest. The Sorcerer banked gracefully into a cloud of smoke and was gone.

Barth staggered to his feet, bewildered and unsteady, and dragging his cringing comrade by the scruff of the neck, fled the throne room beating distractedly at his smoldering robes. The chamber doors thundered closed behind them.

The King clung to the arms of the throne, drawing measured breaths, until his trembling had subsided. When he had regained some composure, he arose and clapped his hands. “Bravo, Sorcerer, very convincing. But how did you do that?”

From behind the tall velvet drapes covering the wall to the King’s left, the Sorcerer emerged. The hood of his cloak was thrown back, revealing a handsome, youthful face, incongruously framed by prematurely silvering hair and beard. He coiled a long wire as he approached the throne. “A Sorcerer never reveals his secrets,” he replied, “even to kings.”

“Well done, nonetheless. Well done, indeed.” The King was beaming now. He turned to Grimm, who was never far from his side. “Don’t you agree?”

The Chief Advisor was a stocky, bushy-eyebrowed bear of a man. The Old King had placed absolute confidence in him for more than forty years. Grimm wore his perennial scowl like an approaching thunderstorm wears dark shadows. “I think you should see that Barth and his sniveling companion are afforded safe conduct to the border and back across the Great River. He should not be detained whatever outrage he may commit on his journey back.” Grimm’s eyes narrowed to slits of lightning flashing beneath his cumulus eyebrows. “It is important that Barth returns with his report to Jabal the Chosen.”

“Yes, of course.” The King grasped the lapel of an attendant stationed beside the throne and pulled him close. “You heard the Chief Advisor?”

“Yes, your highness.”

“Well, see that it’s done.”

The attendant bowed and rushed out through a passageway

concealed by the tapestry behind the throne.

“It appeared for a moment our plans would be undone,” the King remarked, “when the Prince blundered out to confront our unwelcome visitors.”

“You handled it quite well, my lord,” the Sorcerer responded, and all the attendants and archers murmured assent.

“Do you really think so?” The King was pleased with himself.

“It was fortunate your bowmen restrained themselves,” Grimm rumbled. “I think it’s time to clear the court, your highness. Ask the Sorcerer to remain.”

While the attendants and soldiers were departing, the King asked his Chief Advisor in a lowered voice, “Do you really think this . . . display . . . will do any good?” His brow was deeply furrowed. “Will it forestall the attack?”

“Barth was impressed, my lord. But I would be very surprised if Jabal gives his story much credence. We can only hope that word of Barth’s obvious fright will spread through the ranks and weaken the fighting resolve of his comrades at arms.”

“Yes,” the King sighed. He shook his head ruefully. “But even so, our small army will be no match for countless hordes of fanatics bent on recovering what they believe we stole from them.” The King looked small and frightened. “I wonder what father would have done?”

When the door had closed behind the last attendant, Grimm turned angrily to the Sorcerer. “Why in God’s name did you add that business about the terrible scourge? Now they’ll find out in time it was all an empty bluff.”

The Sorcerer ignored the Chief Advisor and knelt before the King. The clear fire in his eyes was eclipsed for an instant by a memory of personal tragedy. He shuddered, then spoke in a frighteningly quiet voice, “My liege, my threat to Barth was not empty. The power of sorcery shall prevail. It’s inexorable course has already begun.” A tear rolled inexplicably down his cheek. “Your enemies will be destroyed. Your kingdom spared.”

The King clutched the Sorcerer’s sleeve. “If you can do this, you may choose your own reward. That is my solemn pledge.”

The claim of Jabal the Chosen and his followers to all the lands of Nod was not entirely without basis. It was indeed Jabal's ancestor, and not the King's, who had first wandered into the great valley and claimed it for his descendants, founding the ancient city of Enoch, which he named after his firstborn. But Jabal's ancestors were nomads and wanderers, living in tents, following their herds wherever the untilled land would sustain them, and Nod had yielded its fruits to them only grudgingly. Like vagabonds they drifted from place to place, across the Great River and beyond, forever homeless.

