

The Minotaur

A story from the Kingdom of Aarbat

for Ginny, Melissa, Jac, and Patrick

John Gilmer, Jr.

Chapter 1

Strabis

Strabis is a pitiful little town. This place, on the edge of the Kingdom of Aarbat, is close enough to the Northern Wastes to be an attractive target for the orcs and goblins that live there, but too remote to be defended from any Lord with military resources. Nevertheless, peasants live out their miserable lives farming whatever little plot they can around the town. You can find a small general store and tavern there, and also a small church and a graveyard. A big graveyard. The local baronet, Lord Danzig, always has horses ready to ride should a serious force of orcs show up, but for some reason the orcs have left the town alone for the last ten years, though they have raided householders foolish enough to build well outside the town.

So why would I, or anyone else, go to Strabis? The one and only thing notable about the place is a large hill rising above the level plain just a mile to the north. The name "Minotaur Hill" suggests to the brave adventurer the prospect of both danger and treasure. I've heard the story many times in the barrooms of Seleze. Dontig's party of adventurers entered the caves at the base of Minotaur Hill a decade ago. They expected to return laden with treasures, but were never seen again. Some speculate that the minotaur must be particularly powerful, or had very powerful allies. Others say Dontig was an ass, and probably couldn't have kept a party organized in a maze, despite his successes in the dwarf caves of the Great Rock Mountains.

O, yes, I need to introduce myself. My name is Mallard. I know, like a duck. How many times do you suppose I have heard that before? People make fun of my name all the time. You can't fight them all, and I've given up trying. If you carry a sword and somebody makes fun of you, you have to decide whether it's worth fighting about, and if worth fighting, getting killed over it. It's not, and I'm still alive, despite spending four years on all the roads of the Kingdom in escort or convoy jobs. I know well enough that I'm not the biggest or meanest or fastest sword around, and I just try to take it all as a little joke, and pretty soon whoever is amused at my expense gets tired of it and picks on somebody else.

I heard from a friend that another party was in Strabis thinking about making a run at the minotaur. I had been running low on funds after failing to get a steady

convoy job the last four months, so I decided to give it a try. As luck had it, I managed to find a job on a convoy of three wagons to Tonstol, and legged it from there to Strabis in company of a "scout" named Ritzian who had similar plans. I did know the place, having been through several times on the road that connects Tonstol to the port of Freshkill. I'd seen the hill. I'd heard the stories. I figured I'd learn more, and then if the odds didn't seem good, there were other places to go. The real question was the nature of this party that was thinking of pulling off this big job.

Let me tell you about them. I got to town and naturally went to the Simple Maze, where the innkeeper and barman, a chap named Billechik, pointed out the adventurers. Not that they were easy to miss; a more argumentative group I've never met. Ritzian and I wandered over and said we were interested in some action.

It seems like the group had been hanging around Strabis for a while, but not doing anything big, and at the moment only some of them were in town. Rusty was a ranger who seemed competent enough, but odd in some way I've never been able to figure out. Not a big man, but pretty quick. He was light on his feet like you'd expect of a ranger. Grantt was a fighter, pure and simple, and Sir Aurthur was too. It was odd that this Sir Aurthur insisted on the honorific "sir" ("That's 'Sir' Aurthur!") but none of the others seemed to care a whit, and treated him with no special respect. Indeed, none of them seemed to particularly appreciate the others, and they were constantly bickering.

Thorg was a magic user who seemed to have a peculiar fondness for milk. He was not a regular member of the group, but joined them from time to time. He did not claim to be a powerful wizard but was a magic user of some sort, and this would prove helpful indeed. He had wandered the world widely, and had strange tales of purple cows, people that looked like cats, and tours to something called "The Great Falls." None of it made any sense to me, and I can't say I remember any details.

The fifth was one to appreciate. She was a tall, no, not just tall, but a big woman, a cleric of all things, named Augustine. She is also fast enough to have been a good fighter. I would have expected someone like her to have been a member of the Queen's Rangers, but as a cleric she is quite formidable enough. If they could use another sword, I'd join them, and Ritzian found that they could use him too.

The five of them were interested in scouting the area for goblins, which had been encountered in the hill area, and for which a small reward was being offered by Lord Danzig. I asked about the minotaur, but they seemed uninterested. It seemed that goblins and such were the limit of their ambition. I figured that this might not be a big profit undertaking, but a small scale adventure would give me an opportunity to watch and see whether this was a party with which I'd be willing to risk something big, like taking on the minotaur. Ritzian and I signed on for a month.

The next day we set out to climb the hill. I won't bore you with all the details. Ritzian was good at his job. He clambered up and secured ropes to help the rest of us with the climb. We eventually found an old tower that was now inhabited by goblins that shot at us with crossbows. There was no way to get at them, so we eventually wandered back down, taking minor scrapes from falls along the way. Rusty had to fight off a giant frog in one of the ponds, and we finally encountered a squad of goblins, which were set to sleeping by Thorg's magic spell.

Rusty then decided to head off on some private business, but this group didn't seem inclined to tackle anything dangerous enough to require his presence to turn the tide of battle. This indeed turned out to be the case. Rather than head into the caves to search for the minotaur, Grantt and Sir Aurthur led us around the hill. On the way out, we came across a very peculiar sign. It was wooden, perhaps three feet by two, and had clearly been painted and set in place in front of the caves leading into the hill within the last week or so. Most peculiar of all was the message:

"Gone fishing -- Until the 12th of Never -- The Minotaur"

This seemed remarkable to me, but nobody had much to say about it. We just continued our way around Minotaur Hill. Thorg put a whole party of orcs to sleep by magic, and we then killed and looted them. Another group of four fell before our swords. No word of interest in taking on the minotaur, or where he might be, or the opportunity to sneak into the caves and take his treasure while he was away.

When we got back to town, there in from Topaltown, a day's journey to the East, was a magic user named Jazmond. Now, this Jazmond had been part of this party from the very beginning, many years ago, but had decided to quit adventuring and become a lady of means. She had returned to her home in

Topaltown, and has since been to various cities in Aarbat, no doubt trying to catch the eye of some lordly dandy. And she ought to be able to, for she was as attractive as a girl might be short of magic, although there was something about her that seemed a bit strange or dangerous. Apparently she was still unmarried. I did not feel it was my place to inquire, but I let fall to me what I could learn from her conversation with the others. But it wasn't about Jazmond that most of the talk centered. Something very peculiar was happening in Topaltown, something to do with bears.

My experience with bears along the Northern Road to Freshkill was that they were seldom dangerous. There are many black bears in the vicinity of Gildegulch, and you do hear reports from the natives of bear attacks on remote cabins. The cabins are usually those occupied by woodcutters seeking rare lumber for furniture construction, a primary product of both Topaltown and Gildegulch. Many a load of fancy carved chests, bedsteads, and ornamental doors have made the trip to Seleze and lesser cities where the nobility collect luxury goods, and guarding such loads has earned me many guilders over the years. I did once hear of a big brown bear attacking a small party of bandits once, but that was no doubt a tall tale told by a captured bandit trying to talk his way out of an execution. So this story of bear troubles in Topaltown was a surprise. But Jazmond seemed to know some things that I didn't, and others that she really didn't want to talk about.

"I never did like the bears," she stated, after telling us that she had heard about the bear problem in Topaltown.

"What bears?" someone asked.

"Oh, the bears in the area. There are some. There are people that like them, but I never did."

At this point, I made my observations on bears known, and asked Jazmond if the bears near Topaltown were any different from the black ones near Gildegulch.

"Yes, they are actually a variety of colors, not just black. You'll see. If you go. That is, I would guess you would all want to go and help, since there's a reward. But like I said, I don't like bears. I'm heading for Tonstol."

