

A Clark Ink Serial Novel

# The Legends of Nod

## The Mech Valley Debacle



Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

Part 1 of 2: Into the Wyyrd Outback

# The Legends of Nod

Books by Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

*Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*

THE CHRONICLES OF NIGHTFIRE, TEXAS:

*The Vampire Murders*

*The Haunting of Alexas Mansion*

*The Great Debate*

METROGNOMES:

*The Demons of the Blood*

*The Shaman's Apprentice*

THE LEGENDS OF NOD:

*The Dragons of Nod*

*All for the Blood of Nightstorm*

*Enter: The Wanderer*

# The Legends of Nod

## The Mech Valley Debacle

“Into the Wyyrd Outback”

Beginning the fourth volume in the first saga

*The Sword of Libran*

A story from

*The Epic of Prince Joryn*

by

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

CLARK  
INK<sup>llc</sup>

2020

**The Legends of Nod: The Mech Valley Debacle #1  
“Into the Wyyrd Outback”**

Copyright ©2015, 2020 by Clark Ink, LLC

First Edition E-Book: October 2015

Expanded Edition E-Book: February 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be copied in any form, outside of initial e-book download from an authorized Web site, without the expressed written permission of the publisher. The only exceptions to this declaration shall be brief quotations used for the purpose of critique or review. At the time of this printing, the author may be contacted through his Web site ([www.glensladeclarkjr.com](http://www.glensladeclarkjr.com)).

Published by Clark Ink, LLC. All characters, situations, and other imaginings featured in this publication are purely fictitious and bear no intended likeness to actual persons either living or dead.

Cover art by Molly Fine.

This book was originally published as

*The Legends of Nod #4*

“The Mech Valley Debacle, Part I”

## CONTENTS

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| Dramatis Personae . . . . .  | vi       |
| Chapter 1:<br>A Change of Plans . . . . .  | 1        |
| Chapter 2:<br>The Priestess' Warning . . . . .   | 14       |
| Chapter 3:<br>An Impossible Steed . . . . .  | 20       |
| Chapter 4:<br>Road to Mech Valley . . . . .  | 30       |
| Chapter 5:<br>A Night in Boom Town . . . . .   | 58       |
| Chapter 6:<br>The Authority Called, and They Want Their<br>Brawn Co. Peace-Keeper Back . . . . . | 77<br>94 |

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**Sir Illium** – Bionic unicorn male from the Golden Field, age 1,000 years; son of Ryjan and Maladine; husband of Lady Norlan; father of Charger; knight of the Order of the Golden Field; royal steed of Prince Joryn

**Iron Bill** – Deluvian war bird male, from the kingdom of Deluvia, age 4,588 years; son of Red Rodger and Dawn Glider; last of the Deluvian war birds; charged by his friend Libran to protect and assist the priestess Tianna

**Prince Joryn** – Human male from the Kingdom of Nod, age twenty years; youngest son of Emperor Sapro and the Unnamed Empress; younger brother of Prince Kail; youngest half-brother of Prince Repteré, Princess Willowyll, Prince Dakarai, Princess Hero, Prince Mwana, Princess Adaeze, Prince Dorago, Princess Enjinia, Prince Vail, and Princess Lily; paramour of Lord Galen; newly appointed champion of Libran; recently helped to defeat the forces of the Wanderer in Imperial City, only to be defeated and seriously injured himself in a face-to-face battle with the Wanderer, during which his friend, Captain Starro, was killed

**Kabed** – Human male from the kingdom of Deluvia, age twenty-four years; tech wizard; Imperial head of science for Emperor Sapro; inventor of the robotic unicorns called Unitrons

**Sir Lowgun Kin** – Reptisaur male from the city of Slythe Orn, age 102 years; knight of the Order of the Imperial Crown; professional speedracer; owner of the *Dragon Racer*; outlaw, wanted dead or alive by the Mech Valley Authority; encouraged by Libran, along with his friends, Longshot and Trig, to join the cause of Prince Joryn at the Battle of Chiroptera, helping to turn the tide in favor of the Imperial army; recently knighted by Emperor Sapro, for his valor during the battle to retake Palace Nod from the forces of the Wanderer

**Sir Longshot** – Human male from the city of TexStar, age nineteen years; paramour of Princess Pumpkitina; knight of the Order of the Imperial Crown; gunslinger; outlaw, wanted dead or alive by the Mech Valley Authority; encouraged by Libran, along with his friends, Lowgun Kin and Trig, to join the cause of Prince Joryn at the Battle of Chiroptera, helping to turn the tide in favor of the Imperial army; recently knighted by Emperor Sapro, for his valor during the battle to retake Palace Nod from the forces of the Wanderer; set to lead the mission, alongside Prince Joryn, to rescue Princess Pumpkitina from the robotic despot of Mech Valley, Torakku N’obotto

**Marley** – Unitron (robotic unicorn), male gender identity programming, from the Kingdom of Nod, age three months; steed of Kaped; just repaired after being crushed by a boulder at the Battle of Chiroptera; formerly known as Unitron 001

**Trig** – Robotic horse/light gun, male gender identity programming, from the city of Mech Valley, age five years; steed of Sir Longshot; outlaw, wanted decommissioned by the Mech Valley Authority; encouraged by Libran, along with his friends, Longshot and Lowgun Kin, to join the cause of Prince Joryn at the Battle of Chiroptera, helping to turn the tide in favor of the Imperial army

# **The Legends of Nod**

## **The Mech Valley Debacle**

*“Into the Wyyrd Outback”*

## CHAPTER 1: A CHANGE OF PLANS

JORYN FLEXED THE FINGERS OF HIS RIGHT hand, stretching his arm out happily once again, as he keyed the code into the pad and lowered the entry ramp to the very Fighter Disc in which he had pursued the Wanderer just over a month before. He was still getting used to the lighter feel of his arm, now that the cast had finally come off and he'd been declared fit for the mission at hand.

The Fighter Disc too had undergone repairs in the weeks since the attack, and the palace itself, along with many of Nod's territorial capitol buildings, was still undergoing extensive reconstruction.

He thought of the loss of his loyal friend, Captain Starro, who had been killed helping him try to bring the Wanderer to justice. Not for the first time, Joryn felt the deep pain of his own failure.

“You all right, man?”

Joryn smiled, in spite of his brooding introspection, and turned to see the young gunslinger Longshot, accompanied as always by his reptisaur friend Lowgun and the form-shifting mechanical horse Trig. “I'm fine, Longshot. Eager to leave the palace behind me for a while, even if the mission *is* another dangerous one.”

“We'll be in and out, pal,” Longshot assured him. “Just watch. Especially with this Fighter Disc. Won't take but maybe an hour or two to get to Mech Valley.”

Joryn nodded. “I've been going over maps with Parakletos in the library. I think it would be wise to land in the outskirts. The disc might

attract unwanted attention in the valley, and we don't want this monster robot, Torakku N'obotto, to know we're coming. I ran the plan by Quickwing and Dorran this morning. They agree discretion is best."

Lowgun nodded, smiling. "Longshot likes to go in guns blazing. But I've been telling him the same thing."

Longshot looked to his friend incredulously. "You been eating flash bugs again, sidekick? Guns-a-blazing happens to get things done. Worked when we took Mount Chirip. Worked when we fought off those robot monkeys here in the palace."

"But it won't work if it gets us shot out of the sky by the likes of N'obotto," Lowgun argued. "You know he's no ordinary despot. And you're *my* sidekick. Remember?"

"Since when? You wouldn't even be here flappin' your scaly lips if I hadn't saved you from those—"

"Well," Joryn cut in, "the official plan is to try to negotiate first, if we can."

"No way!" Longshot protested without missing a beat. "Bad idea!"

“It’s worked before,” Joryn pointed out, not feeling a need to offer the now very well-known specifics.

“Longshot is right, my prince,” Lowgun said in his calm, unflappable voice. “Torakku N’obotto is not a king, nor is he an elected official. He recognizes no rules of diplomacy, lacks anything in the manner of courtly graces. N’obotto’s a thug, whose power is based on wealth and intimidation. If he wants something, he takes it. If he hates someone, he kills them. There is no law in the Outback that can rein him in. He would blast us for sport, just for *asking* him to release Princess Pumpkitina. We’ve dealt with his people before.”

“Too many times,” Longshot added, regarding Trig and patting the robotic horse on the back.

Joryn nodded. “Good thing we have a plan B then. We need to get into his fortress, take Pumpkitina back, and get out without being killed.”

“That’s my kind of plan,” Longshot beamed.

Lowgun shook his head. “I think it needs work.”

“Nope!” Longshot unholstered a pistol and spun it around on his fingers deftly before returning the weapon to its place at his side. “All it needs is me.”

Lowgun laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, really. You’re not the first human I’ve seen drowned in his own arrogance. That’s all.”

“Yeah? Pro’ly because you’re like nine hundred years old!”

“One hundred two.”

Longshot shrugged with a grin. “I was close.”

“You’re a hundred and two?” Joryn asked, amazed.

Lowgun nodded.

“Yeah, he’s got a long story,” Longshot said, rolling his eyes. “A *long* story. Get him drunk, and he’ll even try to tell it to you. Anyway, reptisaur don’t get old. They just keep getting bigger. Never stop growing. One day, he’ll be bigger than this palace.”

