

Galendor
The Middle of Next Week
(Book III of The Galendor Trilogy)

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Dedication/Acknowledgment

Examples are important. My wife, Joy, has revealed the meaning of true love. My mother, through her many trials has shown what true honesty and charity is. My sister, who shares the same hurts and hang-ups of our youth, still endeavored to raise an intelligent, considerate child, and has exemplified strength. Merideth and 'His Kingdom' are inspired by the artworks of my sister, Carla.

The selfish, wretched examples of people who seek their own truth and damage themselves and everyone around them, also have something to teach. We are all in this sinking boat together. Some struggle to rise above the waters, many choose to just swim in it.

These books have been an attempt to show very real personal conflict and resolution through the lens of a silly fantasy world. I thank all who read them and sincerely hope their message reaches those who could use it.

Chapter One: Be Careful For What You Wish

Resting his lower back against the edge of the kitchen counter, Galendor steadily munched on a big ol' bowl of Tasty Poofs.

“Nyang, nyang, nyang,” he mumbled while chewing with his mouth open. The twofold action expressed delight at having a bowl of goodness, and broke the utter silence of his empty home.

Sir Wicket had taken off to train Doeglen and Ernesto in the finer arts of knighthery. Lil' Red opted to visit Toots and be his guide, and Jessica remained at the castle reuniting with her father.

“Everyone said they'd rest until the middle of next week. Does no one respect the sanctity of goofing off!?” Galendor whined.

Mr. Stove ignited. “Say again, your last.”

“Nah, skip it. I'm feeling a bit blue today. I dreamt of change for so long, yet, I'm ill prepared to deal with it.”

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“Well, get cleaned up, go outside and let the light in, you’ll feel better.” Stove’s cheery voice almost masked his derision. “But, do the cleaning, for real. You take two steps out there in your current state and a feral will surely dig a hole to cover you up.”

“Why everyone gotta be a jester? Have you studied snark from The Book o’ Wicket?” Galendor frowned.

Stove warmly replied, “I believe it was Chapter 2 Verse 4: *If you can’t say something nice, say it as a joke. That way if someone takes offense, you can say ‘just kidding’.*”

Galendor shrugged and headed for the water closet. “Lovely. I’mma get a bath, then visit Garoeth and family.”

* * * *

Yonder Forest buzzed with movement and sound, showing no signs that ‘The Apathy’ had engulfed it days earlier.

“I wonder if anyone or anything will even remember or care about what we did?” Galendor voiced as he strolled the path. “I wonder if there’ll be any change at all?”

Oddly, his mind shifted to a philosophy-snack message he’d cracked open at a restaurant some months earlier—*be careful for what you wish, it might stink.*

* * * *

Outside the lobothian settlement, a site so shocked Galendor, he ducked into some bushes. “Oh man! What unholy non-savoriness is this!?”

A toad dressed *exactly* like Galendor—cape, hat, glasses—led a tour group of humans through the woods.

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“Now ladies and germs,” *wurp*, “we are utmostly going to the righteous lobothian village to score some opportune views of their most triumphant settlement,” *wurp*.

Galendor whispered to himself, “I don’t talk like that! Clearly he misappropriated the five-dollar words.” He didn’t dare leave the bushes until all were out of sight.

* * * *

Sir Wicket stood at the grandstand overlooking the jousting arena at Castle Yorh. His arms were crossed at his chest and, with troubled brow, he barked out, “You can’t focus on the size difference! It shouldn’t even come into play when a knight goes up against a giant troll or a mountainous dragon.”

Don Ernesto looked ever so small perched atop a mighty steed. His little legs couldn’t possibly split to go around the rocker’s midsection, so he sat between its shoulders with his legs straight out, tweezing the equine’s neck. He held a lance twice his size. “Jes, but how many trolls have you actually encountered? Plus, we know de only dragon in existence and der is *no way* anyone would try to slay him.”

Wick clinched his eyes and breathed deep. “Look, just do the work! You want to be a knight...well...this is what knights do, they joust.”