Nobody asked much more about the bears, and Jazmond clearly didn't want to say any more on the subject, and retired to her room soon after. The others were by then engaged in talking about the prospect of a reward. As if on cue, two other

members of the party entered the tavern, and took up the discussion and excitement.

Ceara is a bit peculiar, with bright red hair and green eyes. She seems to have elvish features, and is a magic user with a familiar that looks a bit like a miniature dragon. She called it a dragonet. Rusty came in with her. Perhaps that had been his mission, to gather the party together.

We now had a group that could venture against the minotaur with a fair chance of success. Yet, all anyone could talk about was this supposed reward, for a bear problem that seemed both odd and unlikely. It was resolved that we would go to Topaltown and seek the reward, setting out early the next morning.

The trip to Topaltown is a day's travel if you have horses and wagons. On foot, we got only two thirds of the way before needing to camp. The road was deserted except for a merchant hastening in the opposite direction. At sunrise we continued, crossing over the bridge into town at about noon.

Chapter 2

Topaltown

Naturally, we went directly to the local tavern. Topaltown is a bit larger than Strabis, and some of the local merchants have become wealthy from the furniture trade. Farming is minimal. Topaltown earns money from lumber and wooden goods and imports most of its food from towns like Strabis. There are no beggars, and very few of the poorer sort. It's usually a very pleasant stop, and often the merchants I have traveled with prefer its overnight accommodations to most others. They then often travel through the night past Strabis to make Tonstol in one long journey instead of stopping. It's dangerous to do this traveling through the night unless well provided with guards due to the possible encounters with orc scouting parties. But the point here is, Tevya's tavern was large, had nice rooms, good food, and was expensive. The establishment did not tolerate rowdy types, and this was as the merchants who made up most of the visitors, preferred it. It was what they paid for. Merchants have enough to worry about without having barroom brawls and loud gambling parties.

So, it was quite a surprise to see several boys, I would say perhaps 8 to 11 years old, clustered near the doorway to the tavern. They were engaged in a dispute over some trivial matter, and were yelling at each other. One showed signs of having recently been in a fight. As we approached, one of them turned to look at Grantt, who was leading us to the door. Instead of stepping aside politely as you would expect, he jumped forward and delivered a swift kick to Grantt's shin, then ran. The others laughed, and one stuck out his tongue as another made a rude gesture inappropriate for one of such tender years. They then ran off jeering, as we stood in shocked surprise.

There was nothing to do but enter. I could tell that everyone was a bit shaken by this reception. Thorg ordered a saucer of milk, and Rusty ordered a cup of the same. This was odd, but odder still was that Rusty then threw the cup of milk at the bartender, claiming it was spoiled. Thorg then tried to intervene and calm things down as the bartender protested and Rusty threatened.

None of us saw it, but while this affair over the milk was happening, one of the boys we had met earlier had quietly sneaked in the door. With a quick lunge and a slice of his knife, he cut loose Thorg's money pouch and scampered for the door. The brat was gone by the time we burst out of the tavern in pursuit. Ritzian

looked around for a while trying to find him, but ultimately returned empty handed and in a bad mood.

At least things calmed down between the barkeeper and Rusty. The barkeeper apologized.

"Things just have not been right here. First the bear problem, now all these brats. The food isn't even as good anymore. I just hope Lord Monson gets something done about it all. Here, mister, I give you full return for the milk, and happily offer anything you wish as a substitute. The spirits are good. Here's some nice Freshkill wine, if you wish."

His words had an immediate effect. We were reminded what our business was. Grantt asked about the bear problem.

"The biggest problem is these brats, as far as I'm concerned. Usually they'd be doing things children normally do, playing out in the woods by the stream, helping their parents with the livestock or other chores, or learning the arts of furniture making, or whatever. The bears haven't been in town, at least not that I've seen. But they do say there's some problem, and that they have made the woods too dangerous for the children. I guess that's why they are here pestering us."

Rusty stated that we were in town because we had heard about a bear problem, and that there was supposed to be a reward.

"Go see Lord Monson, I hear he has indeed put up some sort of reward. But, first you will want a meal. Strabis is where you have come from?" He was very helpful, and saw that the barmaids brought us plenty to eat and drink. We were not further interrupted by the troublesome boys either, but I suspected we had not seen the last of those little rats.

After our meal, Grantt, Rusty, and Thorg set off to visit Lord Monson. Ceara decided to scout the woods near town and see what she might find. The rest of us planned to go with the others to the church after Grantt and company talked to the Lord Monson. Augustine suggested that the priest might have some useful information for us, and should we be injured, it would be well to have paid him a friendly visit beforehand. So, I waited with Ritzian near the door as the three of them left, and saw them enter a large and rather elegant dwelling nearby.

Meanwhile, the streets were not quiet. I saw a number of children running about, not at play, but purposefully, and occasionally clustering in a group before dispersing, as if organizing further trouble. Nor was I wrong. As we all got to the church, we spotted a ring of about a dozen of these rascals, including three girls. Four boys were tormenting a dog, which they were pulling in different directions by the poor creature's limbs as it howled piteously.

Rusty stepped towards them, and asked, "Are any of you not mean?" Thorg, spotting the thief who had made off with his money pouch, also stepped forward, demanding that the boy, who was pulling on the dog's hind leg and tail, hand up his pouch. The boys dropped the dog and backed up, and glared with a sullen silence.

Finally, one of the girls looked Rusty in the eye, and said "I'm not mean."

Immediately, one of the boys unleashed a big kick into her back, sending her sprawling into the mud in front of Rusty. They all then laughed and ran away a short distance. Rusty helped the girl up, brushed off some of the mud, and asked her name.

"I'm Mishpa," said the crying girl, "They are bad, but I'm bad too. I don't know why. I'm just so sad. My friend even hates me."

Rusty tried to comfort her, and Mishpa followed her to the church door, where Rusty knocked.

We waited outside, keeping an eye out for the troublesome children. Many had left by now, but a cluster of two boys and a girl stood maybe fifty feet away making faces and rude gestures at us.

In the distance I spotted Ceara making her way back into town. But as she approached within a hundred yards, suddenly she was hit on the back of the head by some sort of splattering missile, which sent her toppling forward. I rushed toward her, but she seemed to be healthy enough. The object was a mudball, and soon there were others thrown at us from, as you no doubt guessed, the little hellions of the town.

Just then, Sir Aurthur came around the corner from the tavern, and was caught full in the face by a mudball, then by two more to the body. The little monsters were coming daringly close, and he lunged and caught one of them, one of the smaller ones. He pushed the boy down into the mud, making sure his face

was immersed. The little cretin didn't like it much. But his fellows, far from being intimidated by this show of force, just jeered, now at their brother as well as at us, and stooped to prepare more mudballs.

Ceara leaned down and helped the little boy out of the mud. But Sir Aurthur, still angry, grabbed him by his shirt front, lifted him up, and threw him again down into the mud. He was crying now, but the other children just laughed, and threw another volley of four mudballs.

The church door cracked open. When the priest saw us, he opened it wider and hastily admitted us, closing it quickly as more mudballs pounded the portal and splattered some debris into the church. We were in an antechamber in which there was space to brush off muddy garments, and a junior cleric was sent to fetch some wet towels so we could wash away the worst of the mess. There were a lot of unpleasant mutterings about these children, but we all realized that they are not technically monsters; you cannot just shoot them down like you would goblins or rats.

After seeing to our cleanliness as best he could, Father Eliab invited us in through the sanctuary to a room at the back that he used as a study. As we went, he made us welcome to come worship here whenever we wished, and pointed out the bowl standing near the front into which one could make offerings to assist the work of the Church.