“Not likely,” Lowgun said with a wry grin. “We grow *very* slowly, and most of us never avoid fatal disease or lethal catastrophe longer than a millennium or two.”

Joryn was delighted. “That’s nothing to shrug at, Lowgun. Unicorns are much the same, aside from the growing part I mean. Illium’s a thousand years old himself.”

“Yeah, man,” Longshot said. “That growing part’s just weird.”

Joryn noted the sound of approaching hooves. He had so many four-legged, hooved friends now, that it was a wonder he knew which one of them it was, but he had learned to recognize their distinctive rhythms, and he was not surprised when the centaur Dorran Equus came into view.

“Are we all ready to go?” the centaur asked with a broad, beaming smile.

“As ever, Dorran,” Joryn answered. “You seem happier than usual, my friend. Have you had good news?”

“I received a letter from Lute this morning. My parents are making sure that he keeps up with his schooling while he is with them. It warms my

heart whenever I hear from him. And his writing is coming along very well, if I say so myself.”

“That’s good news indeed,” Joryn said. “It’s been too long since the palace has been graced by his energy and his contagious childhood enthusiasm. It’s seemed less like home without him galloping all over the place these past months. When will he be returning anyway?”

“Another month, give or take. My people are not known for keeping strict schedules. But, sometime next month is likely. We had agreed he should return before the winter festival.”

“Who’s Lute?” Longshot asked.

“Lute is my son,” Dorran said proudly. “He’s been visiting his grandparents and learning the ways of our people firsthand since this summer, before the dragons attacked. I can’t wait to have him back here with me. Especially with the Wanderer returned. I have taught him to be brave and strong, but still, a father worries.”

“I have arrived,” declared the near-shouting voice of the little round elf called Onri Sprigg. “We may now leave!”

Joryn laughed. “We’re still waiting on the rest of our party, Onri. Kabed should be here any

minute. Hero and Vail are joining us as well, as soon as their duties allow. And Dorago, just this morning, offered his sword to our mission. Drae, I'm afraid, is much worse today. I've told him to remain in the care of the physicians. I don't know where Illium and Quickwing are."

"They are settling a wager, along with Charger," Lowgun said, amused. "They are out in the fields, determining the matter of who can cover the territory faster, Quickwing with his wings, Charger with his unicorn legs, or Illium with his cybernetic legs."

"What?!" Longshot said. "Why wasn't Trig included in that? I bet he could take 'em all!"

"Probably because I never told you," Lowgun said. "You're so easily distracted, and this is really *your* mission. I know how you'd hate to be late."

"Why you pompous, scaly, green—"

Lowgun laughed, and Longshot laughed with him.

"Yeah," Longshot agreed, straightening his wide-brimmed hat. "You're probably right, old man."

“No reason to wait for them then,” Joryn said. “Let’s go ahead and start loading the Fighter Disc. The others can help when they get here.”

“I’m afraid there’s been a change of plans,” another new arrival broke in.

“Kail,” Joryn greeted his eldest brother. “I thought you were in a Council meeting this morning.”

“I was,” Kail said, “but we adjourned early. Father is still very concerned over the Wanderer situation. That monster is still out there, and he could return to hit us, while we’re weak, at any time while the palace remains under reconstruction. Parakletos has been scouring all of the old myths for clues to the truth of who or what the Wanderer actually is, and has yet to finalize a report, even with Mwana helping him to sift through all of the tomes in the royal library. Father feels that there are far too many unknowns.”

“So,” Joryn asked, dejectedly, “is he canceling the mission to Mech Valley? My visit to the Whispering Plains?”

“No,” Kail said with a warm smile. “We managed to keep both trips moving forward.” Unhappily, he added, “With some amendments.”

“What sort of *amendments*?”

“Father wants the majority of the knights to remain here, to defend the palace. He’s agreed to let you take Longshot and Lowgun, for their familiarity with Mech Valley, your steeds of course, and Kated for his expertise in robotics. The rest, including Hero and Vail, will have to stay here. As will the Fighter Disc.”

“The Fighter Disc?” Joryn protested. “But it’s a ten-day’s ride to the Outback, even for Illium!”

In a solemn tone, Kail assured him, “That is more than he had originally intended to grant you, Little Brother. I did what I could, as did your other allies on the Council. That’s why you get Lowgun and Kated.”

“So it was just to be me and Longshot and our steeds, alone.” Joryn frowned in thought. “Another suicide mission. And he had just the right excuse to make it look like the cuts were necessary.”

Kail cleared his throat pointedly, walking over to Joryn and leading him several paces away from the group with a friendly hand on his shoulder, so that none would sense he was reprimanding his brother. “Joryn,” he said quietly, so as to not be overheard, “remember your place, Little Brother. These loyal knights of yours follow your every lead. Would you have them speaking out against the emperor? He is our father; we may speak of him between ourselves more honestly. For the others, we must put on a show of respect. For *their* sakes, as well as our own. You know well how little our father is prone to mercy.”

Joryn nodded, feeling foolish. “I know. I’m sorry. I’m just so frustrated. Ten days to the Wyyrd Outback, another three to Mech Valley if the maps are to be trusted. That’s nearly two weeks there, and just as many days once we turn back home; it puts almost another whole *month* between Galen and me.”

“I know,” Kail offered sympathetically. “But you are a prince of Nod. You can do this, with poise and dignity. Succeed in your mission, come home safely, and I give you my word that I will

do *everything* I can from my end to keep your trip to the Whispering Plains on the emperor's calendar with his blessings. You know these are uncertain times. Perhaps our father is even right to keep most of the seasoned warriors here for the time being."

"Perhaps so," Joryn conceded unhappily. "Very well. Thanks for being the one to tell me, Kail."

"Any time, Little Brother. I'm just sorry I had no better news to bring."

Walking back over to his friends, Joryn said with an air of confidence. "Upon reflection, it does seem wise to keep most of you here, when the palace is vulnerable to attack. I fear the outcome, should the Wanderer strike the palace without the might of Dorrان Equus and the courage of Onri Sprigg to defend it."

"Dookie nougat!" Onri spat. "I so looked forward to putting my sword back in action against that robotic monstrosity!"

"There will be another time, Sprigg," Joryn said. "In times such as these, I'm afraid I can say so with absolute certainty."

The metallic Deluvian war bird from the Temple of Libran flew quickly out of the sky and landed on Joryn's shoulder.

"Iron Bill," Joryn greeted him. "You have an urgent look about you."

"I suppose birds made of Deluvian steel often have that look, my prince. I just wanted to catch you before you left. The priestess wishes to see you."

Joryn nodded. "Very well. Tell her I'm on my way." As Iron Bill flew off to do so, Joryn addressed Longshot, Lowgun, and Trig, "Make whatever preparations you need to for nearly four weeks of riding. When Illium gets back from his run, and I from the Temple of Libran, we will set out. Someone should let Kaped know as well."

"I'll do it," Kail offered. "I was just headed his way, in fact."

"All right," Joryn said. "Then let us all be about our business. I'd like to get on the road while the day's still young."

## CHAPTER 2: THE PRIESTESS' WARNING

JORYN STRODE INTO THE TEMPLE OF LIBRAN on the palace grounds, noting how humble the little building was, in spite of its grand décor. It seemed unbecoming for a temple whose alleged 'god' had so changed his life.

Tianna walked out from her rooms in the back, pushing aside the loose-hanging curtains, Iron Bill perched upon her shoulder.

The war bird flew into the rafters, which was where he tended to roost when anyone came into the temple.

“You sent for me, Tianna?” Joryn smiled at his long-time friend.

“Yes.” She seemed hesitant.

“What is it? Is there some danger we haven’t foreseen? Like there was in Chiroptera?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s just ... Something seems ... *off*. I can’t think of a better way to put it.”

“Off?”

“About this mission to Mech Valley. About Longshot’s girlfriend, about this Torakku N’obotto, all of it. I’ve been meditating on these things, because I want to know that you will be safe. It’s just, I get the overwhelming sense that all is not what it seems.”

“Longshot?”

“I think we can trust him completely. Lowgun and Trig as well. The fact that they were chosen by Libran, just as you were, is testimony enough. Besides, I get a *very* honest sense from them. Longshot has nothing to hide. Nothing sinister anyway. If there *is* a deception involved, if

something is amiss, as I fear, he's more in the dark about it than I am."

"And you have no idea what this feeling of yours is about, exactly?"

"It's about the whole thing. That's what I'm saying. Something is *off* about the whole thing. I'm not saying that you shouldn't go. Of course you should! I'm just saying, keep your wits about you. There is a hidden truth to all of this that none of us has foreseen."

Joryn nodded gratefully. "I'll keep that in mind. Thank you for your warning, Tianna." He hesitated, then, "You've been working with the physicians, with Drae Shivvan."

"That is no secret." She smiled, sadly.

"Is he going to be all right?" Joryn asked. "I mean ... will he live? He seems to have been getting progressively worse since he came to us after Chiroptera. I saw him this morning, and he appeared so frail. Like he's simply wasting away."