It was ancestors of the King who had later migrated into the territory, settling it, civilizing it, digging irrigation channels and dams, building villages and towns and cities, constructing roads, reclaiming fertile cropland from the parched desert and impenetrable chaparral of the rolling foothills. Farm by farm, field by field, fence by fence, the King's ancestors had slowly tamed the land, assimilating a few of Jabal's people, and displacing the rest.

As the population multiplied with the passing years, the inhabitants of Nod managed to eke out a modest existence for themselves by careful planning, husbandry, and small but reliable harvests from their farms and ranches. The natural grazing lands upon which the nomads depended, however, could not keep pace with expanded use, and in lean years, Jabal's forebears fought with one another for what little there was. The cost of defeat was often starvation. Conflict spawned a class of nomad warriors, marauding bands of soldiers under the command of a petty warlord, stealing what they needed, preying upon the weak, and skilled swordsmen and archers retained by the powerful tribal chiefs to increase their wealth and defend what they had taken from others.

To protect its subjects, the Kingdom of Nod established a small but efficient militia. It was all that was needed. The Great River to the south and the ragged Eastern Range of mountains, whose summits and ridges defined the boundary to the east, provided natural barriers to the ravaging barbarians. Only an occasional party of adventuresome marauders ever managed to cross into Nod to steal the fruits of the more gentle society, and such incursions were easily controlled by the well-trained army of Nod.

Or so things had stood before the vision of Jabal the Chosen. Jabal was a fierce young warrior of great skill and cunning who professed one day that an angel of Allah had appeared to him in a dream and appointed him to unite all the warring tribes under his exclusive command for the holy purpose of retaking the lands of Nod, which rightfully belonged to his people. He had been chosen by God as their savior and deliverer. Through a series of treaties, intrigues, betrayals, deceptions, and bloody battles, Jabal the Chosen won over or overpowered nearly all the tribal chieftains and warlords. He mercilessly slaughtered the remaining opposition and consolidated his command over all the nomad troops south of the Great River. Terror and promise of reward sustained his tenuous alliance, while he pandered his divine mission to the superstitious and gullible, who turned out to include most of his troops. His warriors numbered in the tens of thousands, and though undisciplined, they made up in religious zeal for what they lacked in military finesse. They outnumbered the defenders of Nod by fifty to one.

The Old King had sent a select group of special envoys to Jabal in the hope of negotiating a peaceful settlement of their territorial dispute and averting war. These were fine counselors, reasonable men learned in property rights, surveying, land titles, adverse possession, and eminent domain. Jabal the Chosen laughed and lopped off their heads. His command found its legitimacy in his divinely inspired mission of overthrowing the Kingdom of Nod by force of arms, and any deviation from that course might undermine the alliance itself. Compromise was out of the question.

Six weeks later the Old King fell in glorious hand-to-hand battle with Jabal himself. Or so the story was told. Actually he cut his heel on the rusty sword of a fallen comrade and contracted lockjaw. As his father before him, the Old King jealously preserved his direct command over the troops, and while personally leading a force of crack horsemen against a bandit gang which had been terrorizing the villages along the southern border, he had fallen into a trap set by Jabal the Chosen. Beneath the blackness of a new moon, the Old King had led a bold escape, but he had sustained the seemingly minor injury in the process. He was dead before the moon again was full.

Grimm had borne the tragic news to his new lord and master. Just after breakfast the King was on his way out to the fields for a rousing croquet match with his cronies who had all grown middle-aged waiting for that day.

“Your father has fallen in battle,” Grimm had told him. “You are now the King and must take charge. It is up to you to settle matters with Jabal the Chosen.”

The Old King had always appeared larger than life to his son. Each footstep he was to follow in seemed so big it would swallow him completely and leave no trace. The forty-year-old regent listened speechlessly to his Chief Advisor. Then he fainted.

The subjects of Nod were not warlike by nature. As news of the impending invasion spread, panic increased and threatened to overthrow the new King’s tenuous reign even before he could be deposed by the invading hordes. Wealthy landowners hastily gathered together whatever valuables they could and scurried frantically around in circles. The kingdom was an island of culture within a sea of mindless barbarism. There was no place to go. Peasants abandoned their ripening fields, preferring to spend their last few days at home with family. Everywhere merchants, shopkeepers, and tradesmen stopped work and, gazing toward the southern horizon, sniffed the breeze and wondered what the hell the King planned to do about Jabal.