Doeglen and Gwen stood motionless and at the ready on the other end of the field.

Ernesto’s voice rose in frustration, “*Fine!* I will try to hit Doeglen wit de stick, but to what end, I don’ know!”

Wicket clapped his paws. “All right, we’ve no fanfare and I’m not about to try and make a trumpet sound, so... ready...*go!*”

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Doeglen gently tapped his heels against Gwen's haunches, spurring her to an immediate gallop.

Ernesto kicked and whapped and chided his rocker, to no avail. "C'mon ju silly beast! Go, rocky, go!" Nothing, and Doeglen sped ever closer.

In a last ditch panic, Ernesto protracted his claws, leaned way back and sunk them (albeit superficially) into the animal's hind quarter.

His rocker reared, forcing Ernesto to dig into its neck with his foot claws. The rocker bolted forward with Ernesto lying flat out, holding on for dear life.

Doeglen passed, with lance at the ready as if there were someone to hit.

"You people! Get situated and start again!" Wicket pinched the bridge of his muzzle.

Doeglen and Gwen got into position straight away. Ernesto struggled for every movement of his steed. All stood in silence watching the miyeh kick and pull at the rocker to line it up.

Much of his patience expended, Wicket yelled, "Do you need..."

"No, I'm *fine!*" Ernesto fired back.

Wicket continuously slapped his thigh. "Great, now hurry back to your positions. We need to get in as much practice as possible before Doeglen's knighting ceremony." He then mumbled to himself, "Heaven help us if the king wants a show of skill."

Doeglen took position and sat motionless while Ernesto struggled with the futility of riding a rocker. "Do I have to sit on dis ting a certain way?" he questioned.

Wicket closed his eyes and rubbed his neck. "Man, do what you gotta do! Let's just get this done."

Ernesto pawed his way up the rocker's mane and with a hearty, "*Ha Haaa!*" plunked himself between its ears.

Gripping a tuft of mane between his legs, he kicky-kicked at the rocker's cheeks and together, they bolted down the stretch.

Doeglen took the cue and charged.

Wick's eyes widened with hope. "All right, a real joust may be fixin' ta happen here."

The opposing forces drew ever closer, weapons poised to strike. At the critical moment of contact, Ernesto jumped and slid down Doeglen's lance, ganked him in the helmet, then sprang back to his rocker. He showboated by finishing his ride standing up.

Wicket gripped the wood railing in front of him and stared intently at the track below as the participants rallied under the grandstand. Ernesto stood at attention on his rocker's backside, Doeglen sat proudly atop Gwen. Though hidden inside armor, he clearly puffed his chest.

"Why are you so cheery? Technically, Ernesto just took a point from you." Wick lectured.

"It's the first joust where I stayed on Gwen!" Doeglen beamed.

Wicket faced the sky, taking in a deep breath. "Let's get in a couple more rounds then we'll try some fencing."

* * * *

Galendor skipped visiting Garoeth and walked to Hither. The town was ground zero for fanatics. Hawkers wore green clothes and sunglasses and sold rough-hewn dolls shaped like Galendor and his friends.

Some children wore long blue knit hats and acted

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blind while others donned papier-mâché narf masks and red towel capes to mimic Wicket. If not for the fact that *everyone* dressed like him, Galendor thought he'd surely be swarmed. At present, he posed as just another poser.

He ducked into Ye Olde Food Shoppe for refuge and intel. Sara, the proprietor blared loud enough for the whole block to hear, “*Ohhhh Galendor! A bonafide celebrity right here in my store!*”

“*Shhhhhhh!*” Galendor repeatedly pressed his index finger to his lips. “I don't know what's going on out there and it's utmostly freaking me out!”

“Everyone's having 'Gray Day' celebrations. People are treating each other like long lost relatives, tours are being taken through Yonder Forest, and it's an all-around jubilee—all because of you guys!” Sara explained.

Galendor blushed. “We didn't really do anything other than travel over, under, and through the world to put on a most raw and awesome concert preventing an alternate universe from taking hold.”