Tianna shook her head, remorsefully. "I cannot say. I can only encourage him to keep fighting. But it's the Mark of Centaurus. Drae broke a pact with a Guardian. There may, in the end, be nothing we can do. We may encourage

him to beg Centaurus himself for mercy, but I have met this self-proclaimed god, and he did not strike me as the least bit merciful. I fear he would only hasten Drae's demise. Though that may be seen as a mercy in itself. I cannot imagine what else he may do, other than to demand Drae follow through on their bargain and deliver your head."

Joryn looked away. "Then he is bravely fighting to save my life, perhaps at the cost of his own," he realized solemnly. "I can't have that on my heart. Especially after ..."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Starro chose his fate, Joryn. As did Drae. It was the Wanderer who murdered Starro, not you. And it was Drae who made this bargain with Centaurus in the first place. It was not you who gave him the Mark. He chose to accept it freely, just as he later chose freely to break the bargain and betray his god."

"Maybe," Joryn said, unconvinced. "But Starro—"

"Joryn, are you to blame for *everyone* the Wanderer killed that day?"

"No, but—"

“*But* ... Starro was Captain of the Imperial Guard. He was doing his duty. He was protecting you, yes, but more importantly he was compelled to go after the monster who had bombed the palace and bring him to justice, just as you were. He was not following your lead any more than he was following his own heart.”

Joryn nodded, accepting the words, the logic of the argument, in his mind, but still not accepting their truth in his heart. “I just ... I feel like I’m never going to get it right. First I had no confidence, then I had too much. Now ... Now I don’t know *what* to feel about my abilities as a leader. I never asked for this, you know. I’m not saying that I would throw it all away. It’s too important. I’m just saying, I never announced to the world that I was the right one to carry Libran’s sword. I never declared myself exceptionally competent in any way. When Libran found me, in fact, I was desperate, hopeless. I was lying on a ledge with Illium, unable to rescue him, unable to mend his wounds. At that particular moment, I had failed in my quest to meet with the dragon queen and save Galen. I had *failed* when Libran chose me!”

“But you were there, Joryn. Think of how far you had already gone. And you accepted the help when it was given. And you didn’t turn back after you and Illium had been rescued. You kept on going. Perhaps you did ask for this after all. Perhaps you did announce to the world that you were *just* the man for the job.”

Dismissively, he shrugged. “I can’t think about that, I guess.”

She giggled affectionately. “If you say so, my prince.”

“And as for Drae,” he said, still solemn, “do let me know if there is *anything* that I can do to help him.”

“Remain true to him,” the priestess answered. “That, in itself, may be all the comfort you can give. I have no illusions that I can save him from his fate.”

Joryn nodded, looked to the rafters. “Look after her, Bill.”

“She hardly needs that,” the war bird said in reply.

Tianna smiled. “But I do appreciate the sentiment.”

### CHAPTER 3: AN IMPOSSIBLE STEED

“I CAN’T THINK OF ONE MORE THING to do that could possibly fix this,” Princess Enjinia said, as she stood up from her place on the floor in Kaped’s workshop and wiped the grease from her forehead with her sleeve.

Kaped nodded, looking the Unitron over as though his gaze alone could repair it. “It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“You sure you want to take him?” Enjinia asked. “You could take Lance instead, just to irk Vail.”

Kabed stroked his slender goatee, grinning. “That’s an idea. But I just can’t tear myself away from the mystery *this* one presents.”

Joryn, having walked into the room mere minutes before, greeted by a wall of determined silence, as Kabed and Enjinia worked on the Unitron, spoke up at last from his place beside Quickwing and Prince Dorago. “Kabed, Kail did come by here, didn’t he?”

“Hmm?” Suddenly remembering that he was not alone, Kabed turned to the observers with a look of surprise that they were still watching him. “Oh! Yes, Joryn. He was here about, oh ...”

“An hour ago,” Enjinia finished for him.

“Kabed,” Joryn said, somewhat irritably, “we have to get on the road. The others are waiting by the elevators at the front gate. Are you even packed yet?”

“Sorry, Joryn. I got distracted. But yes, I packed last night.” He patted his chest. “Tech

armor's running at maximum efficiency. *I'm* ready. It's Marley I'm worried about."

"That's *Marley*?" Joryn asked, regarding the Unitron that had been the center of the room's attention. "You actually managed to *repair* him?"

"Well," Kaped said, dubiously, "sort of."

"What's wrong with him then?"

"That's just it. I have no idea." The Deluvian tech wizard regarded the mechanical unicorn with a smirk. "Marley, why don't *you* tell the prince what's wrong with you?"

Joryn was startled when the Unitron answered with nasal laughter, far from the standard lifelessly synthetic voice of the other Unitrons. "Yeah! Hey, Joryn!" the Unitron said. "Yeah!" He laughed some more. "Hey, Joryn! Heeeeeeeey!!!" Marley jumped up and down excitedly, then started shuffling around in circles, backwards, and humming a happy little tune.

Wide-eyed, Joryn asked, "What's wrong with his voice? He sounds like a ... like a ... Well," Joryn laughed, in spite of his irritation at Kaped's tardiness. "I don't know *what* he sounds like."

“He sounds like a damn fool,” Kated said, with a shake of his head. “And there’s no reason at all that he should.”

“Kated put him back together perfectly,” Enjinia assured her younger brother. “Bolt for bolt. Spring for spring. I double checked for him. Nothing is out of place. Not one metal plate, not one screw.”

“His vocal component is in perfect shape,” Kated added. “His central processor is in top condition. He’s been repaired and put back together just like any other Unitron. But, he’s *nothing* like the other Unitrons at all.”

Quickwing laughed, delighted with the whole thing. “It’s his life spark, Kated.”

“His life spark?” the Deluvian asked, skeptical.

“Mm hmm.” The winged Celestian nodded, as though it were the most obvious and most wonderful thing to discover in a robot. “My people believe that the Great Spirit is in *all* things. It permeates the universe, even as it exists outside and far beyond it. The Great Spirit is in all times and all places simultaneously, without beginning, without end, even in things seen as ‘lifeless’ by so

many. Where the Great Spirit is, there is life. Where the Great Spirit is, there is consciousness. Because the Great Spirit is both alive and conscious. When Marley was crushed by that boulder during the Battle of Chiroptera, his life spark was pushed beyond the confines of his body. He touched the Great Spirit in a way that most carnal beings never do, without the limitations of his worldly vessel. He has returned to us now, transformed. His life spark has been enlightened.”

Marley stopped turning and studied the Celestian. “Do you like pancakes?” the Unitron asked in a high-pitched, inquisitive voice.

“I do!” Quickwing answered merrily.

Everyone laughed, except for Kaped.

“Well, then, his *life spark* is weird!” Kaped grumbled.

“Indeed,” Quickwing agreed. “The Great Spirit has a sense of humor, just as surely as any of us does.”

Kaped sighed. “I guess I’ll take another one. It would be fun to vex Vail by taking Lance, so that he can’t steal him while I’m away.”

“Take Marley,” Quickwing suggested.

Joryn laughed. “Miiko, that poor Unitron has gone crazy. What good would he be on our mission?”

The Celestian shrugged. “Marley is what he is. Kated may have built him, may have set a particular course for him with expectations on how he would behave, on *who* he would be. But Kated did *not* create Marley’s life spark. He only provided the housing for it. Just because someone does not turn out to be exactly who their maker thinks they *should* be, does not make them a flawed being. The failing is in the eyes of the parent who does not accept the child’s path as the child’s own. Give Marley a chance to be Marley, Kated. I think he is a gift from—”

“The Great Spirit,” Kated finished for the Celestian, grumpily. “I know.” He sighed again. “Well, like I said, *technically* he’s perfectly fine. He’s just—”

“Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeird!” Marley finished for him. “Blab la blue blue blue. I like pink!” He hopped up and down happily. “Can I go?”

Kated looked to Joryn, terrified of making the decision himself.

Joryn laughed. “Bring him, Kaped. If only just to get us moving without further delay.”

“All right then,” Kaped said. “You’re the prince.”

“Yay!” shouted Marley. “I can go! I can go!” He stopped abruptly and looked directly at Kaped. “Are you my mommy?”

Kaped looked to Joryn, Quickwing, and Dorago helplessly.

“Yep,” Enjinia answered for him. “Kaped is indeed your ‘mommy,’ Marley.”

“Yay!” Marley shouted, bouncing again. “Mommy has a mustache! Yaaaay!”

Kaped pointed to Joryn and Quickwing. “This is *completely* on you. Just so we’re clear.”

Joryn laughed again. “Just don’t think of him the way you do your other Unitrons, Kaped. Think of him as ...” He thought for a moment. “... Lute.”

“You want me to think of him as a seven-year-old centaur boy?” Kaped considered the idea, then shrugged and shook his head in resignation. “Somehow, that does make it easier.” Kaped grabbed his bag and slung it over Marley’s

back before mounting up himself. “All right, Marley, let’s go to the main gate.”

“Okay, Mustache!” Marley began to walk towards the door of Kaped’s garage.

“Marley,” Kaped said, struggling with his patience.

“Yeah, boss?”

“If you walk with your head in *front*, you can actually see where you’re going.”