The day after Barth left the castle and the Sorcerer had returned in haste to his home atop one of the tall peaks in the Eastern Range, Grimm sat the King down and tried to discuss military strategy with him. Jabal had managed to enlist the savage mountain tribes of the east into his alliance and was planning a pincer attack on the kingdom from the south and east. Troops stood poised at the borders of Nod to begin his self-proclaimed holy vendetta. A line of defense had to be established.

But the King wanted nothing to do with it. He shuddered to choose between losing a savage war and the doom of unconditional surrender. In terror and confusion he proclaimed Grimm to be Commander-in-Chief of all the armed forces of Nod and fled to his private chamber to await the outcome. He had been curiously

heartened by the wizard's terse assurances, though he carefully avoided inquiry into the man's methods and means. Silently he cheered him on.

## CHAPTER TWO

### An Accommodation Is Reached

General Grimm did not share the King's naive optimism. To kill a serpent, one must crush its head. Victory would have to be fought for and won. Though he had barely a thousand men in his command, he devised a plan. He would divide his troops into two battalions. One would spread out along the banks of the Great River to attack the invaders where they were most vulnerable, perhaps sinking a few boats with catapults and huge rocks, at least inflicting casualties on the exposed flotilla with arrows shot from cover. When the enemy had established its beachhead, the battalion would fall back in headlong retreat, hopefully drawing the invaders after them in hot pursuit. The second battalion would conceal itself in the caves of Routh beneath the rough cliffs near the river rapids where the enemy was unlikely to attack. After the first wave of invaders had swept past them, they would emerge and search for the enemy command post. If they were lucky enough to find Jabal the Chosen and kill him, they might have a chance, if not of victory, at least of stalemate. The plan's chances of success were meager, but something had to be tried.

Too quickly the days slipped past. The futility of the situation began to flutter home to roost among Grimm's hapless soldiers, and desertion became popular. Nod's forces dwindled. Riding south to battle against the tide of fleeing refugees, the army of Nod seemed to dissolve into the countryside like sugar into hot coffee. General Grimm arrived at the Great River one morning leading a column of barely a hundred men, those too feeble-minded to appreciate a lost cause when it perched on their noses and looked them in the eye.

As the time for the invasion drew near, word came that pockets of illness had begun to break out within the crowded encampments of

the barbarians across the Great River. At first the reports attributed the infestation to unsanitary conditions in the camps. A curious pattern of epidemic developed, from west to east along the front. Then the same sickness also struck the mountain tribes at their bivouac on the other side of the monastery pass. Word came that the campaign had been postponed a week to allow the invasion forces time to recover full strength.

The disease was diagnosed as smallpox. Over half its victims were gravely ill, many dying, and the plague was spreading among them like fire through a tinder-dry forest. No one, on either side of the border, doubted any longer that the Sorcerer was the instrument of this terrible scourge.

Jabal the Chosen took sick and retired to his tent. The faithful took it as a sign. Jabal himself would show them how to fight and conquer the devastating disease. The Sorcerer's spell would be broken. They called upon Allah's protection while the invasion force bided its time. When word finally leaked out that Jabal had succumbed, soldiers who had not yet contracted the disease broke ranks and disappeared into the night. The remaining positions were decimated, manned only by dying warriors and those too sick to flee. The battle was over before it had begun, and not a single enemy soldier had set foot within the Kingdom of Nod. Precisely as the Sorcerer had foretold.

When there was no longer any doubt that the Kingdom had been miraculously spared, the King relieved Grimm of his temporary command. His first official act as royal commander was to dishonorably discharge all those who had deserted. They would not be replaced. The kingdom would no longer be burdened with the extravagance of maintaining a standing army, except, of course, for ceremonial functions in and about the castle. With the Sorcerer on their side, who needed one?

