

Derek Vortimer, MBA Manager of Worlds

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## **Chapter one**

### **The interview**

Had Derek Vortimer known what was to follow he would not have gone near the place. What he wanted was to be Chief Financial Officer of a profitable business. What he got was quite different, but certainly more exciting.

A Mr Edmund Codd rang the day after the award ceremony and congratulated him for having gained Honours in an MBA class. (Master of Business Administration.)

Mr Codd explained he needed a young and brilliant graduate and there was a job available. A position with high pay, and limitless possibilities and he would learn about it if he came to Mr Codd's office the following morning at 10 o'clock.

By a quarter to ten Derek was outside the address he had been given, and got his first surprise. The street he had come to was lined with gleaming, high rise office buildings. The footpath was crowded with prosperous looking people.. Expensive cars glided along the streets. Everything was bustling and businesslike.

Only one building did not match the rest, it was shabby, a mere four stories high, and at least a hundred years old, but the street number over the entrance was that given to him by Mr Codd.

He was disappointed but entered and found a notice board with a list of tenants. Mr Codd's office was on the third floor.

A creaking lift struggled up to the third floor and opposite Derek, when he stepped out, into a drab passageway were, two hands painted on the wall, each with a pointing finger. One indicated right, one left. Over the one pointing to the right was Mr Codd's name. A few steps further on was his door with the name *Edmund Codd - Agent*. painted on the frosted glass of the top half. Lower down, near the door knob, was a smaller sign. *Enter without knocking*. A strange rattling noise was heard through the door.

Derek entered and found the source of the noise. He faced a woman sitting at a large oak desk. And it was she who had been making the rattling noise by typing away on a black 'Remington' typewriter.

It was a museum piece, he had never seen such a thing before. The typiste may have been from a museum too. Her hair, streaked in grey, was done up in a bun at the back and held in place by two pins with turtle shell knobs. Her long-sleeved white blouse had lace cuffs and was fastened at the neck by a cameo brooch.

She looked up at him. 'Yes?'

Derek stammered, but said. 'Mr Codd, he asked me to call and see him.'

She opened a note book which lay on the desk and examined it. 'You are Mr Derek Vortimer, am I correct?'

Derek admitted to being that person!

He sat on an uncomfortable chair as directed, but was astonished when the lady stood up and went into another room. She had on an ankle length black cloth skirt which ended just above a pair of lace up black boots. He had been in many offices but had never seen a receptionist dressed like this. What sort of job was he being offered?

She returned and held the door open for him. 'Mr Codd will see you straight away.'

The man also sat behind an oak desk which was covered in documents tied into bundles with red tape. He rose as Derek entered and leaned over to shake his hand. His hair was snow white and carefully parted in the middle. Black suit, stiff white collar A large, ruby stickpin was the centrepiece of a black bow tie. He had blue eyes which beamed at Derek.

'Ah, Mr Vortimer,' 'What a pleasure to meet you at last. I have followed your progress through school and university with the greatest of interest. Your reports are all here, uniformly excellent.' He held up a manila folder containing papers. 'And now a crowning achievement for a twenty two year old, your degree, of which I have a copy. Well done! Well done!'

Derek was astonished. He had no idea that someone he had never met was taking such an interest in his affairs. Perhaps the man was a loony, and would be hard to get rid of.

'Have you been spying on me?'

Not spying my boy, not spying! Supervising, studying! Watching your splendid progress from afar. I have your school photographs here, all of them.' He held up the folder again. I have been watching you blossom into manhood.'

Derek was astonished to hear of such prying into his affairs. 'Why have you done all this, what's the point?'

'The point is we need people of your intelligence and capacity. I was present in the audience when you and all the other clever young students received their degrees, and when I saw you take yours from the chancellor there were tears in my eyes. I knew it was time to act.' He opened the folder to study one of the documents.

In spite of his amazement Derek took advantage of the moment to look round the office. He was astonished to see some leather bound volumes on a shelf. They were business directories dated from 1895 to 1930. In spite of what the proprietor had said he was rapidly losing hope of getting anything worthwhile out of this rickety old office. The man was a nutter!

'What job are you offering?' he asked, to distract Mr Codd from his papers.

'Excellent question!' cried Mr Codd. 'Excellent! The position I have in mind for you is the management of a small country.'

This was a let-down and Derek was irritated. 'A small country what? A pub? A general store? A stock and land agency?'

'No, no, Mr Vortimer, you mistake me! I speak of a country that is having difficulty making its way in the modern world. You would be in charge, you would be the manager'

'What country? What are you talking about?'

'The country's name is Sultania, and I am proud to be its agent in this city.'

'Sultania!!' Derek thought the conversation was becoming more bizarre by the minute. 'Thank you Mr Codd, but I feel I should look around a bit more before deciding on my career. and there will be other offers.' He thought it would be best to leave before the man started raving.