Rusty summarized what he, Grantt, and Thorg had learned from Lord Monson. The bear problem actually was related to the problem with the children. These were not really true bears, as one normally thinks of such, but a smaller creature, bear like in appearance, with magical powers, and which were usually quite friendly and helpful. Normally these particular bears were actually guardians of the children and kept watch over them and played with them, often all day, in a part of the woods northwest of town along the river.

For some reason the bears had recently turned hostile, and consequently the children no longer ventured out of town and had become most unpleasant and unruly. A considerable reward was being offered to anyone who could solve the problem.

As Rusty was speaking I could see a pained expression pass over Father Eliab's face, and he squirmed uncomfortably. When Rusty stopped, he remained silent for a moment, seeming to have difficulty deciding what to say.

Finally, he spoke. "I really don't believe in these so-called bears," he began. "There is something out there in the forest, yes, I admit that. But it is some kind of old magic or worse, and I'm very suspicious of it. I have always felt that it was very foolish of parents in this town to trust their precious children to the influence of these things, be they bears or demons, and I have said so. It has not been what anybody wanted to hear. They like being able to shoo their children out to the woods and think them safe, and conveniently out of the way, so that they can ply their trades with less interruption, and thus make more money."

"Well, if they are not bears, are they demons as you say? Why would demons actually help the children, even for a short while?" asked Rusty.

I could see that pained expression again. "Well, maybe 'demon' isn't quite the right word for them," Father Eliab admitted. "They are somewhat more like heathen gods. One is supposed to be responsible for weather, another for happiness, and perhaps there are others for love and war, for all I know. There are supposed to be many of them, maybe a dozen, all of different colors and characteristics."

He continued, "Oh, the children do talk about them, and you'd think from what they say that these 'bears,' for so they style themselves, are magically able to remove any problem, calm every fear, and even relieve pain. Just like the old heathen gods, whose names I also shall not utter. As far as I know or have heard, they do not demand worship, or actually call themselves gods, but it is all too close to the nature of heathen gods to my liking. I have written. Oh yes, I have written the bishop, but he says 'What harm do they do?' and ignores my concerns. I have written the archbishop, but receive no replies. I tell you, something is wrong, and now we are seeing the fruits of our neglect of this evil!"

Father Eliab paused here. He had been speaking more and more loudly and in a more animated fashion, as if just getting started on a sermon that touched on the essence of Truth. He suddenly seemed to realize that he was saying more than he should, or perhaps to the wrong people.

He finally continued, "So, you are going to try and fix this problem for Lord Monson? Well, be careful, it may be the very devil himself behind it." Father Eliab offered what aid he might, admitting that he would have to send for help to Tonstol if an exorcism or something similarly serious was needed. He did offer Augustine some holy water, after eyeing her a bit suspiciously.

We found that Mishpa had slipped away while we were with Father Eliab. By this time the afternoon light was starting to fade, so we headed back to the tavern. Thankfully, the plague of children was gone. Probably gone home to harass their parents into feeding them cookies and cake. It was late enough to consider the day's work done, but we continued to ponder and discuss this peculiar problem. The bartender was no help, saying that he doesn't want to talk about this particular issue, that is, concerning "bears." But he had several stories about terrible children that left us in do doubt of his dissatisfaction with the state of things, and we could well assume he spoke for most of the town.

Chapter 3

Into the Woods

We could think of no better approach than to go directly to where the problem was said to be, in the woods along the river northwest of town, where the children were accustomed to play in the company of these “bear” creatures. We rose early. Rusty found Mishpa curled up in an old blanket sleeping just outside his door. Apparently she was trying to avoid the other children. We let her join us for breakfast. She told Rusty sadly, "My friend was Sun Bear, but she doesn't like me anymore." We tried to ask some questions, but she seemed to decide then not to talk further. Sir Aurthur slipped her a dozen silver coins, and she brightened up again, said "Thank you," and ran off.

We were all a bit nervous. I was thinking, if these things really are ancient gods, even the less powerful ones, and they are angry, we could be in big trouble. We set out up the path along the river, into the woods. This would normally have been a pleasant walk, with the river gurgling nearby. The woods were not the tangle of vines, scrub, and trees usual around this region. There was very little underbrush, and what there was looked organized, as if someone was keeping a park. If anything, this made me even more nervous. It was foreign, as if a place pretending to be a forest but actually a trap constructed by some malign magician. For once, I was glad to be in the back, bringing up the rear. I could see that there was a more lighted area up ahead, a clearing perhaps, toward which we were cautiously moving.

Suddenly movement at the front stopped, and I could see through those ahead something purple in color, and about the size of a large bear cub. It may have jumped out of some of the shrubbery that came close to the path on the left. Or maybe it just appeared from thin air. I heard a gasp, and a yell from someone. Then I heard the “bear” itself speak, in a rather high but unpleasant voice that sounded a bit like the urchins in the town.

"What's the big idea? We don't care for you coming in here!"

I think I heard someone at the front ask the thing what it was, but about that time I was shocked to see that there were two more of them there. One was yellow and another was blue. Thorg was sort of bent over like he was sick, and it seemed that one of the bears had done something to him. Just about then a dark cloud

rolled over the sun in a way that did not feel like a coincidence, and I heard a lightning bolt blast nearby up ahead. My feet were contemplating a retreat.

Someone asked the bears, "What do you want?"

"Nothing. We don't want anything," a bear replied.

"Yeah, we just don't care!" said another.

"Rain or shine, it's just fine. Ruin your hair? We don't care!" uttered the third one.

One thing was certain, these were not silent bears. Once they got started, they had plenty to say. The basic theme seemed to be an indifference to human suffering, and even a willingness to help bring it on.

"Run with scissors? We don't care! Stab you belly? We don't care! We don't care! We don't care! We don't care!"

The blue one said, "Wouldn't it be a shame if a lightning bolt came down and hit these pitiful people!" Just then, indeed, another lightning bolt hit a nearby tree. I just about jumped out of my skin, and I saw others start too.

The bears though this was terribly funny. "Blown to cinders? We don't care! Zapped from heaven? We don't care!" All of them joined in for the chorus. "We don't care! We don't care! We don't care!"

By this time I had maneuvered into a better position. Still making sure I was in the back, I was able to see the yellow one clearly. It was standing on its hind legs as if this was its natural pose, and I saw that on its white rounded belly was a mark that looked like a sunburst symbol. Was it a tattoo or branding? Now I could also see the blue one which also had a white belly and some kind of mark thereon as well. One thing was sure: these were not ordinary bears. Whether they were gods or demons, they didn't act like our party gave them any reason for concern, small though they might be. Nobody pulled out a weapon, which was probably fortunate. If they were still talking, they were not blasting us away with their powers. At least, not yet.

Augustine was yet bold enough to pursue further dialog. "But you are supposed to be friends of the children! What has happened?"

"Didn't you understand? We just don't care!" said the purple bear.

"I'm mad enough for another lightning bolt," said the Blue bear, "And I won't care who it hits, either!"

"If I have to hug one more kid, I think I'll throw up! And I don't care too much for you people either, added the purple bear."

"We don't care! We don't care! We don't care!" came the inevitable chorus.

"But why?" asked Rusty.

"If everything good and sweet in your world was taken away, you wouldn't care either!" said the yellow bear. "Why should I care if the sun shines?"

"Why should I care if you feel bad?" added the purple bear.

"Why should I care if the thunder scares you? Added the blue bear, "In fact.." But he never finished in order to join the chorus of "We don't care! We don't care! We don't care!"

"What's this about goodness and sweetness?" asked Thorg, "What is it that was taken away?"

"Go away and leave us alone!" The bear paused.

Then, "Wait, we do care about that," said the yellow bear.