“Right, boss!” Marley turned around and headed out the door.

“I’ll clean up,” Enjinia shouted after them.

“I would have joined you,” Dorago said solemnly to Joryn, “if Father had allowed it. We all owe much to Longshot and his companions.”

Joryn put a hand on his brother’s shoulder, noting once again the stark contrast of the soft, unassuming voice with the tattoos, shaved head, and brawny frame that would have greatly intimidated anyone who did not know him. “I know, Dor. I wish you could come as well. Your offer has been made known.”

Prince Dorago nodded, which was his preferred method of communication. That he had said anything at all lent much weight to his

sincerity in wanting to repay the heroes who had saved the palace from the Wanderer. To his sister, he gave an inquisitive look and held up his hands.

“By all means, Dor,” she said.

With that, Dorago began helping his sister to clean up Kaped’s workspace.

“See you all in a few weeks, I guess,” Joryn said, as he turned to leave.

“Joryn,” Quickwing said. “Are you certain that you’re up for this?”

“What do you mean, Miiko?”

“I mean, your cast just came off this morning. The mission to Mech Valley has waited this long. Another day might not hurt. There would be no shame in taking a day to be sure that you are fully healed.”

“I am moved by your concern, Miiko. But the fact remains, the cast *did* come off, and we have waited long enough. How many days after you were declared fully healed did you wait before you flew again?”

The Celestian flexed his great, angelic wings. “Wait? Me? I was talking about *you*.” He laughed, and Joryn joined him.

“And on that first eager flight of yours, you recovered my sword. I’m better for your failure to give yourself another day to heal. Don’t worry, my friend,” Joryn assured him. “If these past few months have taught me anything, it is to temper confidence with caution ... and to temper caution with confidence. One is of little use without the other.”

“Wisdom,” Quickwing agreed. “May the Spirit guide you on your quest.”

Joryn nodded with a smile, and he headed after Kabed and Marley.

Across the room, Dorago nodded to Quickwing with quiet approval, and Quickwing happily went to join the prince and princess in cleaning up Kabed’s mess.

## CHAPTER 4: ROAD TO MECH VALLEY

AS THE HEROES LEFT THE MOUNTAIN palace behind them, beginning the nearly two-week journey to Mech Valley, they took the occasion of their long trek to get better acquainted with one another. Joryn had of course known Illium all of his life, and Kabed had been known to them both for the past five years. Longshot, Trig, and Lowgun, however, had been

with them less than two months, and Marley was a puzzle who had only just been introduced.

“You’re from TexStar, aren’t you?” Joryn asked Longshot, as they rode side-by-side.

Longshot grinned. “How’d you figure?”

“It’s your accent. You have a distinct Tex-Starian drawl.”

“I thought you said you’d never been out that far west.”

“I haven’t. But I got to know some people from there, when I was at Leadership Camp last year.”

“Leadership Camp?” Longshot asked. “Sounds like something—” he and Lowgun exchanged a look, as the reptisaur rode beside him on his *Dragon Racer*. “What the heck is that?”

“It’s a summer camp for the sons and daughters of nobles,” Joryn answered. “Kings, queens, lords, governors, various other self-proclaimed VIPs across Nod, all send their offspring there, so that they can learn how to be effective diplomats and heirs to whatever duties await them when they inherit whatever mantle their parents have lined up for them in the future.”

“Sounds ... fun,” Longshot offered sarcastically.

Joryn shrugged with a contented smile. “I don’t know. Kail loved it when he went. He was elected chair three years in a row. Willowyll did nearly just as well as Kail. Vail was never out of trouble when he went. As for me, I found better ways to pass the time than to sit around all day practicing courtly procedures and learning the legislative processes.”

Longshot eyed the prince shrewdly. “I don’t suppose Lord Galen went to Leadership Camp?”

Joryn smiled slyly.

Longshot laughed. “All right! Story time! So how *did* you pass the time?”

“I made interesting friends.”

“Don’t play coy with me, man! We’ve got two weeks of travel before we have anything to do. I expect a good story outa you at least once a day.”

“I snuck out,” Joryn said. “A lot. Found adventures in the surrounding villages. I always made the scheduled meetings and faux legislative sessions, but I also never missed an opportunity to invent a distraction for myself.”

“And?”

“And, yes,” Joryn laughed happily. “Galen was there too, and he was up to the very same scheme. That’s how we met. I ran into him at the market square one day. We had *both* made an escape, and we had been doing so independently all along. After that, we were cohorts, always sneaking off *together*. And then ...” He grinned, but realized he might have become too free with Galen’s own story.

“And *then*?”

“We got to know each other better. A lot better.”

“I knew you met at Leadership Camp last year,” Kabed said, riding on the other side of Joryn and Illium. “But I never did get all the juicy details.”

“Yeah,” Joryn said. “I was never even really comfortable calling him more than a friend, officially, until after the whole dragon thing. That’s when I realized it was ridiculous to be in denial about it; I had fallen in love. Besides, I’m not one to kiss and tell.”

“Why not?” Kabed asked. “I kiss and tell all the time.”

“I know, but you never really care about them, do you?” Joryn pointed out.

“Well, I certainly can’t say I’ve ever gotten tied down,” Kated conceded.

“That’s the difference though, Kated,” Joryn said. “You see it as being tied down. What I found with Galen ... It’s like finding the other half of yourself, when you never realized it was missing in the first place. What Galen and I have is special to me. I wouldn’t degrade it, I wouldn’t degrade *him*, by letting it turn into lewd tavern gossip.”

“If you say so,” Kated allowed, disappointment plain in his voice. “But see if I tell you about the next tavern maiden I—”

“Who cares about the *next* one, Kated?” Longshot asked. “I want to hear about the *last* one!” All three of the young men laughed at this.

“What about you, Longshot?” Joryn asked. “What’s your story?”

The young gunslinger shrugged. “Nothin’ much to tell. I was born. Nineteen years later, here I am. Short story.”

Joryn laughed. “Nonsense! I want to know how you came by that one-of-a-kind horse of

yours that even *Kabed* doesn't recognize. How did you and Lowgun pair up? How did you manage to win the heart of this princess we're off to rescue?"

"Me an' Lowgun ran around the Wyyrd Outback for a *while*," Longshot said. "We just sort of liked to town-hop. At least we did when it made sense. And town-hopping makes a *lot* of sense in the Wyyrd Outback. We were in Pumpkin Land for a while, and Lowgun entered a speedracer competition. It's sorta his thing. I met Pumpkitina there. After Lowgun won, he was presented to the queen, and Princess Pumpkitina gave him a kiss. Of course, she wasn't hot for him or anything, what with him being a gross ol' lizard and all."

Lowgun cleared his throat. "I'm right here, hair head. And I wouldn't have gone for her anyway. Not my type."

"Well, she was sure *my* type!"

"Everyone is your type."

"Says you." Longshot thought a moment. "Well, not *everyone*, but maybe *almost* ... I mean, what's wrong with having more than one type anyway?"

“Nothing,” Lowgun said. “I just think it’s funny, because it’s harder to stay out of trouble when you can’t help but flirt with just about everyone you meet.”

“I never flirted with you or Trig!”

“I know,” Lowgun allowed, “and I thank the gods for that!”

“Whatever,” Longshot muttered. “You know you’d like it.”

“With your permission, my prince,” Lowgun said to Joryn, changing the subject abruptly, “I’d like to scout ahead for a while, before listening to Longshot rattle on sours my stomach too much more.”

Joryn laughed. “Go ahead, Lowgun.”

Without any further words, the *Dragon Racer* sped off and was soon out of sight.

“Is he angry?” Joryn asked.

“Nah,” Longshot answered, laughing. “He’s not mad. He always does that. He loves speed, and the *Dragon Racer*, as you can see, is built for it. He usually goes way ahead of me and Trig and finds a good campsite. He’ll have one all set up for us when we catch up with him.”

“So, what can you tell us about where we’re going?” Kated asked Longshot. “The Wyyrd Outback, Pumpkin Land, Mech Valley? I know a little about these places, but I’ve never been there myself.”

Longshot thought for a moment about the nature of the Outback, his lips curling into a smile. “Well, I can’t really say much in a general way about the Outback. Place is dramatically different from one town to the next. Heck, it’s different from one patch of dirt to the next. Crazy, *crazy* place. But it’s a blast, and it’s a great place to get lost in, if you ever need to. Not sure where all we’ll be stopping to camp on the way, but just before we get to the valley, I’m sure we’ll stop in Boom Town to get sorted before we head into N’obotto’s territory. Things won’t get dangerous till we get into the valley.” Longshot shuddered. “I never thought I’d go back there. In fact, after I picked Trig up there, I more or less vowed it. But here we are, heading there for the love of Pumpkitina.

“As for Mech Valley, it’s right in the center of the Outback. Like a crack in the world. The pit where all the bad happens. Most of the Outback’s

a blast, like I told ya, but Mech Valley is an oppressive place. And I can't say I've got many friends there." He considered. "If any, really. Well, other than Pumpkitina, but she's a prisoner!

"And her home, Pumpkin Land, is a wondrous place! Weird pumpkin people, a pretty goofy couple of monarchs, gorgeous Princess Pumpkitina, buildings that look like giant gourds, a trans-dimensional waste-disposal system—"

"A *what?*" Kated asked.