Mr Codd smiled at him again. 'Think, Mr Vortimer! You may never be offered another opportunity like this. All your life you will be wondering - what did I miss out on when I refused the chance to manage a small country. - 'Let me tell you about the wonderful opportunity I am presenting to you'

Derek leaned back in his chair while Mr Codd smiled and smiled. The ruby on the stickpin blazed a brilliant red. Derek felt tired. It was only ten o'clock, two hours to lunch time and he had nothing else to do, and the name Sultania haunted him. It was as though he had heard it in a dream. He decided to listen for a while.

'The manager's salary,' said Mr Codd, 'Is five hundred dinars per week. They are gold coins. Not legal tender here of course but dealers in gold are always eager to buy them. You can also sell them as curios.' He pushed across to Derek one gold coin in the shape of a crescent. 'That is a half dinar, there are also copper coins.'

'I can look all this up on the internet, or Wikipedia' Derek was wondering why he felt so tired and reluctant to move.

'There's nothing on the internet concerning Sultania,' said Mr Codd. 'I have studied encyclopaedias, atlases, gazettes, history books, there is no reference to it anywhere. But I know it exists, I have been there. How else could I be its agent?'

'If it is not on any maps, not even the internet, how would I get there?'

'You will be guided, my boy, guided! You will be taken straight to the capital, Sultanopolis, and there you will meet the Council of Elders whom you will be advising.'

'I can't advise anyone about running a country, what would I know about the government, or the country? Honestly, Mr Codd, I think you should look for someone older and more experienced.' He then remembered something. 'Sultania!, that was the name of the scholarship that paid my way through college and university.'

Mr Codd was delighted. 'Exactly my boy, exactly. We were with you all the way, and now our investment is about to pay off. because you have talents and abilities that would let you grow. into the job. But if you don't want it look into my eyes and tell me so. Look me in the eye and say you don't want the job. Come now, straight into my eyes.'

Derek gazed at the blue eyes in front of him and started to say, 'I don't want---' when a sudden spark passed between them. Derek fell back in his chair and stared at Mr Codd, wondering what had happened.

'Mr Codd's lips curled in another smile. 'I believe you've changed your mind,' he said.

After the interview Derek was in a nervous state all day. Common sense told him that the man was talking rubbish. It was impossible for an unknown country to exist in the world. It was nonsense. Still, he had been very persuasive and Derek thought he had committed himself to something or other, he was not sure what.

Derek lived in a house from where he went by tram to the university. His host family was away for a few days. If they had been at home, things may have been different.

He was in such a state that he jumped when someone knocked on the door that night. The caller was a stranger Derek had never met before but would have remembered.

The young man, scarcely older than himself, was tall, and black as midnight. He wore a polished steel helmet with a spike on top. The helmet was swathed in a white scarf, the ends of which were tucked into the neck of an embroidered silk shirt, and he had on long, soft leather riding boots. His outer garment was a coat of small steel links.

'Peace be on this house,' said the strange figure who was armed with a curved sword that swung in a scabbard by his side.

He strode in and sat down cross legged on the floor rug with his back to the TV. Derek was about to say that he must have lost his way to a fancy-dress party. He would have made a joke of it but the hooked nose over a firm mouth together with a level, direct look, were a bit scary.

Unable to think of anything else he said, 'Can I help you?'

'I am Lord Ramses, head of my clan in Sultania. Effendi Codd recommended you for the position of manager of our country. The Lady Frederika will be here shortly and we can discuss the matter. Gus, your servant, will also be here.'

Before Derek could say he didn't want the job, nor a servant named Gus, there was another knock on the door. This time it was a girl with fierce blue eyes looking out from either side of a nose guard attached to her helmet.

She also was a memorable figure, her helmet had no spike like that of Ramses but was adorned with fine silver bands around the rim; she too wore chain mail. She stood her spear and bow in a corner of the room and threw herself into Derek's only arm chair.

Is that him?' she said, pointing with her thumb towards Derek who was gazing at her, astonished.

'This is indeed him,' was the grave reply. 'He is a young man of courtesy but knows nothing of Sultania and its customs. Perhaps you could rise and greet our host.'

The girl jumped to her feet and took Derek's hand in a powerful grip. 'Frederika von Hohenberger,' she said, 'Lady Frederika to you, manager.'

Derek thought his guests were more interesting than anything to be seen on television. He did not intend to manage their country but wanted to find out all about them.

You have an unusual name,' he said to the young man. 'Wasn't there a Ramses, king of ancient Israel?'

'Certainly not,' retorted Ramses stiffly. 'I am a direct descendant of Ramses the Second, the greatest Pharaoh ever to govern Egypt.'

Behind his back Lady Frederika pulled a face and rolled her eyes.

To cover his embarrassment Derek asked, 'Tea or coffee?'

'Wine,' said Ramses.

All Derek could find were two bottles of non-alcoholic wine. One bottle was full, the other half full. Everyone hated the taste.