Sara widened her eyes and jutted her head forward to silently imply, “*Duh!*”

Galendor took the hint. “Yeah, but we didn't *do* anything other than go through the motions.”

Sara reached over the counter and held his shoulder. “Just enjoy the attention. You always dreamed of fame, yes?”

“*Meh!* I'm not seeing the virtue of people dressing up and talking like me. Thereto, wouldn't I be egotistical if I did?”

“Maybe. But don't be an ingrate for your blessing of success.” Sara slapped her hands on the counter. “Now, what can I get for you?”

Galendor shifted on his feet and tinkered with stuff on the counter. “Actually, what I’m pondering is peregrination to the Castle. I don’t wanna walk, but with the current chaos, I’m apprehensive to ask for assistance.”

Sara smiled. “I’ve a wagonload of lettuce being sent that way. I’m sure you can catch a ride in back if you want.”

“Decent! Bonus in the grocery store!”

* * * *

The trip to Castle Yorh took hours versus a day or two. Galendor had to laugh as not only did this save his feet, but riding atop a load of lettuce lengthened the list of crazy conveyances.

The wagon stopped and the sounds of attendants unlatching the cover preceded the garish burst of light as the tarp was removed. Again, Galendor’s mondo, sacred, secret, stud, dude sunglasses came in handy.

“What ’ave we ’ere? A vole, weaseling his way into the Castle, ’ey?” A woman with thick forearms and a missing front tooth jeered.

“No ma’am, not weaseling per se, just hitched a ride from Hither. And, can a vole weasel? I mean, if we use the animal’s type as a verb, then can’t a vole *vole* as a weasel *weasels*?” Galendor smiled.

“*Guards!*” The woman was not won with wit.

“No, no!” Galendor pushed his hands toward the lady, tilting them left and right. “No guards necessary! I’m just here to visit the princess.”

The woman scowled and clinched her jaw as armored men approached. “Maybe you’re the one ’ose been vandalizing the lettuce?”

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“*EEK!* I’m Galendor! Perhaps you’ve heard of me? I saved the kingdom and am more or less betrothed to Jessica!” Humility went right down the toilet in the face of incarceration.

The woman turned her back and threw her thumb over her shoulder to point out Galendor to the guards, adding, “Right! You and a hundred other men.”

Galendor felt a sudden sinking feeling. “No, I’m pretty sure I’m the only one promised.”

Chapter Two: Dinner With The Dad

A guard gently placed Galendor's arms behind his back and moved him forward. "Sorry mate, jus' doin' my duty ya know?"

"Oh, just anything." Galendor sighed.

The guard continued, "Whether you're the real 'im or ya ain't s'not for me to decide. I'm just linin' you's up and sendin' ya out the gates."

Rounding a stone spire leading to a main courtyard, scores of Galendors in all shapes and creeds were lined up in spiraling cattle pins as if waiting for a great amusement ride.

Galendor wiggled free and threw his arms in the air. "And *what* sort of shenanigans is this? *I* am clearly the real Galendor!"

The crowd cried in a crazed cacophony:

"I'm utmostly the real Galendor!"

"I am!"

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“I’m triumphantly true!”

“Princess! Your gallant Galendor awaits!”

Galendor stared at that last fellow and lost it. “*Dude!* Straight up! You’re a *toad!*”

“Hey. You don’t have to be hurtful,” *wurp*, the guy said.

“It might be hurtful if, in fact, you weren’t an anthropomorphic amphibian.”

The fellow went on the offensive. “*Oh yeah!?* Well... Galendor could have been a toad.”

“Sure, he could have been, except I’m human and *I’m him, you nit!*”

“Galendor!” a sweet yet distant voice cried.

“*Princess!*” all replied in unison, save one: the real Galendor.

“Jesse, this is madness!” He yelled.

“I know.” She smiled as she approached. “But, they’re all just excited the kingdom is safe.”

The crowd collectively got dreamy-eyed as she drew near.

Jessica raised a finger and spoke as if a lecturing Kindergarten teacher. “Excited or not, shame on you for trying to trick me into thinking you were my man.”