The King proclaimed a week-long holiday. Festivities were to culminate in a lush banquet honoring the Sorcerer and investing him with the newly-ordained title of Protector of the Kingdom. Invitations to the feast were inscribed and sent out, and a special envoy was

dispatched upon the arduous three-day journey to the wizard's secluded mountaintop retreat to specially request his presence and that of his lovely young wife. The King planned to meet them on the day of the banquet and lead a parade through the main streets of the capital and on to the castle.

In matters of public ceremony and courtly etiquette, the King was without equal. The parade, the banquet, the ceremony of investiture were all planned to the most minute detail. So when the King's minister plenipotentiary returned a day early with the news that the Sorcerer would be unable to participate in the royal proceedings honoring him, the regent was understandably distressed.

"How in the devil's name can we have a banquet in his honor if he refuses to submit?" the King fumed. "How will it look to our subjects if we cannot bring such a powerful man to the castle to honor him? What excuse did he give?"

The ashen minister was obviously unnerved to be the bearer of such bad tidings. Droplets of perspiration beaded on his forehead. He cleared his throat. "He said that there had been a death in the family, your majesty, and that he was therefore indisposed--"

"Indisposed! My God! To an invitation from his King!" The King's mood verged on hysteria.

Grimm, who had resumed his position as Chief Advisor, stepped forward from the darkness behind the messenger. "I instructed you to bring him here by force, if necessary. Why didn't you seize him? Were your orders not clear?"

The messenger spun around and bowed to the stocky advisor. Drops of sweat splattered on the cold marble floor. "We tried, my lord. I had him surrounded by four of the King's best soldiers. When I insisted that he accompany us, he refused. I informed him of my instructions to bring him in fetters if necessary, and he just laughed. On my signal the soldiers leapt to take him captive. Before they could reach him, there was a flash of light and a thick cloud of smoke and flames where he had been standing. It rose up into the trees above us. When the air had cleared, he was gone. There wasn't any trace of him. His house was empty, his wife and attendants gone. We waited half the day, but he never returned."

“How many witnessed this,” Grimm asked.

“Only the four soldiers and I, my lord. The rest of our party was camped below the crest and saw and heard nothing.”

“Good. And these four soldiers, can they be trusted?”

“Yes, my lord. They are four of the best.”

“See that each is promoted and given an increase in pay. Make sure they understand that they’re to speak of this to no one.”

“It’s already been done, my lord.”

“Did the Sorcerer say anything else?” Grimm’s voice was a low rumble.

“Yes. He gave me a message for the King.”

The King eyed his minister suspiciously, as a mouse might eye an envoy from the cat. “What was the message?”

The Minister was miserably uncomfortable. “He said, and I quote,” he cleared his throat again, ““If the King wants to see me, tell him to come here.””

“My God!” The King grabbed his crown to keep it from falling off his head. “How is this going to *look!*”

“Anything else?” Grimm asked.

“That was all, my lord.”

Grimm dismissed the minister, and the ebullient envoy fairly danced out of the chamber relishing the heavy bounce of his head still attached to his neck.

“What have we created, Grimm?” the King wanted to know when the throne room was empty. “How does it look if the Sorcerer can resist with impunity the will of the ruler of the kingdom?”

Grimm sat down heavily in the chair just below the King. “I don’t think he has any ambitions against the throne, your highness. No, I believe he just wants to be left alone right now. He seems to be possessed of that peculiar sort of overbearing conscience that grieves for the hideous deaths inflicted on our enemies, even as he rejoices with us in the preservation of the kingdom. But he’s no threat to you.”

“Perhaps not. But how are we going to get out of this embarrassing mess he seems to have placed us in?”

“You could graciously accept his invitation.”

“I could?” The notion startled the King into the singular.

“A magnanimous gesture, no doubt.”

“Perhaps we could . . . .”

“The King himself, by his own initiative, condescends to pay honor to a great countryman who is unfortunately . . . unable . . . incapable, for whatever reason, of accepting an invitation to the castle.”

“Yes, I like it,” chortled the King. “We will need to get the wording just right, of course.”

“Of course,” Grimm rumbled, smiling imperceptibly and scratching out a few notes to himself.