Lord Ramses took a sip from his glass and relaxed. 'You have passable wine in this city,' he remarked. 'Frederika, will you join me in drinking to the health of our host and wishing him a long and happy term as manager of our dear land, Sultania.'

The two drank the toast with enthusiasm while Derek smiled nervously and waited for a complaint. None came, he suspected that his guests were not regular drinkers.

Before he could explain that he did not want to go to Sultania, or be its manager a third and last stranger arrived.

This guest was a dwarf, a hairy dwarf straight out of *Lord of the Rings*. He had on a leather jacket with no sleeves, leather shorts and lace up boots. His arms and face were brown, and his beard and hair bristled out beyond any possible grooming with comb or brush. He bowed to the assembled company.

He said to Derek, 'My name, your worship, is Gustavus Adolphus Schrumpf and I am your worship's butler and bodyguard. My duty is not only to look after your needs but to protect your worship's back during the battles to come.'

Before Derek could explain that he didn't need protection in battles because he was not going to attend any he was interrupted by Lord Ramses.

'He is also an excellent knife thrower,' said Ramses, 'Gus, let's have a demonstration.'

Derek was waiting for Gus to start when a knife, which he had not seen before whizzed past his head and embedded itself quivering in the door to the kitchen. It was well no one came through the door at that moment; the unfortunate person would have been skewered between the eyes.

'Quite right,' said Ramses as Gus walked across to recover his knife. 'A handy skill, considering the unsettled state of our political life at the present time. You will also find him very strong. He used to be a professional wrestler but his last bout had to be cancelled because he accidentally broke his opponent's neck.'

Gus looked ashamed at the memory of this encounter.

'Well Gus, what kept you?'

'I apologize, Lady Frederika, but I have been arranging our passage home. It took a little longer than expected but there will be no difficulties.'

'Excellent,' cried Ramses, he raised his glass. 'A toast to our dear land Sultania, may the manager soon solve its problems.'

They threw their heads back and drank. Derek tried to say that he hoped that they would soon find the manager they were seeking, but for some reason his tongue had become too thick to pronounce the words. It didn't matter anyway, no one was listening.

The conversation had turned to Sultania and Derek listened with growing unease to what they had to say.

He learned that Frederika's father had been killed by a huge boar.

'Yes, it was the biggest pig anyone had ever seen. Even the old legends don't tell of a boar that size. I'm going to hunt it down personally, and kill it,' said Frederika. 'I tell you what, the manager can come too. He can have my spear because I've ordered a bigger one with a stronger cross piece.'

Derek was about to rise and denounce the whole project. If the boars were any bigger than rabbits he was not interested.

His objections were never heard.

He was interrupted by the arrival of the pizza delivery man. Derek had forgotten the order but was reminded of it when Ramses tried to pay the bill in gold dinars. The man would have taken his pizzas away but Derek had enough money to pay the bill.

Gus cut up the pizzas and put them on plates; they were greatly appreciated and more wine was needed to wash them down.

With no more wine left they decided to end the party. Derek tried to rise and address his guests in order to clear up any misunderstandings. He was going to tell them that he enjoyed their company and they could call any time when passing, but on no account would he accept the job of manager. He would have said all this, instead the tiredness he felt in Mr Codd's office came over him again and he fell asleep on the couch in front of the television set.

He was still asleep when Gus picked him up.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Sultanopolis**

Derek groaned when the sun speared a beam of light on him through the windows far up in the wall and crawled further under his bearskin rug

Rug! What rug?' It seemed as though someone had come into his room during the night and glued his eyes shut, but he could still feel. His hand wandered over the hairy texture of what seemed to be a hard bed cover with fur growing out of it .There were no sheets and from the rustling noise he made at each movement he guessed his pillow was stuffed with straw.

He managed to open his eyes to see the blurred view visible over the top of the rug. He was in a room with a high, vaulted ceiling Rough stone walls were partly hidden by hanging tapestries showing hunting and battle scenes. His clothes were folded on top of a wooden chest. His wallet and telephone were also there.

Derek slid back under the rug and waited for the nightmare to go away. He was sick. His mouth felt as though a small, furry animal had come to a nasty end there some weeks ago and had just been removed. It could have been too much pizza last night His head ached.

The best plan was to lie quiet, but after ten minutes of discomfort he tried to sit up. It was a failure and he was about to sink back again with a moan when a voice by his ear said, 'Allow me, your Honour.'

An arm slipped round his shoulders. In the stranger's free hand he could see a goblet which was held to his lips. He drank. The stuff was terrible and revived the taste of pizzas past their use by date.

He was allowed to lie back on the bed while the voice, which he now recognised as belonging to his butler, bodyguard said, 'I think your Honour can have a wash and breakfast now. You will feel much better afterwards.' He lay back hoping to wake up in his own bed at home.