"The cotton. It's gone. Without the cotton candy, how can anybody expect us to be sweet?" added the blue bear.

"The fairies won't make it for us anymore," stated the purple bear, "and without it, well, we just don't care about anything!"

"We don't care! We don't care! We don't care!" came the refrain.

Thorg was onto something; I could tell. "Why don't the fairies give you this, uh, cotton candy anymore?" he asked. "Maybe we could help. Where can we find them?"

This seemed to puzzle the bears, as if it was something none of them would ever have thought of. "So much for them being gods," I thought.

"I don't know why," stated the yellow bear with a rather puzzled tone.

"They always bring it to us, but all of a sudden, they just stopped," said the purple bear, as if this was the first time he had heard such questions. "If we ever get a hold of cotton candy again, we'll stockpile enough to make a world out of it! Then let them try cutting it off it again!"

"They live further up the valley," said the blue bear testily. "All I care about, if I ever see one of those fairies again, it had better give us some more cotton candy, or else!" I heard a rumble of thunder, and had no trouble figuring out what he meant.

"We used to call them when we wanted more cotton candy," stated the purple bear. There's a rhyme you have to say. But they never come anymore. Maybe it's time we went looking for them! No cotton candy, and I think there's going to be some fairies with some big, very big, problems!"

"Maybe it would be better if we went and asked them first," suggested Thorg, trying to calm them down. "We can tell you what we find out. What was that rhyme?"

The three bears said it together in a sing song voice:
"Good fairy bright and small and light;
Please share with us your sweet delight!"

"But they don't come anymore." said the purple bear, frowning again.

"We couldn't just say it anywhere, though," said the blue bear. "We had to stand in a circle holding hands and dance around singing." He paused. "But you'll have to look for them up in the valley, where the flowers are."

"There are flowers everywhere, you can't just tell him to look for flowers!" replied the yellow bear, with irritation.

"Oh yeah? Just how many flowers do you see today, Sun Bear?" demanded the purple bear. "Normally, yeah, but with Mister Storm Bear here flattening and

zapping everything, how many flowers do you see?" Turning to us he said, "Look for some really big toadstools. Watch out though. They bite."

I could see the yellow bear looking venomously at him, planning some kind of reply. Tempers were rising, but fortunately not at us. As Thorg led us onwards, I could hear another bear or two add their voices to the discussion, and heard an ominous roll of thunder. Glancing back, I saw a red bear arguing with the purple one, and then we passed around a bend and they were finally out of sight. I wondered whether the purple bear was referring to the fairies or the toadstools with that last comment about biting. Maybe both!

The path continued beside the river. We passed a large meadow, which was the lighter area we could see ahead just before we encountered the bears. Beyond that, the woods became more like a normal forest. Now that I was looking for it, I did notice that what few flowers there were along the path were wilted or dead, and in one case apparently blasted by a lightning bolt that had struck and split a nearby tree. The landscape was looking wilder.

We came upon a stand of toadstools that were indeed quite large, growing about two feet high. I quickly looked to see if they were violet fungus or shriekers, but they were an unfamiliar type. I saw Rusty ahead showing similar caution, so I didn't say anything. I was so thankful to have passed those dangerous bears with no harm done, that I was quite willing to take my chances with unfamiliar fungi.

Up ahead, Thorg consulted with Rusty and Augustine on the words of the rhyme. Finally, the others moved back as he approached the toadstool nearest the path. "Good fairy bright and small and light, Please share with us your sweet delight." he chanted, with somewhat less enthusiasm or rhythm than the bears had managed.

We waited. He looked at Rusty. Rusty looked at Augustine, and Augustine looked at Thorg. The rest of us just watched Thorg. Nobody said anything. It looked like Thorg was nerving himself up to try again, when suddenly a fairy popped into view on top of the toadstool.

I don't know if you have ever seen a fairy. Amazingly enough, this one looked just like what you'd expect. She was tiny, about a foot in height. She had a thin but shapely build, and from her back jutted out two wings somewhat like those of a horsefly, though much larger. She wore a small tight outfit that was a light pinkish in color, covered by something that looked like a flowing robe or cloak

made of a diaphanous blue material as transparent as her wings. Her expression and attitude did not seem consistent with her delicate appearance.

She addressed herself to Thorg. "You're not a bear. What do you want, you big louse?"

"We were wondering why you don't make cotton candy for the bears." stated Thorg.

"What's it to you?" she snapped. Her patience seemed to be rather short.

"The bears are unhappy, and they are being unpleasant to the children, and the whole town is upset!" said Rusty hurriedly.

The fairy looked at him. "Well that's just too bad, isn't it!" she said. "There's no cotton candy! We're not making it anymore. And we are not going to be answering stupid rhymes to come anymore, either. I just came to see who was dumb enough to try." The fairy, who had been sitting on the toadstool, started to get up, about to leave.

Thorg quickly asked, "We wondered why. Is there any reason? Maybe there's some way we can help."

The fairy gave our assemblage a scornful scan. "No honey, no cotton candy. It's as simple as that." Turning to depart, she was interrupted by Thorg again.

"Where do you get the honey?"

The fairy turned back to us. "Didn't you ever learn where honey comes from? Humans can be so stupid! Bees make honey! Or, at least they are supposed to. But now, no honey! So, we can't spin it to make cotton candy."

"Just where are these bees?" asked Rusty.

"Not just any old bees," the fairy replied. "Well, I suppose you can try, if you find the right ones. But don't be surprised if you get stung to death. Sue Bee is powerful mad these days. Kicked out all the drones, she did. She let us fairies know that there wasn't going to be any honey and there was no sense asking. She's not going to be happy to see your lot."

"Sue Bee?" Thorg asked.

"Yes, Sue Bee! She's the queen. Don't you know anything about bees?"

"Where can we find this Sue Bee?" asked Rusty.

"At her hive, of course," replied the fairy. "And I don't suppose you know where that is either, do you? Why should you? You don't know anything else. Just keep going up this path. You'll see it. You should hear it before you see it, and that might give you time to change your mind like sensible people and go back to your stupid town and your stupid bears and your stupid children."

With that, she apparently had said as much as she wanted, and had tired of the conversation. With a snap of her fingers and a flutter of her wings, she suddenly vanished, leaving us standing there staring at the now vacant toadstool.

We all looked at each other. There was nothing much to be said. "Onward up the path then," said Augustine. So on we went.

Chapter 4

To the Source of the Trouble

Fairies must have better hearing than humans. We had not a hint of anything ahead when we came around a large boulder, and there in front of us was, unmistakably, a bee hive. And what a bee hive it was! It looked about the shape you would expect, like a rounded off pyramid with a step-like structure, gray in color. But the scale was colossal, reaching maybe thirty feet above the ground!

At the entrance, a hole about three feet in diameter, were two creatures that could only vaguely be described as bees. They each stood upright on four legs, about four feet tall. The striped abdomen was topped by a humanlike body with normal arms, and a vaguely girlish head. Each wore a decorated vest covering the torso. I never did see how the vest made way for the wings. Each held a small bow, and had a sling of arrows over her shoulder. A headband secured a large feather sticking up more or less vertically.

We were still gaping at these strange creatures when one of them spotted us and buzzed angrily to where we stood. "Who dares approach the hive?" she demanded.

Thorg, who seemed to be assuming the responsibilities as spokesman, made an explanation. "We are here to see Sue Bee. The fairy told us she is the queen of the hive."

"That's Her Majesty, Sue Bee, to you!" answered the bee. "Why do you want to see her?"

"The fairy told us that they cannot get any honey. They used to get honey from Her Majesty, Sue Bee, and that there is no more honey. We came to ask why."