“It’s fine weather for a royal outing,” the King proclaimed. “And the Prince is now old enough to undertake his first extended journey. It’s time he got to know the realm, and the realm got to know him, wouldn’t you say?”

“I think it’s time you had a talk with your Protector of the Kingdom,” Grimm reminded him ominously.

“Yes. I see what you mean. It’s time we reached a clear understanding with the Sorcerer. Absolutely. No doubt about it.”

The parade and banquet were held as scheduled, but without benefit of the Sorcerer’s presence. The official announcement explained in great detail how the wizard had not yet fully recovered from the enormous expenditure of energy involved in single-handedly routing two separate armies. The King himself would travel to the Sorcerer’s mountain retreat to personally bestow the supreme honor of Protector of the Kingdom upon the exhausted magician. The two empty chairs beside the King at the head of the banquet table were heralded as ceremonial reminders to the celebrants of the debt the kingdom owed to the Sorcerer and his beautiful wife, but to those few who dared to believe they could see beyond mere appearance, they were tokens of where real domestic power now rested.

And so it came to pass that the King and his elaborate entourage undertook the long journey to the Sorcerer’s mountain retreat. The road from the capital city ran generally north-by-northeast and usually took three days to transit. The King’s party took six, seeing the sights, visiting an influential farmer here, a rich manufac-

turer there, entertaining petty functionaries everywhere, and generally dispensing its favors across the countryside. Town streets and village byways were invariably lined with peasants and shopkeepers, merchants and mayors, farmers and homemakers, each hoping to catch a glimpse of the King and his beloved infant son the Prince. Words of praise abounded for the King and the Sorcerer. As royal bugles blared, the subjects cheered wildly to be part of such a wonderful, peaceful, and inviolable kingdom.

The King took the precaution of sending an envoy on ahead to make quite certain the magician intended to receive him in the fashion appropriate to a monarch's visit. The Sorcerer welcomed the honor, it was reported, and would be on his best behavior, though he would prefer that the King limit to ten the number in the royal party that actually made their way up the mountainside to visit the wizard's modest household. This suited the King just fine. Not knowing for certain what pranks the unruly magician might be capable of perpetrating, he was pleased to keep the number of witnesses to an absolute minimum.

But the King need not have worried, for the visit contained not a single awesome act, no pyrotechnics whatsoever, and nothing particularly out of the ordinary. As the King, his Chief Advisor, and the Sorcerer held their private discussions seated informally around the kitchen table, the wizard bounced the infant Prince on his knee. He was truly fond of the inquisitive lad. The youngster was fascinated by the painting of the Sorcerer's strikingly beautiful wife which hung on the wall above the sideboard.

"I'm sorry your wife is unable to receive us," the King said more than once.

"Yes, I'm sorry too," the magician replied each time without attempting to explain her absence.

Grimm diverted the flow of the conversation back into the channel of the business at hand.

"You needn't concern yourselves with my loyalty to you and to the young Prince here," the Sorcerer said, still bouncing the burbling Prince. "I frankly don't care to participate in the customary ceremony of court, splendid though I'm sure it must be. Nevertheless,

you will have my continuing allegiance and support in preserving peace in the kingdom and assuring the rule of justice.”

“The King will always seek to have his rule tempered with justice,” Grimm rumbled.

“Then the King shall have my unswerving allegiance and support.”

As Grimm had advised, the King offered the magician a yearly stipend, modest compared to many of the extravagances of the royal court, but fully adequate to meet his needs and those of his staff and household. In exchange, the Sorcerer accepted the title of Protector of the Kingdom as a royal office, implying under the circumstances a continuing duty as well as recognition in thanks for a past task well done. The wizard declined, however, to name any further favor in discharge of the King’s earlier pledge of reward, made hastily in the teeth of certain disaster.

Grimm brought up the delicate subject of separation of powers within the kingdom. In a lengthy, though at times oblique discussion which the King had difficulty following, Grimm and the Sorcerer readily agreed that the magician would concern himself with protection of the state from foreign threats, and the King would administer the internal affairs of the realm. It was strongly implied by the Chief Advisor that neither should meddle in the bailiwick of the other. Having arrived at an understanding entirely satisfactory to both, the King and the Sorcerer shook hands warmly and emerged from the vine-covered cottage arm in arm, the picture of solid friendship and eternal goodwill.