Gus left the room and came back with a bowl of water, soap, and a brush. He wetted the brush and rubbed it on the soap. He started on Derek's face and hair. The bristles were stiff and better suited to scrubbing floors than tender faces. Derek, by this time was wide awake and wondering where he was as he cringed away from the brush.

'Where am I? What have you done to me?' croaked Derek, while trying to spit out the taste of soap.

'Your Honour is in the Castle Maledisant in the City of Sultanopolis, which is the capital of Sultania.'

Gus had overlooked his pyjamas and apart from the rug Derek had nothing on, only underclothes. The air in the room was frigid, and he shivered.

'Sorry, your worship,' said the dwarf who was drying Derek with a coarse towel. 'I should have known that you would be cold. You can't start managing the country with your teeth chattering in your head. But never fear, I ordered the finest clothes in Sultania, most suitable for a manager.'

The clothes were on a cabinet Derek had not noticed before. Gus was about to slip a shirt over Derek's head when he was stopped by a feeble protest. Derek wanted his own clothes.

'Your Honour, it is not proper. No doubt those strange garments are suitable for your own country but here we are very fashionable and they would not be right for a man of such importance as our manager.'

'What Derek had thought to be long underwear was put on with the help of two servants; actually they were trousers, baggy round the behind and the legs narrowed and his feet just got through. Boots and socks were put on next. Last was a smock which had hundreds of colored beads sewn to it. The skirt of the smock was divided front and back for, as Gus explained, horse riding.

Derek didn't want to ride a horse, he hated them. All he wanted was to be chief financial officer of a profitable company back home.

The outfit was finished off with a scarlet cord round the waist. Gus looped it round several times and tied it with a complex knot.

'Now,' he said while kneeling to tie bows at the top of Derek's boots. 'A light breakfast for your worship; a simple repast, I think.'

In another, larger room it was surprising to find several dozen people awaiting his arrival. They bowed low when he entered and sucked in their breath excitedly while whispers ran round the room.

He was served a large meat pie with the handles of a carving knife and a fork sticking out through a hole in the crust. These were removed with a flourish by a servant who broke the crust and speared lumps of meat dripping with sauce and gravy on to his plate. This was too much to face and Derek waved the pie away; he still hadn't recovered from the pizza.

There was a wail from the onlookers and Gus protested. 'Your Honour, the cook will commit suicide! If you reject his creations, he will stab himself and we will lose one of the great cooks of Sultania. Good cooks are hard to find. The Sultan alone has ordered three to be strangled with bow-strings at different times after an unhappy choice of dishes and since then no apprentices have come forward to learn the art of cooking. I beg of you, take a little and send a message of congratulations to the cook.'

Derek did not want a dead cook on his conscience and by gagging a little he managed to force down a mouthful or two of pie.

Lady Frederika strode in. She dropped a battleaxe on Derek's table and turned to face the room. 'Out!' she ordered.

Some of the crowd murmured against this but she stilled them with a gesture of her thumb towards the door and they began to move, bowing deeply while leaving. She took off her helmet and ran her hands through her yellow hair which was drawn back in two plaits hanging to below her waist. She was no more than twenty, and good-looking, in a forbidding sort of way.

Gus moved the battle axe to one side and placed the tray in front of Derek.

Lady Frederika seemed short tempered, it was possible she had not recovered from the socializing of the previous evening. Though it may have been the pizza.

'The country is in sore need of management,' she stated. 'You must begin at once. There is no time to linger over breakfast.'

'Take this away!' she said, pointing to a platter that Gus had just put on the table. 'Breakfast is over!'

'Like hell it is!' cried Derek who didn't want the breakfast, but wasn't to be bullied by Frederika. 'I'll say when I've finished, not you. And I've never agreed to manage this rotten country, and I want to go home.'

'You can't go home!' Frederika retorted. 'You are hundreds of leagues from your own country and it would take months to get there. Forget going home; you are the manager of Sultania and the council will see that you carry out your duties.'

'Well, how did you get me here? It was only last night, wasn't it?'

'We came the short way,' was the answer, and Derek's further questions were ignored.

'You will feel better after drinking this Your Worship,' Gus presented him another goblet. It was terrible stuff and bought back the taste of pizza

'Come,' said Frederika. 'It is time to go to the great hall; The Council of Elders will be meeting shortly, important decisions have to be taken, and you must be prepared to carry them out.'

Derek put a hand to his forehead to indicate the extent of his misery, but the girl was not interested. She was not that well herself but was more determined than Derek.

'You have been engaged to manage this country and manage it you will,' she said, in spite of his protests and explanations that he was there by mistake. The Lady Frederika cut short these complaints, she grasped him firmly by the upper arm to march him out of the room and down the corridor to the great hall.

The business of the council had not yet begun because a crowd was standing around chatting and waiting.