They all contemplated their feet and shrugged. Galendor felt a pleasant churning in his stomach to hear this lovely angel state him as ‘her man.’

The princess began, “Now, you must all go home...”

A sorrowful “Awww!” came from the crowd.

“However,” she continued, “before you do, if you would like to mill about the courtyard, you can all enjoy some cake and pie.”

The multitude cheered.

Jessica took Galendor by the hand and led him into the castle. “You’ve become quite a star.”

“Don’t I know it? Since departing my domicile, I’ve seen dozens upon dozens of doppelgangers. It’s a bit demoralizing.”

“Really?” Jessica asked with a tone of doubt.

“Truth be told, demoralizing was the only ‘D’ word I could think of for my flow, but it *is* unnerving. I hadn’t left the house since returning, so don’t think me terse for saying it’s a culture shock.”

Jessica laughed. “That I’ll buy! Imagine my surprise when I got an announcement you were here, and I came running to see a toad dressed as you awaiting me with open arms.”

“I think I had dealings with that dude just before you showed.” Galendor paused. “Come to think of it, there was another one acting as me giving a tour of the lobothian village. Should I find it disconcerting that toads literally think they can pass as me?”

Jesse smiled and giggled, sending all sorts of happy waves through Galendor.

* * * *

Hand in hand, Jessica led him to a tranquil garden and sat under a soft-bristled evergreen next to a goldfish pond. She stared at him with such intensity, Galendor fought the impulse to squirm. She held his hand firmly. “I’m so glad you’re finally here! I know you needed a break from your long travels and mentioned the middle of this week, but it was all I could do to keep from going to your house.”

Visibility became fuzzy for him as his chest

pounded. Fighting to sound coherent, he squeaked, “Oh... really? Why?”

“To see *you*, ya big dummy!” She punched his shoulder. “And to tell you what news I have of my mother.”

Focus returned. “That’s right! If memory serves me correctly, you got a toad-o-gram from your mom? But, you said she was blown to Smithereens years ago, so, how can that be?”

“My toad-o-gram stated, ‘Jessup, I’m here. Find the way in. Bring picky salads’.”

Galendor fought to keep his face from reflecting a letdown. “A tad cryptic, yes?” In his mind, he wished to say, *For that you ran out?* But, he had no right.

“It is vague, but only Mom called me ‘Jessup’ when we played dress-up as a child. And for some reason, ‘picky salads’ was my term for those P.J.’s that have the feet sewn in the bottoms. I used to stomp around the room singing, ‘pick-ee *salads*, pick-ee *salads*...’” She smiled reluctantly.

Galendor just laughed. “Picky salads? That makes you certifiable! I actually loved those footy pajamas.”

Jessica pulled a folded parchment from her dress pocket. The scribbles written on it were blotchy, smudged, and barely legible. “I instantly believed the letter to be from Mom, so I ran out that day to track the source. The toad-o-gram was transcribed from a note delivered by a courier falcon from monks in the northern mountains who caught an inktailed butterfly trained to skitter this message!” She took a good breath after that one.

A blank artist’s canvas held more information than Galendor’s expression as he processed the new information.

Jessica explained, “The butterfly had to have been trained by my mom! She traced her message with it and sent

it on its way, therefore there has to be a passage to and from wherever Smithereens is! Don't you see?"

Galendor desperately wanted to emulate her enthusiasm, but troubles flooded his thoughts. Fresh off the world-saving tour, he felt himself closer to being worthy of the princess' attention. With every ounce of his being, he wished to help her, but he couldn't even hope to dream of a starting point. Facing certain failure, he'd lose Jesse's admiration and pop the little dream bubble in which he currently resided.

Anxiety swirled in his chest as scene after scene of aimless plodding played through his mind. Out of sheer reflex to stave off the oncoming quiet, Galendor's mouth mumbled, "I like butterflies."

Jessica sat patiently, staring into Galendor's empty eyes.

"Wait...*what!*?" he shouted as he heard what he'd just said.