"I said they've got a trans-dimensional waste-disposal system."

"What does that even mean?"

"It means they flush their *stuff* into another universe."

"Ha ha!" chirped Marley. "Poopie!"

"Yeah, man. *That* stuff," Longshot confirmed.

Joryn, listening intently, removed a flask full of water from one of Illium's saddle bags and took a drink.

"Of course, they also use it to travel," Longshot added.

Joryn spit the water out of his mouth, taken completely off guard by the comment. He wiped

away the dribble on his chin, as Kaped laughed at him.

Illium whinnied grumpily and shook the water from his mane.

Chagrined, Joryn patted the unicorn's neck. "Sorry, Illium."

"Not at all, my prince." Illium bucked up just enough that Joryn rose in the saddle and landed back down hard enough to smart.

"Ow!" The prince joined the unicorn in playful laughter. "It won't happen again, old friend. Next time, I'll spit on someone else."

"See that you do," Illium replied smugly.

Joryn turned his attention back to Longshot, remembering what had caused him to react in such a way in the first place. "You mean they travel by ... *toilet*?"

"Yep," Longshot confirmed. "Weird place, Pumpkin Land. Great place for adventure, but I wouldn't want to live there."

"All right," Kaped said, trying to change the subject, "you've gone on and on for weeks about your lady love. What is it about this much-praised princess of yours that so captured your heart when you met her at that race?"

Longshot shrugged. “Ah, you know; she was there.”

As Joryn and Kabed exchanged a perplexed look, Illium chuckled under his breath.

Both at mid-day and at sundown, Lowgun had meals ready and waiting for his friends. They stopped for lunch just outside of the Labyrinth of Blossoms, which they wisely elected afterwards to go around, rather than through. When they made camp at sundown, they were still an hour’s ride from the Kingdom of Brethmour. They might have pressed on and taken rooms in an inn, but it would not have placed them in Mech Valley significantly earlier, so it was better, they agreed, to build a camp where they were and get some much-needed rest. Fortunately, Lowgun had anticipated this, and he had already set up camp, with a fire and food cooking.

As they took their meal around the fire, Longshot shared his excitement over their journey. “I can’t wait till you guys get to Boom Town. It’s sort of like the heart of the Outback,

just outside of the valley. There's a pretty good mix there from all parts."

"I've been to Boom Town before," Illium informed the gunslinger amiably. "When I was much, much younger of course."

"Really? What'd you think of it then?"

"It was much as you described. It was like going to a carnival that never closed down for the night."

"Yeah!" Longshot agreed. "Of course, if you guys *really* want something like that, we should stop in Carnival Town on the way back. It's a little to the northeast of Boom Town, but it's well worth the detour."

"There's a *Carnival* Town?" Kabed asked.

"There's all *sortsa* towns," Longshot beamed.

"Perhaps another time, Longshot," Joryn said. "I'll be eager, once we've finished our work in the valley, to be on my way to Galen and the Whispering Plains. We've been far too long apart."

"I understand *that*," Longshot conceded.

"We all knew, by the way," Kabed said to Joryn with a grin, as he lay back on his elbows and relaxed.

“Knew what?” Joryn asked.

“About you and Galen. During that whole year after you got back from camp, when he kept finding reasons to visit the palace.”

Joryn grinned and shook his head.

“I don’t know why you felt like you needed to pretend that you were just friends for all of that time. It’s not like you’d never had suitors before.”

“I know.” Joryn shrugged. “Galen’s more than that. As I told you before. I guess I was just hesitant to make it official. I didn’t want it to become something ... *political*. Galen didn’t either. There’s a lot of political tension that goes with courting an Imperial prince, especially if you’re the son of a colonial lord. There are jealousies from other realms to be tolerated and guarded against, accusations of courtly intrigue, of personal agendas, ulterior motives. Not to mention the possible pressure from his family to make it just that. I think we just wanted to be ‘friends’ for as long as we could. At least, as far as the rest of the Empire was concerned. We wanted to keep what we had found in each other to ourselves.” He shook his head, smiling still. “It

just stopped making sense, after Din. Really, it had stopped making sense well before that, but it was undeniable after that, on the journey home. We had weeks to be alone with each other before we returned to the palace.”

“You weren’t quite alone,” Illium added, a teasing tone in his voice. “Though you both seemed to forget that fact, every time we made camp for the night.”

Joryn laughed and tossed a passing tumbleweed at the unicorn. “Still mad about losing so much sleep on that journey, Illium?”

“I slept fine. Unfortunately, I did have nightmares as a result of your ... amorous behavior.”

Joryn laughed at this, as did Kabed and Longshot. “I’m sorry if human affection gives you nightmares.”

“I wouldn’t call it affection so much as ... raucous athleticism.”

Kabed and Longshot both hooted at this, forcing Joryn to blush in the light of the fire.

“All right,” Joryn said, perfectly amused in spite of his embarrassment, “this is getting dangerously close to that lewd tavern gossip I

refused to give in to. And *Illium* of all people is the one who took it there!”

“Yeah,” Longshot agreed. “Sir Illium is my kind of unicorn!”

“We thought he was sleeping soundly at first,” Joryn admitted. “But then he started to wander off at night, and we figured it out. We tried to keep it down after that.”

“Tried,” Illium said, a wink in his eye.

“I’m in *love*, you silly old stallion!” Joryn threw another tumbleweed at the unicorn, playfully, and Illium laughed good-naturedly.

Joryn shook his head, smiling. “Now, if we could talk about something more relevant, I think we need to go over our plan for getting the princess out of Mech Valley.”

“It definitely needs work,” Lowgun reiterated.

“What work?” Longshot asked. “It’s a great plan. We go into Mech Valley, get into N’obotto’s mansion, rescue Pumpkitina, and go home. Easy as pie.”

Lowgun shook his head, and Kabed laughed.

Kabed looked to Joryn. “He *is* joking, right?” When no one said anything, he asked, a little bit frantically, “That’s not *really* the extent of our plan, is it?” He looked over his shoulder. “Marley! Stop eating dirt!”

“I’m pretending it’s pancakes!”

“It’s dirt!” To Joryn, he said, “Tell me you have a better plan.”

Joryn sighed. “Well, we had a plan this morning that involved *everyone* and a Fighter Disc. We left with just the seven of us. The plan has changed, but so far it hasn’t changed into anything more than just *not* the plan we had before. Yeah, Longshot’s pretty much got it down.”

“It needs work,” Lowgun said again.

“I know, Lowgun,” acknowledged Joryn. “And we have the better part of two weeks to work on it.”

“The journey shouldn’t be a problem,” Lowgun said. “Even when we get into the Outback. It’ll be strange, but not dangerous if we keep to the roads. The trouble comes when we get into Mech Valley.”

“What sort of trouble?” Kabed asked.

“Oh, you know,” Longshot answered for the reptisaur. “I may have ticked some folks off when I left the valley.”

Joryn nodded. “So, we need to be vigilant about keeping a low profile. When we had the Fighter Disc in the plan, we would have probably just landed in Boom Town and headed right into the Valley before anyone knew we were there.”

“You’re the big issue here,” Kaped said to the prince. “You and Illium. Who *isn’t* going to talk about seeing the champion of Libran and his bionic unicorn steed passing through their town? Why didn’t we think this through before we left?”

“We *did* think it through,” Joryn insisted. “The plan got trashed by my ... by the emperor’s council ... because of the Wanderer’s attack.”

“Well, why didn’t they let us know they were going to pull the rug out from under us before this morning?” Kaped asked, disgusted.

Joryn sighed, wearily. “I don’t have an answer that would satisfy either one of us, Kaped. But here we are, and we must work with what we have. For one, you make a valid point about our fame. We should travel *around* the major towns as much as we can. It should cost us mere hours, in

the end, rather than days. Better yet, tomorrow Lowgun can drive through Brethmour and buy appropriate barding for Illium in a local shop, with a trapper long enough to cover his legs. I don't think anyone will recognize me if Illium is sufficiently disguised."

Lowgun shook his head. "I think that would slow us down significantly. Barding needs to be made custom for a steed like Illium, and a trapper that could fully cover his legs? I think we would need to all stop in Brethmour, to have Illium fitted, and then all would know that the famous Peace-Bringer and his steed had been to their kingdom and purchased a custom wardrobe for Illium. Word would spread. The disguise would serve to herald our arrival in each town thereafter, rather than conceal it."

"All right," Joryn said. "Then we avoid as many of the towns and kingdoms along the way as we can without losing too much time. And when we get to the Outback—"

"Don't worry about the Outback, man," Longshot said. "No one there knows anything about what happens in the Empire. They won't

recognize you and Illium even if you tell them who you are.”

“Even so,” Joryn said, “let’s not use my real name when we get there.”

Longshot shrugged. “If you say so, but I’m tellin’ ya, there’s nobody out there who cares.”

“*You*, however,” Lowgun said to his partner, “are a different story altogether.”

“Me? What about you? We were in on that Mech Valley thing together, if you’ll recall.”