A herald in a blue velvet cap and a tunic of the same with a palm tree in silver sewn across the front bustled across, took off his cap, flourished it and bowed low to Frederika. 'Your Ladyship!' He then

turned to Derek. 'Welcome, Effendi Vortimer, to Sultania. May you have a long and happy term as manager.'

He turned to face the room. 'My Lords, Ladies, Gentlemen, and commoners, make way for the mighty Effendi Vortimer, newly appointed manager of Sultania.'

Derek was not an impressive sight. His complexion had a greenish tinge and sweat had broken out again on his forehead in spite of its recent wash. He had difficulty focussing his eyes and tended to stagger a little while walking. His youthful appearance did not help. Many of those present exchanged grim and doubtful looks with their neighbors.

He was presented to the more important persons present, none of whom seemed particularly enthusiastic at meeting him. He couldn't remember their names anyway.

One, Sir Nigel, was chief of the council and made a brief speech. 'Welcome!' he cried. 'Thrice welcome Effendi Vortimer to your first meeting of the Council of Elders and to Sultania.' This speech was followed by a patter of applause.

A servant led Derek to a place at the foot of the table, facing Sir Nigel who was at the other end.' Scribes sat at smaller tables ready to take notes of the proceedings.

Sir Nigel said, 'Now that the manager has arrived I ask you all to stand and observe two minutes silence in memory of our late, former manager. I am happy to announce that his head has at last been recovered. It will be returned with Honour to his grieving family together with the balance of his salary, though we fear the rest of him has been eaten.'

Derek could barely stand for the horror of this news, but before he could collect his thoughts, and present his resignation, Sir Nigel spoke again, he said, 'I draw the attention of the council to the ambassadors from our great neighbour, The Khan, Lord of the Carthaginian Empire.' He indicated three grim faced men whose black hair and beards had been ringleted and their eyes outlined with black make-up. They sat in chairs near the council table but were quite silent. They nodded slightly and gazed with stony faces at the gathering. The third looked at Derek, his eyebrows flicked up and down, and he winked.

Derek stared, astonished. It was Mr Codd! How did he get here, dressed in outlandish clothes, and decorated with abundant hair, and a beard. Why was he masquerading as an ambassador from some place called the Carthaginian Empire. Perhaps he really was an ambassador.

This sudden appearance was so unsettling that Derek forgot to announce that he had never accepted the job of manager, did not want the job, and would withdraw until they had arranged his return home.

His thoughts were interrupted yet again by a door which crashed open and the appearance of two armed men who strode into the hall.

Sir Nigel rose from his chair. 'Sir Humphrey Swiftblade, Seigneur Michel du Lac, what is the meaning of this? How dare you break into a meeting of the council in this unseemly manner.'

'Sanctuary!' cried one of them. 'We demand the protection of the council!'

'Against what?'

'Murder! Seizure of our lands and homes! The troops of the Sultan are marching against us at this very moment'

Consternation around the table. Every man gazed at his neighbors and at the accusers.

'We have heard nothing of this. Why should the Sultan order such a thing?'

'Treachery Sir Nigel, Treachery! Someone has poisoned his mind against us, and I accuse Lord Grausam who is at this very table.' He pointed at a black browed man sitting opposite.

The man accused, Lord Grausam, went white as quarrels and shouting broke out.

Sir Nigel hammered the table with the handle of his dagger until the noise died away. 'This is very serious,' he said. 'It is a matter for the manager. He shall head a Board of Enquiry into these accusations. We will give him a body of troops as protection and to enforce his orders'. Derek looked round to see if he could make a bolt for the door and escape. It was useless, and Mr Codd was shaking his head. Derek had no idea how to get out of this strange and perilous situation. He would just have to lead the enquiry. Though, what it was to be and what they would make of it when he reported back did not bear thinking about.

'A Board of Enquiry!' sneered Lord Grausam. 'This so called manager barely got into the hall without tripping over his own feet; now you want him to head a Board of Enquiry. He's a foreigner a child, still got the ring of the pot on his bottom, no doubt. Where are his weapons? What is his authority?'

'He is a deeply learned young man.' Said Sir Nigel. 'Effendi Codd's message informed us that he was held high in honour in his own country.'

At this point Derek saw Mr Codd nodding agreement.

'As for authority, he will have a guard, and he may be accompanied by one or two members of the council, such as are at liberty. They will advise him on the customs of Sultania and bear witness that he is conducting the enquiry on behalf of the council.'

He said thoughtfully, 'I think my young, though greatly respected friend, and wise counsellor Lord Ramses can be one, and --'

'I will be the other,' interrupted Lady Frederika. 'The hunt for the giant pig can wait. I helped bring him here and I am responsible for him to the council.' Perhaps she thought less could go wrong if she was on the spot and overseeing his actions. 'And I suggest to the council that we go direct to the castle of Sir Humphrey and start our work there.'

'Very good,' said Sir Nigel as people around the table nodded. 'Your military escort will be waiting at the city gates at dawn tomorrow.'