She smiled that reassuring smile encompassing her eyes, cheeks, and tiny little nose. With a gentle squeeze of his hand, she stated, "You aren't alone. We'll figure it out together."

His uneasiness immediately diffused.

* * * *

Evening brought a formal meal and unimaginable out-of-placeness. It's tough to meet a girl's parents for the first time, but how does one convey the vast amount of panic and birdseed when that parent is the king of all the land?

Galendor endured hours of being measured, primed, and groomed in preparation. Feeling like sausage stuffed into

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a velvety, jeweled casing, the time came for him to face the mirror.

“Oh heavens no!”

Forget the puffy shoulders and ruffled cuffs of his tunic. Disregard the tight leotard-esque pants or the fact he was clean-shaven. To his complete shame, his long hair had been curled into what could only be described as a wide tube all along the perimeter of his head.

“I assure you’re quite fetching, sir,” Galendor’s valet stated.

“Appropriate you say ‘fetching’ as I clearly resemble a poodle or some other foo-foo dog.”

“Oh! Hardly, sir. This style is all the rage in court.”

“Well, let court rage on. In the really real world I look like a noodle-haired ninny.”

Paying no heed to Galendor’s whining, the man opened the door. “It is time for dinner.”

Galendor sulked. “I don’t wanna go!”

As the man stood at attention, motionless, holding the door open, Galendor pouted in classic Toots fashion. “Foo! Boo hoo.”

* * * *

Galendor was made to stand at the top of a banister overlooking the dining hall. Royalty and other people of title were being led down a blue carpet to the far end and presented to the king. Sitting beside her father, Jessica looked every bit a queen. Galendor once again questioned what grace had been afforded him that he should have her affection.

The far-reaching table filled with guests until only

eight seats remained nearest the thrones. Big honkin' trumpets protruded from ports in the surrounding walls to play a fanfare.

“Savior of the kingdom and future heir to the throne, Galendor, ye dude from Yonder Forest.”

All eyes beheld the man at the banister.

Galendor's guts twisted into a rock pretzel. “Oh merciful buckets of kitty litter, this just makes me sad.”

The crowd rose to their feet and stared. His internal temperature began to roast him like a fine mirepoix and he imagined steam wafting from his seams. Worsening matters, as he came down the left side, patrons struggled with their seats or the persons next to them as they turned to watch.

In an amazing moment of self-awareness, he could feel the sweat bead from every individual pore in his skin. During this divergent state of fight-or-flight, he wondered why no one had developed a cure for sweating; some sort of antiperspirant, strong enough for a man but pH balanced for a woman.

“Ahem.” A voice came from the clouds of his subconscious.

“*Ahem!* Galendor...*sir,*” the voice vehemently stated.

Galendor snapped out of his daydream to find he'd slightly overshot his intended seat and headed beyond the thrones. Hurrying to his chair he found Jessica giggling. The king...well...just was not.

Galendor closed his eyes in embarrassment and praised God that Wicket was not around for this fiasco.

The king, obviously at the head of the table, would have Jessica sit to his left and Galendor to his right.

Everyone remained standing for the princess and as

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she sat, so did they. However, gazing across the wide oak surface, Jessica sprang from her chair causing everyone to rise. She ran around her father's place to sit at Galendor's right. The king scowled, but made no fuss; everyone retook their seat.

* * * *

Various dignitaries began standing to report whatever news or needs were important in their niche of the realm. Jessica paid no mind; she took Galendor's hand and held it under the table. "You look very princely," she whispered.

He met her smile and heavy, unwavering gaze. "You like it? I'm considering this my new style...now that I'm important and all."

Her eyes widened and her face went blank. Her eyebrows rose, but only in the middle. "Really?" She truly sounded panicked.

"*No not really!* I feel like a foppish flop-haired foofenheimer."

Her smile returned. "Either way, you're still very handsome."

All his stress melted in that instant, contented to be at her side. He realized, maybe his grubby, unshaven, unkempt, rugged self was the perfect antithesis for all the prim and proper men in her life. All was right with the world, *until* the trumpets juttet from the portals and pealed an announcement.