“Yes,” Lowgun said, “but I am *much* better at keeping a low profile than you are. We have to play it safe, stick to the shadows, blend in. At least *try* not to stick out like a two-legged centaur.”

“What ‘Mech Valley thing’ are you talking about, Longshot?” Joryn asked, concern evident in his tone.

“Oh,” Longshot waved it away nonchalantly. “Just one of our wilder capers. But it was *years* ago. No one’s gonna remember us in the Valley.”

“I hope you’re right,” Joryn said solemnly. “Everything depends on it at this point. I think, for now, we’ve got the only plan that will work.”

“So what happens when we get to the Valley?” Kaped asked. He looked to Longshot. “You said it was different than the rest of the Outback. You said it’s where all of the bad happens. Can you give us a better idea what that means?”

“It’s complicated,” Longshot said. “The whole place is run like it’s some sort of computer program. Even the people. The cubeks. They all have this weird mental disorder, like they don’t know how to talk to people. They get fixated. Can’t really think about more than one thing at a time.

“The Mech Valley Authority is the same. They don’t think. They just follow some sort of predetermined ‘program’ that tells them how to respond to any given scenario. They can’t adapt either. Even the humans in Mech Valley’s Authority act that way, because they *have* to. N’obotto rules the entire valley, and he owns the Authority. Anyone steps out of line, and he has them blasted.” Longshot looked to Trig then, a sad expression on his face. “Yeah, maybe we should have thought to have a *couple* of fancy trappers made before we left. But I guess we’re in it now.” He shook off the serious tone quickly.

“Anyway, we get into Mech Valley, we don’t attract any attention, which is *easy* if we just follow all of the rules and behave the way we’re *supposed* to.”

Lowgun snickered at this.

“Which I *can* do, *partner*,” Longshot said to the reptisaur. “And then, we get into the mansion, which isn’t as hard as it sounds. N’obotto’s always throwing parties, from what I’ve heard. Never been to the mansion myself, but I’ve heard lots of stories. We can probably just fall in with a crowd, procure some disguises if we need ’em, head right in, and find Pumpkitina.”

“This is still a terrible plan,” Kated said.

“But it’s the best we’ve got,” Joryn pointed out. “I’m open to better suggestions for as long as it takes us to get there. I know this plan is full of holes and uncertainties, but if the Outback is as out of touch as Longshot says it is, then we may, in fact, have no real trouble until we get to N’obotto’s mansion. If things go awry, we can always send a distress signal through Marley back to the palace.”

Kated nodded, resigning himself to the situation. “You’re right. And it’s not the fault of

anyone here that the original plan was scrapped at the last minute.” He nodded again, mostly to reassure himself. “We’ll be fine.”

“We’ve been through worse,” Joryn pointed out.

“That we have,” Kabed agreed. “That we have.”

“You know,” Longshot said, “unless Torakku N’obotto’s got an army of blood drinking Chirops, or robot apes with laser guns that we don’t know about. It *has* been a couple of years.”

Everyone glared at Longshot.

“We’ll be fine,” Joryn and Kabed firmly declared in unison.

The group continued travelling, without great incident, stopping to rest each night when they caught up with Lowgun, who had either prepared a campsite for them or found them room and board in a village or city along the way that was too big to travel around without adding days to their journey. They continued to trade stories, getting to know much more about each other’s personalities, if not their pasts. Joryn noted that

everyone seemed fairly aloof with their histories aside from himself, and so the tales of his own life fueled the conversation more than anything the others had to offer. Indeed, after ten days, he still knew no more about how Longshot, Lowgun, and Trig had teamed up, nor why they had left the Wyyrd Outback, than he had learned on the very first day of their journey.

Ten days after setting out, they at last crossed into the Wyyrd Outback. Joryn was amazed at how suddenly the world changed around them. Almost as soon as they rode into the territory, they were greeted by a cluster of drunken trees who were arguing over politics and sports, until the trees got the two subjects confused, became extremely angry with each other, then laughed it off and started singing old drinking songs from centuries past.

Joryn and his men passed up the opportunity to let thirty sentient sandwiches wash the “windshields” of their steeds for money, mostly because none of their steeds, in fact, *had* windshields; a fact that did not seem to confront the sandwiches in the least.

There were strange metal wrecks in the wilderness of the Outback that Longshot called “airplanes,” which had come from the Outer World. Longshot explained that the Outback was subject to periodic vortex storms that opened up portals between other worlds, and sometimes these airplanes would fly through, and their passengers and pilots would be stranded in Nod forever.

Joryn had known of time storms that sometimes opened up portals through time in the Lost Desert, but he had never heard of storms that opened up similar portals between worlds. He had never known trees or sandwiches to speak, for that matter, and the marvels of the Wyyrd Outback threatened to overwhelm him. So little was known of this part of Nod, or at least if it *was* known it was not widely spoken of. This was an alien realm, and the sheer number of unknowns filled Joryn with an uncomfortable fear that he struggled to keep hidden, masking his unpleasant reactions to the absurd visions that continued to cross their paths with amusement and sometimes open shock. He tried to take comfort in the fact that Longshot, Lowgun, and Trig were perfectly

at ease with the oddities all around them and had spent years in this environment before ever meeting Joryn and his friends in Chiroptera.

“They *say* the Outback was already a strange enough place three-thousand years back,” Longshot explained, “but the Sorcerers’ War sent it over the edge.”

“The Sorcerers’ War,” Joryn repeated. “*That* I’ve heard of. It was the war that wiped out the Sentinels.”

“Yep,” Longshot confirmed. “That’s the one. Anyway, a final cataclysm of mystical energy ended the war, ended the Sentinels, and ended both factions of sorcerers, leaving magical fallout to forever alter the Outback.”

“That actually explains a great deal,” Joryn said.

“Yes,” Kaped put in. “When science is at a loss, a sorcerer probably did it.” He laughed.

“Hey, man,” Longshot said, “talking sandwiches.”

“Well, in this case, a sorcerer *did* do it,” Kaped conceded. “Lots of sorcerers. We know of the Sorcerers’ War in Deluvia. In fact, the

Outback has always been of interest to us, for a number of reasons.”

They passed another crashed airplane. “These airplanes look so different from one another,” Joryn noted. “But this is the second one I’ve seen with those marks on it. The stylized cross.”

“Yeah,” Longshot said. “Those guys are a puzzle. Thing is, planes fly through in the same storm sometimes, from the same world, but they aren’t from the same *time*. Vortex storms are funny like that. Folks around here tend to stay inside and help the refugees from other worlds after things have died down. The guys from the airplanes with those crosses, which are called ‘swastikas’ as they tell it, are no fun to help. I’ve met a few in taverns here and there. They’ve got some funny ideas about exploiting the power of Nod to return to their own world. But the thing is, they might as well give up on that, because there’s no tellin’ *when* they’ll arrive in their own world *if* they get through a vortex that *happens* to lead there. They must have been powerful where they came from, but here they’re just kind of funny, angry little men. You see a guy wearin’ one

a those crosses on their arm when we stop in Boom Town, just avoid them. They tend to segregate themselves anyway. But they're only a tiny sample of the people who come through. Most folks from the Outer World are nice and acclimate to their new situation pretty fast."

"The Outer World," Joryn said, dreamily. "I'm riding through a world that is *nothing* like the world I know now, and yet there is another world, perhaps many worlds, beyond Nod altogether. Where did it all come from?"

"Depends who ya ask," Longshot said.

Joryn nodded, contemplating the tales of the Twelve Gods of Nod whom he now knew to be less than what they claimed to be. Guardians, Tianna had called them. They had come to Nod with the first humans, from the Outer World, long after the dragons. The dragons said that Nod had been created by the One to give them a place to live, and that humans had taken over the Outer World. According to Onri Sprigg, humans still ruled it. But where had the Outer World come from? If the One, god of the dragons, had created it, then where had the One come from? How *many* worlds were there in the cosmos?

Joryn realized he would have his work cut out for him just understanding the world of his own origin, as they rode farther into the Wyyrd Outback, and all of his ideas about reality were put into question.

“Yes,” Kabed said, facetiously. “I’ve heard more creation myths than I can count over the years. So, let’s just face scientific fact. A sorcerer did it.”

## CHAPTER 5: A NIGHT IN BOOM TOWN

**T**WO NIGHTS LATER, THE GROUP FINALLY arrived in Boom Town, the last outpost before they reached Mech Valley. Lowgun had already arranged accommodations at a local inn, when the others met up with him. Once they had checked in and staked out their beds for the night, the humanoids in the building proper and the equines in the stable out back, Lowgun was more than ready to savor their last hours of peace

before the inevitable dangers of the day to come. He lay down on his bed with a sigh, flicking his long, reptilian tongue out into the air quickly, as if to taste the promised serenity of the night itself. “Last sleep before we get our blades out, boys. I suggest we rest up.”

“You are *old*, Lowgun,” Longshot protested with a laugh. “We’re back in *Boom Town*, man! We have to at *least* hit up Fizzme’s Womp Shop before we turn in!”

Lowgun sat up, tensing at the idea that his rest would be put off. “Fizzme’s Womp Shop is *not* my idea of resting up. *Or* keeping a low profile.”