The ambassadors filed out, surrounded by their bodyguard and Derek was unable to speak to Mr Codd.

## Chapter Three

### The ambush

Derek slept badly that night, wondering what Mr Codd had got him into. He did fall asleep at last but Gus woke him before daylight. It was time to get up.

Afterwards Frederika and Ramses came to escort them to the town gates. Derek no longer explained or complained because he was either ignored or misunderstood and had little to say as Frederika and Ramses led him and Gus through narrow, dirty streets.

Waiting a little distance beyond the gates of the city was an escort of fifty foot soldiers and twenty five mounted troopers.

When his charges appeared from under the arch of the gate the captain, a fierce looking red-headed man, roared an order. His men sprang to attention and the troopers sat up straight in the saddle. The Captain approached, stamped to attention, and saluted Derek. 'Edmund Codd, Sir, Captain in the Council's Guard.'

Once again Derek was taken aback, unable to speak, for this was definitely his Mr Codd, yesterday a Carthaginian ambassador, today a captain in the Council's Guard.

'Good morning Codd, We'll inspect your men.' said Frederika. She led Ramses and the dumbfounded Derek round the ranks while looking keenly at the men and horses. 'How many pubs did you raid to get this lot?' She enquired sourly, Ramses seemed amused at the question.

'They're all good men ma'am,' said Captain Codd. 'When the manager gives me his orders I'll see they're carried out to his satisfaction, and to mine.'

Nearby were wagons with canvas covered tops which they were not asked to inspect, though they were obviously coming along to carry supplies. Derek could not help glancing uneasily at one black wagon drawn by four horses of the same color. Two men sat on the plank seat in front. Their gowns were black also, and their faces were hidden in shadow by the cowls which had been drawn over their heads.

Derek wondered if every Board of Enquiry was accompanied by its own undertakers, ready to bury the dead. He tried to concentrate on the inspection.

When they had examined every horse and every soldier to Frederika's grudging satisfaction he said, 'Mr Codd, may I speak to you privately?'

'Certainly Sir,' replied the captain, saluting smartly and stamping to attention once again.

The others went off to inspect some horses that Gus had led out from under the archway.

When they had gone Derek asked, 'Are you an agent with an office in Melbourne, or an ambassador of some empire I have never heard of, or are you a captain in this country's army?'

'I am all three, and more. My dear boy, surely you didn't think I would throw you to the wolves in this country without any protection. I thought I mentioned coming with you to Sultania.'

'You didn't. I would have remembered if you had told me that.'

'Well, I'm sorry if I didn't. As regards my various persona, I am anything I want to be. The ambassadors have already forgotten me, and the Captain of the Guard is still fast asleep. The soldiers of the guard do not know that I am not really their captain, but they think I am.'

'But how do you get away with all this?'

'It's a gift, a family trait, and now it is at your service. Fear nothing, my boy, you will triumph. I am here to protect you.'

Derek saw that Gus was leading two horses towards him. The small one was for Gus and the other for Derek. Clearly he was meant to get on its back. Frederika was mounting an even larger horse but Derek did not want to take that liberty with the one that was presented to him. It was a chestnut mare with a silky coat and had its ears back looking down on him with a mixture of dislike and contempt. It expressed its opinion by shaking its head and nodding violently, swinging Gus off his feet as it backed away from Derek. As far as the young man was concerned that settled the matter. Neither he nor the horse liked or wanted each other.

He said 'I have decided to ride on one of the wagons; anyone who wants to take on the mare can have it.'

Frederika rode forward. Her own horse, was much heavier than that chosen for Derek. 'Come, Mr, Vortimer' said Frederika, 'The Manager of Sultania, and head of the Enquiry does not ride on wagons. He leads us on horseback. I will hold her for you.' She grabbed the bridle of the chestnut and dragged the two horses together. 'Not to worry, Ramses and I chose her specially for you because of her speed and spirit. 'Gus,' she cried, 'Help the manager on to his horse. Half the morning gone and we're not even on the road yet.'

Gus cupped his hands together for Derek to put his foot in them. Derek glanced round desperately but there was no escape; everyone that had a horse was already mounted, waiting, and looking at him. There was nowhere to hide and seemingly no chance of his horse falling dead within the next few seconds. It was tall and the saddle a long way from the ground. He sighed, gave in, and put a foot into Gus' hands.

Wrong foot, your worship, wrong foot. You always put your left foot in the stirrup to mount.' He tried to correct Derek quietly, but everyone noticed. Derek at last got on to the horse and barely escaped falling over the other side. Gus adjusted his stirrups.

Captain Codd rode along the ranks to quieten the noise of throat clearing and spitting that expressed contempt for such a display. 'Enough!' He roared. any more of this and you will get fourteen days field punishment, the lot of you!'

Instant silence followed except for the jingling of bits and the stamping of hoofs.