"Sir Wicket of Narfingham, Don Ernesto: esquire..." the announcer paused, "...Sir-ish Doeglen the Mid-knight."

Galendor closed his eyes and breathed deep. Jessica

strengthened her grip. “They’re your friends! They’ll be happy to see you, and supportive.”

Galendor closed his eyes and voiced calmly, “Oh, they’ll be utmostly happy *when* they see me, of *that* I’m sure.”

The three sat just opposite Jessica and Galendor. Wicket sat comfortably next to the king and began chatting him up as if they were old buddies. Ernesto scoped the wide expanse of food and Doeglen, though his helmet was closed, seemed to stare right at Galendor.

“See? Nothing to be nervous about.” Jessica tried to reassure.

“Wait for it...” Galendor kept his eyes closed.

Nothing.

“Wait for it...”

Perhaps all had grown in their travels?

“Wait for it...”

Truly it was a new day and the dawning of a more open and mature sort of...

“*Ha Haaa!*” Ernesto shouted, not in laugh, but as if he’d made an important discovery. His eyes were huge and his little miyeh mouth couldn’t have smiled any bigger. His mittened paw pointed straight at Galendor’s face.

“Aaanndddd there it is,” Galendor stated in tranquil defeat.

Wicket stopped yakking and caught his first glimpse of his friend in royal splendor.

It began as the early vibes of a violent volcano. First came Wicket’s uncontrolled, toothy grin and deep, convulsing giggles. Perhaps his conscious effort to contain the cackles made the pressure intensify, but his body began to tremor. His eyes bulged, his ears snapped to attention, and

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the loudest, “AAAAAaaaaahhhhhh!” erupted from the pit of his stomach.

The room collectively gasped and fell silent, turning all eyes to Wicket’s tantrum. He wriggled and squirmed, pounding the table and contorting in all manner of positions as wave after wave of laughter contractions forced every goofy sound imaginable from his muzzle.

Wicket’s tickles became an epidemic that affected the crowd, save for the king, Galendor and Jessica. Soon, the dining hall roared. People were crying, snot ran, and some guests were whisked away due to shortness of breath.

A mischievous glint twinkled in Galendor’s eye as humiliation changed to retaliation. He waited until Wick showed signs of running out of steam, then stood up and pranced around to show off his tights.

Wicket hunched over the table in renewed spasms. His high-pitched chuckles came with such force his throat began to sound worn.

Galendor didn’t let up. He pretended to gallop atop a stick rocker, with each hop, his hair curl would bounce.

“Ah! Stop! Stop! It hurts! *Ooohhh*, my face is cramping!” Wick pleaded when he could summon the breath.

Amidst the chaos, the king caught Jessica’s attention and had to yell, “What manner of people have you allowed into our midst?”

She grinned cheekily. “The kind who save kingdoms!”

Chapter Three: The Rite Of Passage

In many cultures, a meal takes half of the night. People sit, chat, and snack all evening. As for Galendor and friends, mealtime usually meant that the only time mouths moved, other than for chewing, was to ask for someone to pass the salt.

Wicket's entourage sharpened their blades and began bringing in the sheaves. Galendor struggled to eat at Jessica's dainty pace, which was especially rough seeing as how she mowed groceries when away from the castle.

If ever Galendor had a perfect forkful heading to the promised land, inevitably someone would ask for details about his quest. The king never said much, but scrutinized Galendor when an answer was given.

So, with the hair, and the outfit, and the Wicket, and the king, compounded by the fact he'd only eaten half a plate, Galendor felt the dinner a complete shamble.

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Salvation came when the king pushed away from the table, swiveled his chair, and clapped twice. “*Players!*”

A simple, sleepy arrangement of chamber music began to play as a curtain retracted to reveal unenthused musicians trudging through the notes. Jessica squeezed Galendor’s knee a couple of times. “You’re going to like my little surprise.”

Her touch took him by surprise and his leg hit the table. Wick and Ernesto noticed, no one else did.