The Prince cried to leave his new friend. As the royal party mounted to embark on the long journey back to the castle, more than one retainer thought he saw a tear likewise glistening in the Sorcerer’s eye, though whether it arose from the sadness of parting or from some other hidden melancholy, no one could determine.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Prince Comes of Age

**L**ike ripe grain the days fell before the relentlessly swinging scythe of time, seemingly in bunches, but actually one by one, the hours, minutes, and seconds clinging like fat seeds to the head of each golden stalk. The harvested days were bundled together into weeks, and the sheaves were leaned together as months, until entire years stood stacked and yellowing in a regular pattern that receded into the distance and out of sight across the rolling countryside.

And the harvests were good in the kingdom of Nod, year after year. A sweet, bloated peace settled like a sigh upon the land. An entire generation of children, born of corpulent store clerks and fat-bellied farmers, knew nothing of the scourge of hunger nor the paralyzing threat of foreign invasion. They seemed to have been sired by a race of giants who possessed an unlimited capacity to provide and protect. These same farmers and merchants, themselves little educated, found the time and the money now to send a favorite son or daughter off for a year or two of schooling, and the University of Nod flourished. Church pews throughout the realm were packed each Sabbath with content, comfortable, and thankful citizens.

Outside the borders to the south and east, ragged hordes of moral dwarfs robbed, raped, pillaged, murdered, and performed infamous crimes against nature in an endless orgy of wickedness and evil. But no one in Nod cared any longer, for none of the barbarians dared to set foot within the kingdom, so awesome had the tales of the Sorcerer's terrible powers grown with the passing years.

The Sorcerer himself was seldom seen. Occasional reported sightings were doubtless apocryphal, inventions of the overtaxed imagination of a bookkeeper or the conjurings of a wistful fisherman's

fancy. But signs of his presence were well known. Mysterious bursts of colored fire could be seen from time to time glowing just above the magician's mountain home, amidst monstrous rumblings that seemed to shake the earth's very core. These ominous reminders made as strong an impression upon the local populace as it did upon their foreign enemies. For the rascal with a penchant for criminal enterprise, a mere whisper of the wizard's terrible justice straightened a potentially crooked path. Mothers warned a wayward lad or lass to behave lest the Protector of the Kingdom discover the mischief and exact an unkind retribution. A fulsome variety of painful and embarrassing indignities, from spilt milk and moth holes to acid indigestion and hemorrhoids, were quietly attributed to the Sorcerer's mysterious powers and purposes.

Thanks to the Protector of the Kingdom, the army was no longer needed for the awkward and distasteful task of national defense. Public funds were channeled away from the militia. Occasionally the King would still review the troops, for form's sake, but in order to fill the small parade grounds, aging veterans would have to be called out of retirement to supplement the dwindling ranks. The once merely small army slowly deteriorated into an inept honor society for toothless old generals and assorted societal misfits. Its sole remaining role was to amuse the King and garnish his royal extravaganzas.

The King's reign was as unlike his father's as night is from day. He had revered, admired, loved, and secretly hated his father, never once suspecting that they were both driven by the same neurotic insecurity. The Old King had plunged into activity, leading military campaigns, endlessly touring the kingdom, overseeing public works projects, supervising local government, and maintaining political support with the ruthless determination of a desperado. The King avoided life as best he could. Nothing frightened him more than the unexpected, the little vicissitudes of life, the trials and tribulations which might spring up unannounced and reveal to all the world his fundamental inadequacy as a king and as a human being. In truth, he was inept at everything, because he had never in his life attempted anything.

Life had offered the King a single chance to blossom, and then had pruned it away again just as his spirit was beginning to bud. Three years before his death, the King's father had confronted his own mortality, concluded that lineal descendants might help matters, and arranged a marriage for his son with the beautiful young daughter of a rich silk merchant. Though she was fifteen years the King's junior, she possessed a genius for drawing the King out, building his confidence, and interesting him in the marvelous little activities of ordinary life. For more than a year life had been sweeter than he had ever dared to hope. On the evening the Prince was born, the King was the proudest man on the face of the earth. He tenderly kissed his beloved bride as she drifted off into a well-deserved sleep, a sleep from which she never awoke. She quietly died of internal hemorrhaging that night.