Ramses rode to Derek's side. 'You will recall the council agreed we should go first to the castle of Sir Humphrey Swiftblade. Lady Frederika and I think that correct, what is your opinion?'

Derek had no idea what he was supposed to do or how he could escape, he nodded.

Ramses passed his order to the Captain and they moved off along the stony road that was the main route to the north. Derek prepared mentally for a day of discomfort, but he would not gallop, no matter what anyone else did.

Hours later they were about ten miles from the city gate, on an unmade track, and came at last to where thick forest grew on either side of the road. Frederika called Gus to ride alongside with the two pack horses he was leading so she could exchange her spear for a bow and a bag of arrows.

The captain halted their march for a few minutes while the foot soldiers strung their bows and once again checked the arrows they carried.

When the sun was at its height they came to a stream which crossed the road under a stone bridge. The stream wandered over a clearing before disappearing again into the forest.

Captain Codd ordered the wagons to be pulled off the track so the horses could rest and graze.

It was time for lunch. Sentries were posted. They scouted a short distance into the forest watching for hostile movements. Their arrows were set and the bows half drawn. Others were put to gathering fuel and lighting fires while the cover of a wagon was thrown back to reveal packages and bags of food.

Derek dismounted with Gus' help. This was noted but no one made disapproving noises, they remembered the threat of fourteen days field punishment. Derek walked stiffly to a tree and sat with his back to it.

Ramses was too restless to wait in camp while the food was cooking and had trotted off on his horse with the scouts to a point where the road curved to avoid a large boulder. Those who had ridden this way before knew there was a long, stretch of forest crowding the road from that point, an ideal spot for an ambush.

A few minutes later Derek heard the ring and clash of metal against metal, then there were screams.

Frederika ran towards her horse while shouting for Derek to follow. Gus was close by and she roared at him too as she danced round her skittish horse, one foot on the ground the other in the stirrup. 'Come on, Gus!' she cried, 'Help the manager on to his horse.'

Derek didn't want to ride anywhere, especially not towards a battle. Besides he and the mare still didn't like each other. Gus helped him on.

Frederika mounted and advanced towards Derek's mare which was as excited as her own horse at the noise and the sight of troopers mounting in haste.

'Keep open order,' roared Captain Codd it may be a trick or an ambush. You, sergeants, make sure the infantry follow on.' He and his troopers galloped towards the road scattering camp fires and upsetting cooking pots as they went. They were soon out of sight.

Frederika checked her fast moving horse. She cried, 'Manager, you don't have any armor or a sword. I can't take you and I can't leave you. Sir Nigel told us to look after you. He's tired of losing managers.'

Around them the foot soldiers were falling into ranks under the direction of a sergeant. It seemed orderly and secure so Derek thought he might be safer in their company than that of the warlike Frederika. If the soldiers were to march towards the sound of battle it would take a little while and the trouble might have been sorted out by then.

You go ahead,' he said. 'I'll stay with the men.'

Someone grunted and then groaned. A soldier sank to his knees. An arrow had driven into his back and the shaft stood straight up as he hunched forward in agony.

That was only the first. A storm of arrows swept from the woods, rising high and then plunging into the ground or into the bodies of soldiers. Archers hidden in the forest poured out unceasing flights of arrows at the soldiers in the open.

The sergeant was shouting for them to run towards the forest so as to get into shelter where they could come to close combat with their unseen enemy. An arrow bounced off Frederika's helmet as she drove spurs into her horse's flank; it bounded forward and in passing she gave Derek's mount a hard smack with her mailed glove, then caught its bridle and towed them both towards the edge of the forest.

Derek was saved from falling over backwards by the raised back of his saddle, then he grabbed for his horse's mane and held on. The ground was thick with soldiers running in the same direction but Frederika paid no heed and several just escaped from being trampled

They were soon in shelter among a group of trees and bushes and the arrows stopped coming. Frederika jumped off and with help from Gus, who was close by, they got Derek off his horse and standing in a tangle of trees, bushes and horses.

'Keep the manager here, Gus,' ordered Frederika. 'Stay in shelter and make the horses stand on either side so no one can get a fair shot at him, and you stay at the back so you can see any trouble coming. I won't be far away.'

By this time everyone still standing had reached the cover of the forest. They paused, thankful to be free of the arrows for a few minutes and looked round for someone to give orders.

Frederika, taking the place of the missing captain, was soon issuing commands to the survivors and with the sergeant was pushing them into a two deep line so they could advance and flush out their hidden foes.

When everyone was in place she raised her hand for quiet. The forest was silent but for the breathing of the men and the rustle of wind in the tree tops. That was all except for the moaning of the wounded, who still lay in the open. Their enemies made no sound and it was as quiet as though the attack had never happened.

The soldiers began to advance into the forest. Those in the front rank were armed with spears and swords while those behind had bows and arrows at the ready.