* * * *

All lights dimmed and the loud, driving beats of Subtarkan began pulsing in time with the music, speeding the tempo and bringing it to life. Mr. Pipe Dude walked into view as a white curtain dropped. He turned and began projecting his perspective of the big concert!

All could see how the ‘Apathy’ cleared away and the transformation it brought. The king and those taken were aware of the change, but to actually see it with unclouded minds was sobering.

Pipes walked away as Lil’ Red wheeled in accompanying Toots. The lights further dimmed to a spotlight as Toots began a smooth jam on his old saxanhorn.

The king, in an uncharacteristic fit of joy yelled, “Ackmentootis! You old codger!”

Galendor smiled and quietly stated, “Hail, hail, the gang’s all here.”

Jessica hugged his arm and pressed her cheek to his shoulder. With the king’s attention on the music, Galendor finally relaxed. Jesse asked, “Has it really been that bad?”

“I’m just sooo totally out of my element. For you,

scaling down the ladder of class was easy because we, at the bottom, have no expectations, whereas in *your* world...”

The king stood and pointed at Galendor. “Boy! Come with me.”

“*Oh*, this is all kinds of bad.” Galendor knew to his core that he was soon to be sentenced to death for allowing Jessica to lean on his shoulder.

Jessica even lost her normal calm. “Eek.”

* * * *

Forsaking the multitude of guests, Jessica’s father took Galendor out to the gaming arena where, for all intents and purposes, Doeglen would be knighted in the morning. The moon, just a smidge brighter than first quarter, highlighted the king’s long white hair and beard as it did the thick storm clouds in the distant east. Galendor thought either the stress of rule had aged him, or he was a bit older when he conceived Jessica.

“I owe you a debt of gratitude—the whole kingdom does,” he began.

Galendor would normally have rambled some remark of modesty, but opted to keep quiet.

The king continued, “And indeed, my daughter has endeared you to her heart. I’ve not seen such a force of spirit in her.” His voice turned sullen. “I’ve not seen such force of spirit since her mother. However...” Be it calculated or coincidence, they stopped in front of the weapons rack. All manner of swords, spears, maces, morning stars; right in reach.

The king’s voice rang loud and deep, “...she is *my* girl, *my* love. All she has ever known, experienced, learned,

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has been at *my* side. I have been there for every discovery. I have been there for every hurt. And it is *from* her that I take all my joy. My sun rises and sets because of my daughter. Do you think for one second that I—the King of Yorh—would allow some unproven, foolish boy to take her from me!?”

“I make no assertions...” Galendor stated, but the king kept going with his own thoughts.

“Unfortunately, it is not my decision.” He walked to a fence and propped a foot on a lower board. “Jessica is free to do as she chooses. I trust her heart for she is not a foolish girl, weak to the wiles of corrupted men.”

He stared into Galendor’s eyes. “Who are you, boy? Are you a corrupted man? Do you see my girl as a plaything, or an object to be obtained then tossed aside when the newness wears away?”

Galendor didn’t know if it were truly time to reply, so he put all of his focus on not breaking eye contact.

“Come on, *boy*, answer me! Where are all the silken words of which I’ve heard tell?”

Galendor spilled, “Your Highness, I am a corrupted man to be sure, but I’m not the sort of man of whom you speak. Then again, if I were, I could lie and tell you I wasn’t. So, you must take me at my word.” Galendor never felt nor acted more serious in all of his life. “Animals have no moral standard and therefore can’t use the power of choice when it comes to their actions. Whatever they feel like doing: they do. ‘Thinkers’ such as our civilized races are considered, are held to an absolute moral standard. We are to control ourselves for our own betterment and of those around us.

I have no respect for those who chase pleasures with abandon, and I *never* want to become one of them. There is

no greater value in this world than a person's virtue. I hope that quells some of your concern."

The king winced, taking in Galendor's words. He stepped away in silence and headed for the castle entryway. Galendor followed, respectfully a few steps behind.

Before entering, the king mentioned, "I don't like you, boy. But, I don't hate you."