“Well,” Longshot said with an air of finality, “I’m goin’, and I’m showing these boys a good time. We’re in Boom Town! No one will know who they are anyway. And no one who might recognize you or me would ever suspect we were heading to Mech Valley in the morning.”

“Fine,” Lowgun said unhappily, knowing he would never be able to talk his impetuous young friend out of the idea. “But no one drinks any womp tonight. We have to all have clear heads tomorrow.”

“What is womp?” Joryn asked.

“It’s the sound yer face makes when it hits the floor after you drink it,” Longshot answered with a laugh.

Joryn smiled. “I’m with Lowgun then; I’ll pass on the womp. But maybe a night out in civilization would do us some good before tomorrow. Is there anything else to do here?”

“Plenty,” Longshot assured the prince. “But Fizzme’s is the place to be. There’s more to do there than just drinking. Music, dancing, cards. Fizzme’s has got it all.”

“Sounds like my kind of establishment,” Kaped said. “I’m in.”

Joryn shook his head in bemusement at Kaped. “So grumpy about the plan until someone wants to take you to a seedy tavern.”

“I do have my priorities,” Kaped said. “And those priorities include, but are not limited to, fine ales and dancing girls.”

Joryn and Longshot laughed, and Lowgun sighed, as he stood from the bed. “All right, humans. If we must go, then let’s get on with it.”

“You don’t have to go, if you don’t want to, old man,” Longshot said. “We’ll be real quiet if you’re asleep when we get back in.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Lowgun said. “And if you’re going, I’m going just to keep you out of trouble, Longshot. Especially after the last time.”

“The *last* time? What do you—?” Longshot laughed as the memory struck him. “Oh, yeah. Well, come on then. Let’s go get the others out of the stables.”

“Fine, fine,” Lowgun said with a huff. “But,” he pointed a finger directly in Longshot’s face, “*no* womp!”

“Hey,” Longshot shrugged innocently. “Do I *look* like the reckless type? We can get plenty of womp on the trip back.”

Lowgun nodded. “It is a good plan then. Let’s get the others.”

“Fizzme!” Longshot shouted, arms open wide, as they approached the neon glow of the bar at the center of Fizzme’s Womp Shop. “A round of

your strongest womp for me and my friends! And make mine a triple!”

Joryn surveyed the strangeness of his surroundings with wide, disbelieving eyes. Fizzme’s Womp Shop was nothing short of a sampler of all the strange things they’d seen in the Wyyrd Outback thus far, along with more than he could have possibly dreamed there was yet to see. A mix of anthropomorphic plants, animals, and fairly unhealthy snack foods made up the bulk of the tavern’s clientele, along with a variety of perfectly unique creatures that Joryn had never seen in his wildest imaginings. It was like a storybook come to life. He looked ahead, to the man Longshot had addressed as Fizzme, and saw an eight-legged, vaguely humanoid rhinoceros in an apron standing behind the bar on his hind legs. Joryn was once again nonplussed by the sight but tried to cover it up by coughing into his hand.

Beside him, Kabed snickered at his discomfort.

“Longshot!” Fizzme shouted in clear surprise. “Never thought you’d be fool enough to show your pretty face in here again.”

Longshot laughed, sidling up to the bar. “Now why would you think that, Fizz?”

Fizzme raised a rifle from beneath the counter with his third pair of legs, which seemed to function just as well as arms, and pointed the barrel right at Longshot’s chest. “Because, you son of a skeezworm, you skipped out on a pretty damn big tab the last time you were here. I want it paid *right* now, with interest, or I’m gonna put a hole in your chest so big even Doc Puzzler can’t put you back together again. Savvy?”

Wide eyed, Longshot protested, raising his hands in the air. “Now wait a minute, Fizzme! I’m good for it now! I’m a *knight*!”

Fizzme laughed derisively. “A *knight*? You? On my horn, skeezworm. What order would ever have a rascal like you? Now pay up! *All* of it.” He cocked the hammer on the rifle, making a show of it as he slowly put more pressure on the trigger.

“Order of the Imperial Crown! No lie!”

“Shut up and pay, you lying, scheming, conniving little whelp!”

“Well, I don’t have the *whole* amount—”

“Will this cover my friend’s tab?” Joryn asked, placing a bag of Imperial coins on the counter with a forced, though charming, smile.

Fizzme eyed Joryn, then the coin purse. Keeping the rifle aimed at Longshot, as he passed it up to his second pair of leg-arms, he reassigned his third pair to the task of opening the bag and counting. “Imperial coin, eh? I’ll take it, kid. Just keep your friend here out of trouble tonight.” He took the coins and returned the rifle to its place beneath the counter, starting to pour drinks for the group of travelers. Eyeing Longshot and pushing a glass towards him, he huffed, “And we don’t *do* triples, idjit. This here’s a double, which is more than you can handle any day. Drink up now, son. I may not have shot you tonight, but that don’t mean nobody else’ll do it before you leave.”

Longshot raised his glass to Fizzme. “It’s good to be back, Fizzy.”

Fizzme grumbled something unintelligible and shuffled to the other end of the bar.

Joryn whispered to Lowgun, “I thought we weren’t drinking any womp tonight.”

Lowgun huffed. "I figured he would. That's why I came. It's your neck tomorrow, Joryn, but I wouldn't drink that if I were you."

Joryn nodded, politely taking the glass as Longshot handed them out.

A barmaid approached Illium with a pail full of womp.

Illium courteously declined. "Thank you, but I am unable to accept. I have to keep a clear head tonight," he said, staring pointedly at Kaped, who was downing his beverage like it was water.

"Hey, grandpa!" A voice from behind him chimed. "If you don't want that pail, I'll take it."

Illium turned to see three young unicorns, who had clearly already had a pail of womp each, eying him with envy. "Be my guest," he said, and the barmaid hooked the pail over the young unicorn's head.

When the unicorn had finished, he shook off the pail and whinnied with delight. "Thanks, old man! You're all right! Woo hoo!" The youngster and his friends caught sight of a winged red balloon flying past and took great pleasure in boisterously chasing him around the room, much to the poor balloon's distress.

“What was that?” Joryn asked. “I’ve never seen drunk unicorns before. I thought you guys were always composed and dignified.” He laughed.

Illium twitched his ears, a gesture that, for him, equated a human’s shrug. “Even I was a teenager once. Coming to the Outback is something of a rite of passage for some young unicorns. This place offers such a perfect contrast to our society, after all. What could be more fun for a rebellious colt than to travel here and take in such uncharted diversity?”

As he watched the frightened balloon escape through the window, and the drunken young unicorns laughing as they knocked over a table and landed on the floor trying to follow, Joryn asked, “Were *you* ever like *that* when you were a teenager?”

Illium considered, then reluctantly answered, “Possibly.” He stamped a foot, almost like a nervous tick. “But that was nearly a thousand years ago.”

“Don’t worry, my friend,” Joryn said, patting him on the back with a grin. “I would never hold it against you.”

“I should think not,” Illium said with a wink of his eye. “Especially since I once had to change your diaper, when you were just a foal yourself.”

Joryn laughed. “Illium, how could you have changed my diaper? You don’t even have any hands!” Realization dawned on him, and he grimaced. “Oh. Ew.”

Illium nodded. “Precisely why you should always treat me with the utmost veneration.”

“To the venerable Sir Illium,” Joryn said, raising his glass, then merrily pouring its intoxicating contents onto a potted plant.

“Hey! Watch it!” the plant shouted, shaking itself off. “I’m driving tonight!”

“Sorry,” Joryn said, horrified. “I didn’t know you were ... ah ...”

“Typical human!” the plant raged, pushing roots out through the bottom of the pot and walking away stiffly. “Tourist.”

Illium laughed harder than Joryn had known the unicorn could.

Chagrined as Joryn was, he could not help but join him.

“Do you think they got pancakes?” Marley asked.

“My treat if they do, Marley,” Joryn offered, patting the Unitron’s side.

“Oh boy!” Marley made his way up to the bar.

“Hey,” Longshot said, returning to the group. “I found us a booth. Let’s sit down and relax a bit.”

“Not so fast, Longshot!”

Longshot turned to see the barmaid behind him. “Tippayna! Long time no see!”

She slapped him harshly across the face. “You son of a skeezworm!”

“What’d I do?”

“A lot at first. Then *nothing*,” she huffed. “That’s the problem. You said you would call!”

“I was gonna! I just got a little ... busy.”

She slapped him again.

“Hey!” Longshot said, forcing a merry tone. “I’m calling you now, gorgeous! What’s up?”

She walked away, and he stared at her backside, a lustful grin spreading across his face.

“Too late, Longshot!” Tippayna snapped, not bothering to turn back around. “Besides, you’re not my table.”

“Friend of yours?” Kabed asked.

Longshot shrugged. “Of a sort.”

Lowgun shook his head. “Yeah. He’s got lots of *friends* around here. That’s one of the reasons I thought we should stay in.”

“Aw, don’t be like that, ya big lizard.” Longshot motioned for them to follow him. “C’mon. Let’s go sit down.” Longshot led his friends to a booth occupied by what appeared to be a single white rabbit in a red dinner jacket. “Howdy, Maiyer.”