The King never trusted life again.

Yet it would be inaccurate to say he was unhappy as the years passed him by. The royal coffers were filled to overflowing from the exorbitant taxes on every possible human endeavor which the Old King had established when times were lean. Abundance mushroomed within the realm. The King could hardly spend money fast enough to keep up. He had long ago turned over the mundane details of running the kingdom to ministers he seldom saw, and comfort had totally extinguished any spark of ingenuity which may once have smoldered in the backwoods of his otherwise mediocre mind. He spent his time devising ever more elaborate, pompous, and expensive rituals for his daily court procedures, gathering his cronies about him like trained pigeons in splendid and absurd costumes, and buffering himself from the unanticipated. Those ceremonies which amused him, he repeated over and over again, until some of the younger attendants would grow embarrassed and look away, whispering that the King and his Chief Advisor were like two peas in a pod.

In sad fact, the passing years had not been kind to Grimm. He had grown quite senile, often confusing the King with his father whom he had served years ago, and mistaking the fuzzy past with the even fuzzier present. It was rumored that he suffered the insane delusion that God was whispering important messages into his left ear.

Occasionally he would be visited with brief flashes of lucidity, though they seemed to come with decreasing frequency, as if the old man fought them off, preferring instead to swim in the murky waters of muddled thinking. Perhaps in those rare and cruel instants of clarity the once-brilliant Chief Advisor had no choice but to face what he had become: a broken-down, drooling, humorless, smelly, white-haired, irrelevant old scutter.

Yet the King kept him on. Grimm would spend most of the day snoring quietly, asleep in the low chair reserved for him just below the King's right elbow, his tousled hair and bushy eyebrows white as freshly fallen snow upon the heap of his shrunken skin, so loose and shriveled that it seemed to have been torn off and abandoned by a disgruntled grizzly bear. Some said the King put up with him out of the goodness of his royal heart, as a gesture to all the old, the poor, the demented, the sick, and the halt, or at least for the sake of appearance, in deference to the venerable citizens of the realm who could recall Grimm's proud counsel when the Old King had been helmsman of the sea-tossed ship of state. Others suggested that the King himself was a little soft in the mind, and Grimm was the only member of his cabinet who spoke the same language.

In all the inner circles of the royal administration, the only unflickering flame seemed to be the young Prince as he grew older and ever bolder. More and more the King would rely upon his son to supervise at functions and preside at ceremonies, at first only in the remote outlands of the realm, but later whenever sovereign representation was called for outside the four walls of the castle. The King simply would not be bothered to travel abroad. The subjects came to know the Prince better than they did the King. The Prince became a symbol for the new enlightened self-sufficiency the kingdom now enjoyed. With the Prince as heir apparent to the throne, peace, prosperity, and a gentle rule of reason seemed assured for generations to come.

The Prince was the darling of the realm, and the citizens seemed unable to get enough of him. Young apprentices and clerks, without exception polite and pleasant fellows, if a little dull, would have sold their own parents into slavery to possess the spark of

vivacity that flashed from his pale green eyes and sizzled within the words he spoke. Female hearts would go a-pitter-patter whenever the auburn-haired Prince appeared in public to cut the ribbon for a new irrigation dam, officially initiate a diversion canal, or dedicate a freshly completed monument to the living memory of the King. Many a housewife wept silently just to watch him ride past astride his chestnut stallion, shoulders thrown back, head held proudly, in command of a crack honor guard of haughty young horsemen.

Within the castle, downy daughters of staid and stuffy statesmen would catch the Prince's hand as they passed in the narrow mustiness of the royal cloakroom and whisper to him of a midnight tryst. And, indeed, the Prince was no stranger to matters of venereal delight, though no lovely lass had yet snared his fancy for longer than a momentary indiscretion. Except for his dreams, alas, true love itself had not so much as left him its calling card.