Galendor whispered to himself, "All right! Score in the courtyard."

* * * *

That night, the crew gathered in a cozy sitting room next to a crackling fire. With her father back to health, Jessica was expected to leave the boys alone after dinner. Servants brought in Alchemist Pepper and milk drinks while everyone caught up. Though it had only been about a week, people had apparently been busy.

Toots sat at the end of a plush, red cushioned couch closest to the fire with Lil' Red parked near the arm. "Yeah, along about the second day of sitting alone in my tree, I thought I was gonna go nuts, ya dig? Well, then Wagon shows up and we hatched a plan to go back to Andfro. Long story short, I'm managing Woody's hotel and Lil' Red got Woody and GiGi hot on a new design for our rockerless carriage."

"*Squeak!*" Lil' Red added enthusiastically.

Galendor elongated his face, impressed with the two striking out on their own. "Far out, little duder! All the way to Andfro?"

"*Squeal!*"

Toots finished, saying, "It's not so bad when you know where you're going and take a direct route."

Galendor – The Middle of Next Week

Wicket had taken a quick trip home before training Doeglen. He shared some details, “Hey, you guys remember MuShu, the narf at the Invisible Basin Farm? Well, once we’d done our thing, the rules for the farm no longer applied. The boss let everyone come or go as they pleased. That narf was so relieved or enlightened or whatever...he came back to Narfingham and started an organization to empower the ‘Lesser Thans’ as he called them. Still a tad smug that one, but his heart seemed in the right place.” Wick took a sip of frothy beverage and came up with a milk mustache. “How’d you fair with the king?” he asked.

“*Dude*,” Galendor said with a hushed intensity, “that was utmostly the scariest interaction I’ve had with another living soul to date! I was too pumped running from the Gigantalo to think, and our first meeting with Phorsyard was waaay surreal. But there, in the courtyard, next to the weapons rack getting grilled by the King of Yorh—*forget about it!*”

“Ah jes, to meet de father for de first time. De magics of young love,” Ernesto quipped whilst unwittingly batting at Doeglen’s helmet plumage.

Wick grew impatient. “And he said!?”

“Well, he said something to the tune of, ‘I don’t hate you, boy’ so I’m taking that as a plus.”

All laughed at the familiar rite of passage. All except Mr. Pipe Dude who stood slightly removed from the rest. A melancholy pale-blue glowed in his eyes.

Galendor noticed. “Hey brother, I realize you have no need for tasty libation and perhaps your people never have to meet your perspective’s parents, but there’s no need to feel left out.”

“A sTrAnGe CuRrEnT fLoWs. ThOuGh I kNoW iT

iS gOoD wE aRe OnCe AgAiN uNiTeD, mY tHoUgHtS tUrN dIm As ThE tImE tO rEtUrN tO mY pEoPlE DrAwS eVeR CLoSeR.”

“Don’t sweat it!” Galendor gave a thumbs-up. “You’ll not be going alone, dude.”

“And ju don know, perhaps dey jus wan to give you a major award for your role in fixing de world.” Ernesto smiled.

Wicket even got in on the pepping. “Change is going on everywhere. More than likely they want to tell you how sorry they are for heaving you off the side.”

Pipe’s fans flapped for a time. “I’ll Be OkAy. LeT uS dIsCuSs DoEgLeN. He’LL fuLLy bE sIr DoEgLeN tHiS tImE tOmOrRoW.”

“That’s right!” Galendor turned to the mid-knight as Ernesto steadily batted the plumage. “Are you totally stoked or what?”

Surprisingly, Doeglen’s tone sounded higher and rushed with emotion. “I’ll wear boots and pants!”

* * * *

The catching up conversation eventually became idle chit-chat and the hour grew late.

Galendor stretched. “Well, I reckon we could revel on, but we ought to rest for tomorrow’s recreations.”

As everyone filtered out, Wick pulled Galendor to the side. With as serious an expression as he could, he asked, “You do realize it don’t you?”

“Oh, I’m well aware,” Galendor replied.

They were of course speaking of how silly Galendor looked all night.