The movement had just begun when there was a shout from someone in the forest, followed by a noise of trampling and crashing as bushes were trodden down. The noise advanced so rapidly they were scarcely aware of it before they were overwhelmed. Their attackers burst out from the forest

mounted on what appeared to be huge tusked boars, grey or black and covered with hair. The boars, were not as tall, but much heavier than horses. They squealed as they charged and foam slavered from their chops.

Derek scarcely saw the destruction of the line which was beaten and trampled down because the horses took fright at the sight of these hideous tuskers and their riders. They bolted spreading their own terror and confusion as they knocked men over in their flight.

The rest of the battle was disaster and ruin as the boar riders laid about them with sword and club, beating down covering or running men. He had a glimpse of Frederika standing up in the stirrups and holding her horse from bolting while she hacked away with her sword to save herself.

Their assailants were not men, but creatures covered in body hair with ape-like features. They could have been gorillas, but were far more active and dangerous, for no gorilla ever before had worn war harness or wielded axe and club in battle.

In a moment Frederika was down, though whether dead or thrown from her horse by the speed and weight of the attack he could not guess. There were so many active figures, so much human wreckage in the way, so many plunging beasts, so many muscular, hairy arms rising and falling with weapons in hand, so much blood, that he was unable to see where she lay in this press of warriors.

The next clear picture was of his own coming death. A huge gorilla figure had ridden close, bared its fangs at him in a grin and raised its axe. He dived between the legs of its boar and came out the other side from where he saw the mounted troopers galloping back into the clearing as hard as they could drive their horses. It was the moment to sprint towards them and hope not to be ridden down. What the horsemen could do against these creatures and their terrible weapons did not enter his mind; instead it was filled with panic and the need to run and run until he was safely back home where they could no longer find him.

Something brutally hard hit him on the side of the head. He fell, and that was the last he saw of the lost battle.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Captured by Apes**

Derek's next memory was of spiky plants slapping him in the face. He pulled back to escape this punishment and opened his eyes. He was looking at the belly of a beast, and the ground which was moving along about a meter below his jolting head.

He had been laid face down across the back of a boar, in front of the rider. This creature was guiding the boar with one hand and with the other had bunched the back of his jacket and was holding it to keep him from sliding off.

Everything hurt. The ape had bony, hairy knees. The saddle blanket felt like sand-paper; the bristles of the boar prickled his skin. His head ached and every now and then his face would be scraped by

another bush as they passed. He wriggled to seek a position, less painful, there was none, and his efforts were rewarded with a blow on the side of the head that made him groan and wish yet again that Mr Codd had recruited someone else.

'Be still!' grumbled a stony voice. 'I might kill you, but doctor said he wanted to talk to manager.'

Derek froze into position. He was a captive being taken somewhere, surrounded by apes and boars. The apes had finished business for the day and now were riding through the forest. They were not concerned to find a path but pushed straight through the bushes and undergrowth, turning aside only for trees.

Moving his head as far as he was able Derek could see another part of his nightmare. Grey, furry creatures were bounding through the bushes with them. They were more careful in their progress and avoided bushes by hopping round them. These were the archers and carried bows and a quiver of arrows each. Derek stared, wondering why their shape and appearance was so familiar.

Memory clicked into place. They were kangaroos, but different. Kangaroos could not pull or aim a bow. By some witchcraft these had been given arms and hands with five fingers. He turned away, he could no longer look at the creatures of this world into which he had been kidnapped.

He could not see any other prisoners. Frederika had been beaten from her horse but perhaps she and Ramses had survived. He wondered if Mr Codd was alive and could somehow save him.

A long time passed in pain and discomfort before the party halted beside a stream.

The rider bent over in the saddle and lowered Derek to the ground where he collapsed into a heap, scarcely able to move. He shambled on his hands and knees to a tree close by and sat with his back to it waiting for the pain and misery to go away.

His captor also got down and came to loom over Derek. A hairy paw shook Derek. 'Doctor said, get manager,' the owner of the paw rumbled. 'What's a manager?'

Derek thought that explaining the techniques and theories of management to a semi-intelligent ape was beyond him. He closed his eyes again, hoping the monster would go away. However this unlikely seeker after knowledge was not satisfied. He stirred Derek up once more, but harder. 'You tell me what a manager is or I cut you up, then we say to doctor we never seen no manager. He won't know.'

He produced a long thin knife. Its blade had been almost worn away by constant sharpening It was old and greasy. He held it under Derek's nose so that no detail would be missed. Some of his friends came over to watch.

'What's a manager?' repeated the beast, flicking his knife near Derek's throat, 'what's he do?'

'He manages. It's his job to take charge of a company - or a country - and look after all the details and make sure there is a dividend for the shareholders at the end of the year.'

It seemed the ape was not a student of commerce. He became irate and started to grunt at his friends. 'You make fool of me,' he said. 'You talk stupid stuff I no understand. What's companies?'

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