"Well, you are right about that!" answered the bee crossly. I could see the stinger at the end of her abdomen flexing a bit. Glancing toward the hive, I saw that four more bees of similar appearance had appeared from inside, and another had buzzed in from the north. "Why should I trouble our great queen over your question? Why should you and your colony be permitted to remain this close to our hive, on our territory?"

Rusty replied, "Maybe we can help. If we find out why there is no honey, perhaps there is something that can be done."

"Not likely," answered the bee.

"Would Her Majesty, Sue Bee, be pleased to hear that you turned away someone who might help?" Augustine questioned.

This gave the bee pause. I noticed that the bees near the hive, by now numbering a dozen, had their little bows out. One of them was touching an arrow to the end of her stinger, I suppose poisoning it for use in the near future. I wondered how fast these bees could fly, relative to a person running on foot.

Finally, the bee replied, "I will send word to Her Majesty. Wait here. Come no closer to the hive." With that, she flew back to the entrance, did a little dance as the others watched, and entered the hole. I was pleased to see the other bees calm down, and put away their bows.

Eventually, the bees near the entrance suddenly moved rapidly to form up in two rows, and beat their wings rhythmically. Sure enough, this announced the appearance of the queen, who, walked regally out of the entrance, followed by the messenger. All of the bees bowed as they continued thrumming. Queen Sue Bee did a quick shuffle of her feet, and there was silence.

She looked much like the others, but was taller at five feet. She had long black hair falling in plaits from the sides of her head. She wore an elaborately beaded headband with two large feathers instead of just one. Her abdomen was larger, and the vest she wore was covered with fringe and beading. In one hand she carried what appeared to be a wooden mace, inscribed with deep radial grooves on its head.

"Bring forth the prisoners!" she commanded. The messenger bee then flew to us, and demanded that we approach. "Draw no weapons, and give all respect to Her Majesty," the bee ordered. We approached. As we did so, the guardian bees, now about twenty in number, surrounded us.

"What is this you request?" Sue Bee demanded.

"Your Majesty, we have come to ask why the fairies receive no honey," Thorg answered.

Sue Bee laughed. Not a sweet, kind laugh, but one with ominous overtones. "We are not amused. Cannot you see? There are no flowers! We cannot make honey without nectar from flowers. You think the fairies have problems. What about us? How long do you think we can get along without flowers? We do of course have honey in reserve, but if you think I'm going to give any to the fairies, who can live without it, you are mistaken! And it would be foolish, very foolish, for you to think you and your trifling band could take it from us!" With that, she did a few taps of her feet, and all the guard bees buzzed angrily to reinforce her point.

"Why are there no flowers?" asked Thorg.

"Mother Nature is angry. It is she who rules all nature. If she is happy, flowers bloom, bees can collect nectar, and all is right with the world. If she is angry, then, well, there are no flowers. Look around! There are no flowers, so she must be angry. Very angry."

I stared at Augustine. I suspected that she was thinking of denouncing Mother Nature as a false god, but fortunately, she thought better of it and held her tongue. Rusty continued with the inevitable next question. "Why is Mother Nature angry?"

"How should I know?" answered Sue Bee. "Do you think even I, the Queen of Bees, would question Mother Nature?"

"Let me get this straight," said Thorg. "The children in town are behaving like brats because the bears are mad. The bears are mad because there is no cotton candy from the fairies. The fairies can't make the cotton candy because there is no honey. You can't make honey because there are no flowers because Mother Nature is angry. And now, we need to find out why Mother Nature is angry."

"If you dare," replied Sue Bee.

There was a silence. I didn't like the sound of this. We had wondered if the bears might be minor gods or demons, but there was no question that this Mother Nature had to be a goddess, and a major, powerful deity at that. Sue Bee obviously

had made a good point. Who would dare approach Mother Nature? Especially an angry Mother Nature. I dreaded to hear what I knew must come next.

"So, where can we find Mother Nature?" asked Thorg.

"She sometimes visits a cottage near the head of the draw," replied Sue Bee. "You might find her there. But, I remind you that she is angry. I wouldn't try to surprise her. If you should somehow succeed in finding the reason for her anger, and if there is some offering, even honey, that might appease her, do return to let me know. We must have flowers! This is the time of year they should be in full bloom. Go. Find out what you can. Maybe your destruction will appease Mother Nature, and she will restore the flowers again."

So off we went, further upstream, but hardly encouraged. As we walked we could observe what Sue Bee had said. Dead flowers were all about. Large ones, small ones, faded ones, and droopy ones. Not a single flower was bright and beautiful. The creek gurgled over small waterfalls and the trees were brilliant green with spring growth, but not a healthy flower was to be seen. We approached higher elevations, and the countryside gradually changed from forest to low scrub and mixed trees, many of them fruit trees. And many, many dead flowers.

"Hey, this is a garden!" exclaimed Rusty, and so it was. I could now see that the low scrub was organized into hedges, and there were paths with not just random rocks, but flagstones. The trees were of course fruit bearing types, and ornamental trimming could be seen in places. Then, there it was. We heard muttering and grumbling, and the source was a small cottage at the far side of the garden. Mother Nature was in residence, and she was indeed angry! As we carefully approached, we could make out some of the words.

"Mess with me, will they? They'll be sorry they did. Oh, will they rue the day! Locusts. That's what we need. Clouds of locusts. And if they think they'll get rain? Ho! Have they got another thing coming! Dust! Dust they shall eat! Mess with me, will they!"

We all looked at each other. Augustine quietly said, "We'd better not surprise her." And we all realized that, in our fear, the last thing we were wanting was to draw attention to ourselves. But this would perhaps lead to disaster when we were discovered. Here we were. All the situation wanted was for Mother Nature to pause, look out her window, and be surprised to find unwanted guests right here in her garden.

Augustine summoned her courage, and called with calculated gentleness, "Oh, Mother Nature!"

Silence. Then, "How dare you! How dare you appear in my presence!"

I heard a rumble of thunder overhead, and Mother Nature appeared at the door, tall and angry, wearing long flowing robes a dark cloudy gray in color. There was a coronet of what was unmistakably poison ivy on her head. We were all turning to run, futile though that might be, when she suddenly said in a calmer voice, "Oh! Wait. Who are you?"

We stopped, and turned, trembling, to face her. "I thought you were Molly, one of those horrible milkmaids," continued Mother Nature. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I'm Augustine, and this is Rusty, Thorg, Sir Aurthur, Grantt, Ceara, Ritzian, and Mallard."

"We came to ask why there are no flowers," added Thorg. "Sue Bee told us it was because you are angry."

"Angry? I am angry!" replied Mother Nature, drawing herself up to her full towering height of six feet or so. "Those accursed milkmaids brought me sour milk! How can I make pudding with sour milk? How dare they try to slip that past me! It's not nice," she paused for emphasis, "to fool Mother Nature. How dare they! Who do they think they are, the fount of all wisdom? Greater gods? Imagine, bringing sour milk to Mother Nature. I won't have it! They shall be sorry they showed themselves in my presence with such despicable avarice in their hearts!" Mother Nature seemed inclined to go on in this direction at length, as she had apparently been doing before our arrival and perhaps even for weeks past.

Augustine coughed gently, and Mother Nature paused. "Perhaps there is an explanation," Augustine suggested.

"Maybe the milkmaids, Molly you say, was one? Perhaps they didn't know the milk wasn't good," added Rusty. "The barman in Topaltown offered me a cup of milk and it was sour too."

Mother Nature gave Rusty a sympathetic glance. "You poor dear. Disgusting, isn't it? You see how awful it is. But Tess and Molly surely had to

know that the milk was no good. They are milkmaids! It's their business to know milk!"

"But Mother Nature," interjected Thorg, "They are just young women, are they not? They surely are not as wise and sensitive as you are! Maybe it was a mistake. Did you ask them if they knew the milk was bad?"