The Prince was a product of his age of plenty, representative of his generation, only somehow more so, as if his typical landscape had been painted in vivid colors by a more passionate hand. As a boy, he had been given everything his little heart desired, every new game, toy, pastime, or diversion the empire had to offer. In school he rose to the ninety-seventh percentile of his class overall. Later he took to competitive sports with an intensity that delighted his coaches and staggered his opponents. He seemed to have everything a young prince could possibly want.

One would suppose the Prince happy. But inside he was ravaged by unquenchable desires. Though he did very, very well at everything he attempted, he never quite managed to become the absolute best at anything. He raged after the elusive goal of perfection and resented those who finished ahead of him. A bitter discontent grew within him like a fetus, conceived of a ravenous curiosity, nurtured by unruly emotions, and aching to be born. Try though he might, it would not be aborted.

One day shortly after his eighteenth birthday, the Prince sought an audience with the King, who had just completed Royal Decrees and was about to begin Imperial Proclamations. Several attendants stood by in chartreuse leotards with epaulets of flocked juniper branches,

and Grimm was snoozing in the Chief Advisor's chair. "Father," he said, "I am not happy."

"Oh, that doth sorrow us greatly." More and more of late the King tended to lapse into the regal first person plural even with his son. "Perhaps you would like a new jumping horse or a deer hide shuttleball." He gracefully raised his jeweled arm to summon the royal purser to count out enough money for the suggested purchases.

"No," the Prince interrupted. "That is not what I meant at all. That is not it at all."

The King lowered his arm, leaned closer, and squinted suspiciously, as if seeing his son for the first time in years. Where he had expected to find an angular, awkward, unkempt young rascal, a handsome prince now stood. "My, my, but you've grown, my boy. What seems to be the problem?"

"I'm being smothered, father, by all the sports and games and toys and schooling and endless imperial proceedings." The Prince's voice was full of emotion. "They're all distractions, and nothing more. It's all too comfortable, too predictable, and the distractions and the comfort keep me from reaching the truth."

The Prince now had his father's undivided attention. The King fidgeted uncomfortably. "But what are you looking for, my boy?"

"Well . . . truth. You know. I feel an emptiness inside. I hunger for knowledge of the true nature of things. Why, for example, am I here? What's my purpose?"

"Why to be king after me!" the King proclaimed proudly, pounding the back of the Chief Advisor's chair for emphasis.

Grimm straightened up, rubbed his eyes, and yawned.

"But why are there kings at all, father? I want to be absolutely certain that life on earth serves some purpose, because until I know that for certain, I will be discontented." The Prince searched his father's eyes for a glimmer of understanding. "Why, father, is there anything at all and not rather nothing?"

Jarred momentarily from its usual thought processes, the sovereign mind attempted to wrestle with the unfamiliar. "Ah, ah, ah," was all the King could manage to answer as he pondered the larger question. His eyes darted about for help.

“What does he want?” Grimm wanted to know, his voice shrill from paranoia. Having just awakened, he was a bit more muddled than usual. “What’s he asking?”

“He wants to know the purpose of life,” the King shouted irritably, as if sheer volume would render his words easier to comprehend. “Do you know what it is?”

Grimm rubbed his hoary pate with one hand and fumbled with his wizened genitals with the other. “Is it a trick?” he responded, much too loudly.

“Go back to sleep,” the King snapped. “We’ll take care of this.”

“Might I suggest,” whispered the nearest of the festooned attendants, perceiving the King’s distress and trying to fill the void left by the Chief Advisor’s incompetence, “that you could perhaps send him to the learned Professor Thatch.”

“Of course!” cried the King, enormously relieved. “We shall send you to the learned Professor Thatch, my boy! He’s head of the Department of Philosophy, Psychology, and Truth at the University of Nod. Perhaps you know of him? He’ll certainly be able to help you.”

“Thank you, father,” said the Prince, bowing formally and retiring in the proper manner. With excitement and anticipation he put his affairs in order and packed for the journey to Enoch, where the University of Nod was located. He put aside the things of his youth and prepared himself, as best he could, for initiation into the world of higher learning.