"Ha!" replied Mother Nature. "As if they could stand in my presence after that! Molly fled, and that right quickly. I threw a thunderbolt after her, but she got around a bolder and it missed. I could have hunted them down, I suppose, but why would I think it a mistake to bring me sour milk? But you are right. They are indeed foolish young girls. Perhaps I was being hasty."

"We could go and inquire," offered Thorg. "I'm sure there is an explanation. I couldn't imagine them deliberately bringing you bad milk and attempting to deceive you! Surely they would know how foolish that would be. They must have made some kind of mistake."

"There is something in what you say," Mother Nature answered. "Yes. Go, find Molly and Tess. Ask them. Maybe they are innocent after all. But I must have my milk. If they bring me good milk, and explain and apologize for their mistake, maybe things will be all right." She smiled, for the first time during the whole interview. Amazingly, her robe began to show a greenish color. I felt my spirits lift, and a sunbeam flashed down through the clouds. A bird sang in the distance, the first I had heard all day. Perhaps there was hope yet.

"So, where might we find these milkmaids?" asked Thorg.

"Where are the cows?" replied Mother Nature. There was a silence, during which Thorg seemed to figure out that this was a rhetorical question.

She finally helped us. "You really don't know, do you? The cattle graze on the high plain, beyond the head of this little valley. The milkmaids bring the milk to me, and also to the town by the high path. They live in Topaltown, but are more often on the high plain. There is a small shanty where they stay overnight."

So, off we set to find the milkmaids, Molly and Tess. We found them at the door of a small shack not far from the head of the draw. In the distance we could see cattle grazing. Both maids looked unhappy and unkempt, but might have been attractive under better circumstances. One was washing her long dark hair in a

bucket of dirty water. The other, a blonde with a short trim, was whittling halfheartedly on a stick with a large knife. For once we did not seem to be stepping into immediate danger.

"Are you Molly and Tess?" asked Grantt.

"Yeah. What of it?" replied the one with the knife, in a sullen voice.

"We just talked to Mother Nature, and she is very unhappy," stated Rusty.

The two milkmaids looked at each other. The one washing her hair let out a heavy sigh, and started to dry her hair with a ragged towel. The other threw away the stick she was whittling, and stuck her knife in the ground. "It wasn't our fault," she finally said.

"What happened?" asked Thorg.

"Who are you?" replied the milkmaid with the wet hair. Why are you asking about this?"

Thorg introduced himself.

"I'm Molly," she said. "And this is Tess," she added, as Tess glared up at us all.

We all hurriedly introduced ourselves, and Grantt offered the two girls each a cup of drink from his wineskin. We all relaxed a bit. Tess brought some biscuits out from the shack and passed this meager fare around. Apparently they were being as hospitable as they could given their limited resources. Some of us pulled out hardtack, cheese, and some apples, and gave them some. Both girls were eager to take the fruit.

Finally, Tess spoke. "The cattle have not been happy. It's been maybe two weeks now. We noticed that they have been scattered in the mornings, not gathered together as is usual. We have wondered if the orcs were raiding, but they would usually gather for mutual defense if that was the case. I had no idea it was affecting the milk."

"Neither did I," added Molly. "I took a pail to Mother Nature as usual. She smiled and took it, and asked me and Tess to come back for tea late that afternoon."

By then Tess would be back from town. We switch off, you see. It was my turn. But when we started down the path to the garden, we could see a big cloud overhead, and even from a distance, I could hear Mother Nature, angry as a hornet, muttering curses and threats. To my surprise, she was was yelling that we had tried to fool her."

She was mad all right," added Tess. "I wasn't going anywhere near her, I'll tell you that!"

"We didn't dare approach," continued Molly, "but fled back here. We had no idea what was wrong. The next day, we both carried pails to town, for neither of us dared enter the garden. The milkman in town said he had been given bad milk the day before. He tasted what we were bringing him, and said it wasn't much better. He was right, too! In the time it took us to carry the milk to town, it was starting to go bad. That's when we realized what Mother Nature must have been angry about."

"We've continued to take milk to town, but we are paid very little for it, because it's not much good," added Tess. "They don't want a lot of it either. The children won't drink it, and they say it's our fault the children behave so badly. And we've not enough money to buy food. We are not very popular these days. The young man, the young man I like, well , he told me that I'm no better than the milk." Tess began to sob softly.

"No friends now, not much to eat, and we're afraid Mother Nature will come looking for us," said Molly. "We drink a lot of milk. Too much. And it doesn't taste very good either." She paused. "Whatever is bothering the cows, I hope it goes away soon."

"Just what is bothering the cows" asked Thorg.

"Do I look like a druid? How should I know?" snapped Tess.

"Have you ever asked a cow why it was unhappy?" asked Molly.

"Have you?" replied Thorg.

The two milkmaids looked at each other.

"I guess we could try," Tess finally said.

"This is so stupid," said Molly. "But, if you think it will help, I guess we could try."

The two milkmaids got up without enthusiasm, straightened themselves up a bit, and we followed them out onto the pasture toward the cattle. Molly waved a yellow handkerchief like a flag, and one of the nearest cows looked up at us. "Ho, Jersey!" called Molly.

Jersey let out a low rumbling moo, and just stood there.

"She's not happy." stated Tess to the rest of us.

Jersey made a point of slowly walking farther away, requiring us to exert ourselves to finally get close. It took a while. We were now well out onto the plain.

"Ho, Jersey!" called Molly again. The cow turned, and with a resigned air, stood still. We came near. "Are you unhappy?" asked Molly.

Jersey answered with a moo that unmistakably conveyed an irritated and impatient mood.

"You see, she's not contented," Molly told the rest of us. "I wish I knew why."

"You wouldn't be contented either if you had to listen to that creature," stated Jersey.

I don't know who was surprised more. Molly seemed to just about jump out of her clothing. All of us were startled. I was wondering who would pull a trick of throwing his voice under these circumstances, and glanced at Thorg. He saw me, and shrugged. Tess was staring at Jersey. "Did you say that?" she asked, incredulous.

"I did, and I'll say it again," replied the cow. "You wouldn't be contented either if you had to listen to that," she spoke the word with emphasis, "that thing."

I suppose it is natural to be shocked into inattention when confronted with the unexpected. We had received so many such shocks this day that a talking cow would not seem to have been so surprising. Had the milkmaids treated this as a

normal experience, maybe we would have gone along with it as if in everyday life talking cows are a normally encountered phenomenon. But they too were clearly surprised, and left speechless like the rest of us.

Grantt recovered his wits first. "What thing?" he asked Jersey directly.

Jersey swung her ponderous head toward the west, and we all followed her gaze. There in the distance, approaching rapidly with a gait something like a trot or a skip, was some strange, huge, bipedal creature.

I can recall thinking, "What next?" We would soon find out.

Chapter 5

The Minotaur

It is difficult to describe a monster that you have never seen before, and is unlike virtually anything else. The creature was large, with a mostly erect posture, the top of its huge head reaching about ten feet above the ground. It ran on enormous back legs, with a long reptilian tail trailing behind. Its two forearms were minuscule in comparison. It had a mouth large enough to suggest it swallowed its prey whole, although lined with sizable teeth. The most surprising thing was its color, a vivid purple, with a bright green belly. As it came nearer its gait definitely changed to an odd hopping motion as it slowed.

I heard Jersey utter a disgusted low moo, but she did not show signs of fear. We all waited, not knowing what to do, as the thing approached.

I related earlier how surprised we were when the cow Jersey made her initial remark. You would think that the approach of an odd, ungainly, never-before-seen monster would be sufficiently surprising.

But then this huge beast started talking and singing! "Hello boys and girls! And my friend Jersey! Are we all happy today?" As it began to sing, the monster jumped around in time to the song.

"I love you! You love me! We're a happy family!
With a great big hug, and a kiss from me to you...."

Jersey let out another irritated moo, and I admit to a wave of nausea that wrenched my stomach. Most of us just stood in shocked silence. Sir Aurthur let loose a crossbow bolt at the creature's head, but missed, perhaps because of nausea similar to mine. The monster took no notice, but continued its singing and jumping about, until finally Thorg tried to get its attention.

"What are you?" he asked.

The thing's name is Barney" Jersey replied, as Barney, unhearing, continued his inane singing.

"What is it?"

Jersey just gave a moo that conveyed a sense of displeasure. I figured she didn't know, and neither did anybody else.

"Why are you doing that?" yelled Grantt up to Barney, as he paused as if preparing to launch into another round of singing.

Barney stopped, looked down at Grantt, and said, "To entertain the cows, of course. They are my friends! They like singing!"

At this Jersey uttered a moo that left no doubt at her differing perspective on this issue.

But Barney seemed not to hear her. He continued, "The cows have been lonely out here at night, so I have been singing to them."

Now it was crystal clear why the cows were not content. Listening to this Barney creature go on like that would curdle the very milk before it was given! I didn't see anyone with a different opinion. Molly was rolling her eyes, and Tess just stared disgustedly. Jersey was shaking with agitation.

"Just why did you think they were lonely?" asked Augustine.

"Why, because my friend the minotaur has gone away," replied Barney. "He usually sings to them, and guards them from raiding orcs as well. But he has been gone for lots of days, so I came to keep the cows company until he returns. None of the orcs have come around either. I think my singing soothes them, and they go away happy instead of bothering my friends."

"Well, there you have it," said Molly, looking at Thorg. "As long as that minotaur is away, the cows will be afflicted with, with, this creature, and nobody's going to get any milk that's good for anything."

"Where did the minotaur go?" Thorg asked.

Jersey shook her head. Molly and Tess shrugged; they didn't know. We looked at Barney.

"Barney, do you know where the Minotaur is?" asked Thorg.

Barney jumped up and down in delight. "Yes, I know! And now that I have new friends, I need to take you to meet him! My big family is getting bigger!" At this, Barney launched into another round of his favorite song, and I felt my stomach take another lurch.

Barney sang or talked nonsense the whole way. It was a long journey to the north, so it was well that we had gotten an early start that morning, and had stopped for lunch with Tess and Molly. It was late in the afternoon as we approached a sort of wide gully like a miniature canyon, cut into the plain by a southward flowing stream. We could see smoke rising from a campfire within, and Barney headed straight for the spot, the rest of us following. There was no danger of surprise. With Barney both singing and thumping along in a silly skip, the minotaur could not help but hear us coming. When we got to the edge of the gully, he was standing, axe in hand, to meet us.

The scene was actually a peaceful one. There was a fairly large campfire on a sandbar alongside the stream, with something the size of a wild boar roasting on a spit. I could see fishing gear, and a lean-to tent, and some fish hanging from a line. Surely you know what a minotaur looks like. Erect posture, bull's head, quite shaggy, and about seven or eight feet tall. The minotaur seemed to be in a reasonably good mood. He spoke to Barney.

"Barney, what are you doing here? Didn't I tell you not to come within two miles of me? You'll scare the fish. And whoa! Who are these?"

"These are my new friends! They wanted to see you, so I brought them. I'm sorry if I scared the fish for you, but I can't stay. I need to go back to my friends the cows. They will need someone to sing to them tonight. Goodnight! I love you!" And with this he blew us all a big kiss and began to sing again as he skipped away.

Thorg called, "No, wait!" But it was useless. Barney was gone. I could not help but be relieved, although the cows were in for another bad night of it.

"Well," the minotaur said to us, "You might as well come down and have a bite to eat. There's more than enough of this thing to feed a cavalry troop. Tastes like chicken, but I don't really know what it is."

We hesitantly filed down into the gully. The minotaur had resumed his seat on a log near the fire, and picked up a large haunch of meat. The thing roasting

was definitely not a wild boar. It was somewhat like a pig in shape, with a rounded head. Nearby were torn swaths of purple fabric. One piece had a silverish rectangle about a foot square. Nearby was something triangular like an insect antenna folded back on itself to make one of those racks wizards use for hanging their robes.

"It's not human, if that's what you're worried about," said the minotaur. "It was wandering about with three others, speaking gibberish and looking at each others' bellies. I figured it might make a good change from fish for a day. Go ahead; help yourself." He resumed a halfhearted gnawing on the haunch. It appeared that he had already sated his own appetite, which I figured was just as well.

"So, you normally sing to the cows at night?" asked Rusty.

"They love it!" admitted the minotaur. "It's nice for me too. Even for a minotaur. We love mazes, you understand. But it's nice to get out sometimes. It does get lonely in the mountain. Nobody ever comes to see me."

"Nobody comes to see you?" echoed Grantt.

"Well, nobody for a long time. It used to be every few months adventurers would come into the maze, and I'd get to talk with them a while before I'd eat them and take their treasure. But it's now been more than ten years since any adventurers have come to see me." He stopped, and looked at us. "Say, are you people adventurers?"

"No, we aren't adventurers. We are Barney's friends," replied Thorg.

"Oh. Too bad. Well, I'm full anyway. You sure you're not adventurers? You look a lot like adventurers."

"Oh no, we really are Barney's friends, and he wanted us to meet you since you are a friend too," assured Augustine. This seemed to have succeeded in changing the subject.

"Well, Barney isn't really a close friend," said the minotaur. "It's just hard to get him to go away, if you know what I mean. I guess the cows really have had a trial, what with his singing, if you follow me."

We did.

"But with no adventurers coming to see me, well, I just needed to get away and do something different. I don't know if I'm ever going back."

"Oh no!" said Rusty. "You need to go back! The cows really need you. They miss you something awful!"

Thorg then added, "The milkmaids need the cows to be contented. Mother Nature needs the milk, and the bees need for Mother Nature to be happy so flowers will grow. The fairies need the honey from the bees to make cotton candy for the bears, and the bears won't care again until they get it. And only then can the children behave and the town return to peaceful ways. Then maybe adventurers will come to see you again."

I was glad he stopped there without mentioning the reward promised us if we could bring about a solution. The minotaur needed no hint that we might be other than just friends of Barney. But the minotaur was at the other end of the logic.

"What's in it for me?" he asked. "Can you promise that adventurers will come to see me?"

"Oh yes," replied Augustine. "We will tell all the adventurers we meet that, well, should we say that you have lots of treasure?"

"Oh yes, definitely," said the minotaur. "Lots and lots of it. And you can tell them that they will have an exciting adventure, too! You would do that for me? You will get some adventurers to come see me?" The minotaur was now speaking most excitedly, seeming pleased by the prospect of a more interesting future.

Augustine assured him that we would do our best and surely he would have company soon.

He replied, "Well, that is really good of you. It's a fine prospect. You know, maybe I've been on this fishing trip long enough. The cows surely do miss me, and if I'm going to have adventurers come to see me, I need to work on my maze. There are traps to set, bones to clean up, gold to polish.... Why, just thinking about it helps my appetite." He took a big bite of the haunch.

After chewing, and swallowing, he continued. "Tell you what. I'll leave this stuff to you, and I'll get back and see the cows tonight. Be sure to tell those adventurers! I'll be eager to see them!"

With that, he dropped the remnants of his meal, grabbed his axe and fishing gear, and walked off into the night whistling, heading south toward the fields.

Chapter 6

A Happy Ending

We camped there for the night. The roast did indeed taste like chicken, although blander. Only a few of us tried it. The others either helped themselves to some of the fish the minotaur had left, or were content with their rations. The waters of the brook were clear, cool, and clean. The next morning we all bathed in a nearby pool, and breakfasted cheerfully on fish.

We anticipated a good day, and we were in no way disappointed. At least, I wasn't. Here we were, alive after several dangerous moments yesterday, and there was every reason to think that our mission may have been accomplished. Only Sir Aurthur seemed cross, that at having both missed his shot at Barney and not having a chance to fight and kill something. Maybe he should lead the party to go see the minotaur when we get back, I thought.

When we returned to the pasture, the cows were gathered under a small grove of trees, chewing their cuds contentedly. Jersey nodded at us as we tramped past to the milkmaids' shack. Molly greeted us, almost flying into Thorg's arms to give him a hug and a kiss. She then greeted each of the rest of us in similar manner, and I admit to being taken a bit by the bright lass, now so full of life. As soon as she caught her breath, she burst forth with the good news.

"The milk is good! I took a pail to Mother Nature, and she was most pleased! She said that she was sorry for being angry, and look! The flowers are growing again!"

She was right. We had not noticed it but there were millions of tiny flowers, some buttercups, some of clover, all around us, but mostly hidden in the grass.

"Tess has set off for town with two pails, and I'm going to set off soon with another two. Oh, I'm so excited! Thank you, thank you, thank you! I don't know what I can ever do to repay you! If there is anything we can do for you, oh, do let us know. And help yourselves to some milk! Good, rich milk, cooled in the pond! Well, I must set off."

With that, she grabbed two pails, suspended them from the ends of a light yoke that she held across her shoulders, and set off toward the town by way of a

path we had not seen before. I realize now that I should have jumped up, and offered to carry both pails for the lovely lass, and maybe we could have talked on the way to town of this and that. I don't know what clouded my head, but I just sat there with the others, sipping on a cup of the delicious milk.

After a bit, we all somewhat regained our senses, and Augustine said, "It's time we were going. Let's go see Mother Nature."

And that we did. As we approached the garden, the sun appeared to get brighter, and we could hear her singing amidst the birds, who cheerfully provided accompaniment.

She spotted us right away. "Oh, dears, you simply must come and join me for some pudding!" she invited. Mother Nature was radiant, and looked like a tall beautiful damsel that any mortal would be drawn to as moth to a flame. Earlier her beauty was evident, but beneath the severe lines of an older woman of perhaps fifty years. Now she looked as young as the joy of spring itself. Her now vivid green robe flowed around her, and daisies sprouted from the ivy crown encircling her head.

We followed her into her cottage. It was not large, but had an air of spaciousness, and there waiting for us at her table were bowls of pudding, teacakes, scones with marmalade and clotted cream, steaming pots of tea, and small cups of cold rich milk. It was all delicious, and somehow magically invigorating. Mother Nature kept up an entertaining chatter about the birds and flowers, but I don't remember a word of it now, just the sense of peace and joy that had flooded into the world.

Eventually it was time for her to resume her gardening, and as we left we admired the beautiful brightly colored flowers, the artistic hedges and bushes, the little bridge over the pond, and the luminous goldfish swimming therein. The surge of springtime continued into the woods below the garden, and when we reached Queen Sue Bee's hive, we could see out in front of the hive Sue Bee with three bees dressed in impressive black waistcoats and top hats, apparently each doing his best to impress her and complement her. She was loving it, but when we came into view, detached herself from these suitors to receive us graciously.

"The flowers are back!" she announced. "We assume you are responsible this. Mother Nature has smiled on us, and has blessed us with sweet nectar, and has even has invited us into her private garden where she has certain special

flowers that give magic nectar. We are grateful to you. Here, we have something for you.

She directed a nearby worker into the hive, and she soon returned bearing several small wax containers shaped like hexagonal flasks. "This is royal honey," Sure Bee told us. "It is a special gift. The honey has magic curative properties, and will relieve the curse of venom and heal wounds." She paused as one was distributed to each of us. "Now, go with our gratitude. We thank you."

With that, the suitors seemed to know it was time to resume their courtship, and Queen Sue Bee surrendered her attention to their entreaties, dancing this way and that with them as a chorus of workers thrummed with their wings. I was sure she was enjoying it.

As we passed by the toadstools, there was the fairy of our previous acquaintance. She was playing a happy melody on a small violin, and looked up as she concluded the piece when we approached.

"I can't believe you did it! But it appears you have." she called to us. "I'd have saved you some cotton candy, but the bears were simply too crazy with hunger for the stuff. Besides, it probably would not have been good for you. I hear that humans, if they ever eat any, go mad unless they continue to get it. Like the bears. You saw what they were like off their feed. Oh, but I do have something for you. She reached into a small pouch, and flying up into the air, scattered a sparkling dust over our heads. I don't know what it was supposed to do, but it was a pleasing sight. With the single word, "Enjoy!" she then popped into nothingness, disappearing in midair.

"What was that stuff?" asked Grantt.

"Fairy dust, I guess," replied Augustine. "But I don't know what it does." Neither did anyone else, but we were in good spirits and spent no time worrying about it.

Next, we passed the big meadow, and through the trees I could see a ring of children and bears, all dancing, and singing. I spotted Mishpa among them, happy and holding hands with the yellow bear and an orange one I had not seen earlier. They were singing some song about the world being a circle with no beginning and an uncertain end. It wasn't as bad as Barney's singing, and the children seemed happy enough, so we kept on going and emerged into town.

A welcoming committee awaited us. Lord Monson stepped forward, made a short speech of congratulations and appreciation, and delivered to Rusty a large pouch heavy with coins.

Everybody clapped and shouted, but I didn't remember any of that because I caught sight of Molly, there in the crowd, looking back at me. We all retired to the tavern where celebration continued far into the night. Molly joined me in the dancing, and finally in quiet sweet conversation and tender moments when all is right with the world, and blessings seem to overflow the bounds of what we can imagine.

The End.

Postscript

The adventure described in this story took place April 23, 2000 at Woodbourne, Louisa, Virginia. Some liberties have been taken with the details, which were not recalled with the necessary precision for a well told story, but the essence of it is true and really did happen as described. Augustine, Sir Aurthur, and Grantt were played by Ginny, Jac, and Patrick Crawley. Rusty was played by Melissa West, Thorg by Charley Gilmer, and Ceara by Cindy Gilmer. That was now six years ago as I write this. Augustine, Rusty, Grantt, Sir Aurthur, Ceara, and Thorg have not sought adventure in the Kingdom of Aarbat for a long time now. But for many years they did, and this particular expedition seems to have been one of the more memorable ones. That is why I talked Mallard into giving his account of it, and writing it down for you. Cindy helped me a great deal with the manuscript. I hope you have found pleasure in the events recorded here.



Grantt



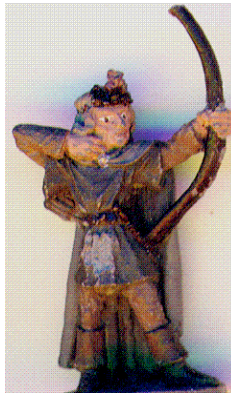
Sir Aurthur



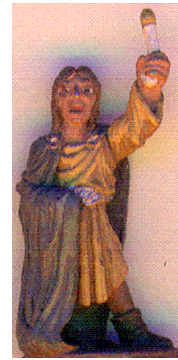
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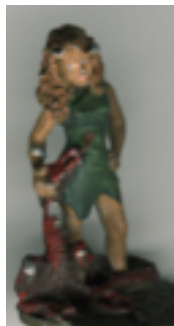
Augustine



Rusty



Thorg



Ceara



Mallard



Ritzian