The furry patron looked up, flustered. “Oh! Longshot! What a nice surprise! Please, sit! Sit!” He patted the seat beside him.

Longshot slid into the booth to the right of the rabbit-like creature, followed by Kaped, Joryn, and Lowgun who slid in to the creature’s left, while Illium and Trig simply stood at the open end of the table.

Kaped leaned over to the gunslinger. “Well, at least *someone* here is actually happy to see you.”

Longshot nodded. “Yep. This here’s Maiyer. He’s the mayor.”

“I gathered that,” Kaped said. “Does he have a name?”

“Yeah,” Longshot said. “I just told ya that! His name’s *Maiyer*. Mayor Maiyer; the mayor of Boom Town and a good friend of mine.”

To the rabbit-like creature, he said, “Maiyer, you know Lowgun and Trig.”

“Oh, yes, of course! How good to see you both again don’tcha know!”

The two nodded in the creature’s direction amiably.

“And these are our friends, Kaped of Deluvia, Sir Illium, and ... uh ... Jo,” he said, almost forgetting to introduce Joryn by a covert name.

“Jo,” the mayor repeated, studying the young human from across the table. “My goodness! But you’re Prince Joryn of Nod!” He looked to the unicorn, and this is *the* Sir Illium!” He hopped up onto the table and took a closer look at both of them. “So, the stories are true about the cybernetic legs! This is *wonderful!*”

“I thought you said no one would recognize him in the Outback!” Kaped said to Longshot, crossly.

Longshot shrugged. “I didn’t think anybody would. But Maiyer’s the mayor, and mayors probably keep informed ... maybe?”

The mayor laughed, waving the idea away. “Oh! No, no. It has nothing to do with my position. I mean, really, who cares about Imperial politics out here? Just me. I’ve always been something of an Imperiphile. I know all about the Empire and the royals. Fascinating subject. Terrible business last month, don’tcha know. Terrible business. The Wanderer of all people!”

“Yes,” Joryn answered. “But we are taking steps to fortify against any future attacks. And as for our present business out here, we would prefer it to go unreported.”

“Oh, of course,” Maiyer assured the young prince. “Of course! Mum’s the word, don’tcha know. I wouldn’t tell a soul!”

“Then you have my gratitude, Mayor ... Maiyer.” Joryn smiled. “Where I come from, the rabbits are nothing like you, sir.”

“Rabbit!?” Maiyer recoiled, throwing a scandalized glance to Longshot. “Did he just call me a ... *rabbit?*”

Longshot laughed and shook his head. “Don’t sweat it, Maiyer. He’s new around here.” He looked to Joryn. “Maiyer’s not a rabbit. He’s a *babbit.*”

“My mistake,” Joryn offered apologetically. “I meant no offense. It’s just that I’ve ... never met a *babbit* before. We don’t have babbits in the Empire, that I’m aware of.”

“Oh,” Maiyer said, returning to his seat with a laugh. “That’s perfectly understandable. Even I can’t keep up with all of the forms of life out here, and *I’m* the mayor, don’tcha know!”

“So, what brings you out tonight, Maiyer?” Longshot asked. “Or do I really need to ask?” He grinned knowingly.

“Oh!” The babbit began fanning his reddening fur with a napkin. “Well, of course Miss Ducky’s singing tonight, after the battle of the bands.” He laughed nervously. “I’m such a huge fan of hers, don’tcha know!”

“Oh, I don’t ... I mean, I *do*,” Longshot said, winking at the babbit and causing its fur to go even pinker with embarrassment.

“Oh!” Maiyer said, relieved, as the white returned to his fur. “Here’s our waitress. You boys order whatever you want. It’s on me don’tcha know.”

Kabed noticed the well-formed waitress, catching her eye with a wink.

The tall, slender, anthropomorphic fox already had a full glass of something on her tray that no one had ordered. Her eyes narrowed as she looked down at Longshot, who's attention was still fully Maiyer's. Still glaring daggers at the young human, she said, "The rest of the drinks may be on you, Mister Mayor, but the first one's on *him*." She picked up the full glass on her tray and poured the contents onto Longshot's head.

"Hey!" the gunslinger protested. "What'd ya do that for?" He looked over to the waitress, recognition dawning on his face. "Oh."

"You son of a skeezworm!"

"Why does everyone keep calling me that?"

"You said you would call. I waited three long weeks before I found out you'd skipped town and hooked up with that ... that *pumpkin* woman!"

Joryn leaned over to the babbitt and asked quietly, "What *is* a skeezworm, anyway?"

"Oh!" The babbitt shuddered. "Believe me, you don't wanna know."

Longshot stood, dripping from head to toe yet still managing a grin. "Come on now, Loxie. I meant to call you. But I had to get out of town

fast. And then I heard *you* moved on. So, it's not *my* fault we didn't work out. Right?"

Loxie slapped Longshot harshly across the face. "You *know* I'd have kept on waiting, if I thought you'd ever have come back."

He shrugged, offering a guilty smile. "I'm back now. So ... what're you so fired up about?" He tried to put an arm around her.

She elbowed him in the ribs and backed away. "Sit *down*, Longshot. Like you said, I've moved on. Besides, enough people in town want to shoot you that standing up in a place like this is liable to get you used for target practice."

Longshot took his seat, visibly shamed. "Sorry, Loxie, for what it's worth."

The waitress smiled in spite of herself. "Well, for what it's worth, you were worth the heartbreak. But you're still a son of a—"

"Skeezworm. I know."

Satisfaction in her voice, Loxie pulled out a notepad and a pen. "So, what'll you boys be having?"

Loxie took everyone's orders, and when she had gone, Kabed spoke with a laugh in his voice. "All right, Longshot, I admit it, I'm impressed."

“What do you mean?” Joryn asked, amused.

Kabed shook his head. “Did you not see the way her shirt —?”

“Yeah!” Longshot cut him off. “Her shirt fit *nice*.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Joryn conceded with a laugh.

“Yeah,” Kabed offered a laugh of his own. “You *wouldn’t*.”

To Longshot, he added, “And that barmaid! How many women did you leave behind here, kid?”

Longshot shrugged. “I don’t know.” He looked to Lowgun. “How many nights did we spend here again?”

The reptisaur shook his head. “You really do have some wires loose, man. I’d say your track record with your exes is nothing to brag about.”

Longshot rubbed his cheek, still tingling from the series of slaps he’d received since entering the tavern. “Well, believe me, partner, I’m payin’ for it now.”

“But was it worth it?” Kabed asked.

Longshot laughed. “Every damn minute.”

The two men laughed together.

Lowgun regarded the prince. “What’s this? Not all humans *celebrate* their inability to mate for life?”

Joryn shrugged. “What can I say, Lowgun? I’m a one-man guy.”

To this, Illium and Lowgun both nodded approvingly.

Suddenly, Mayor Maiyer’s eyes bulged out of his head, and he hopped up two feet in the air before landing back in his seat. “Oh! I don’t believe it!” He struggled to push his bulging eyes back where they belonged.

Joryn was shocked at the physical display. “What is it?”

“Oh! It’s Miss Ducky!” the babbitt answered, trying to regain his composure.

A three-foot tall duck in a tiny skirt, her head adorned with jewelry, approached the table then. “Longshot! You son of a skeezworm!” She died laughing at this.

Kabed glared at Longshot in horror, and the younger man shook his head vehemently, trying to change the tech wizard’s thoughts.

Longshot regarded the singer. “Miss Ducky! It’s great to see you!”

“You, too, sweetie. We’ve missed you around here, you know.” She batted her eyes. “What brings you back, after everything that went down when you skipped town?”

“Oh, just knight business. I’m a knight now, Order of the Imperial Crown.”

Miss Ducky scooted into the seat beside him, looking up at him flirtatiously, oblivious to the mayor’s reddening fur. “A knight? Now how did you swing that deal?”

“There’s been a lot of trouble in the Empire of late,” he answered smugly. “I just happened to be in the right place to lend a hand. Trig and Lowgun too.”

“I heard something about that. Something about the Wanderer? Evil robots? Bombs? Sounds like more than a lot of trouble, brown eyes. You need to keep your cute little tushie safe for Miss Ducky now.”

“Aw, you know me, Miss Ducky. On the day I can’t find trouble, trouble finds me.” They both laughed.

Lowgun rolled his eyes, and Joryn couldn’t help but laugh at the way everyone seemed to

have a strong reaction to Longshot, one way or another.

“I hope you and your friends are planning to stay awhile,” Miss Ducky said. “I don’t go on until after the battle of the bands. Frankly, I don’t think I’m the main attraction tonight. I doubt many people will hang around after the main event.”

“Who’s in the battle tonight?” Longshot asked, intrigued.

Miss Ducky sighed tiredly. “Oh, you know, Kid Popstar—”

“Kid Popstar!? Are you serious?” Longshot’s gushing excitement was uncontained. “I *love* Kid Popstar! Always wanted to meet him.”

“Oh, not you too.” Miss Ducky shook her head. “That boy and his Outer World music is wrecking my business. The kids can’t get enough of him. A lot of them just follow him wherever he goes.”

“Wait,” Lowgun said, warily, “if Kid Popstar is in the battle of the bands, then that means—”

“Smokes!” Longshot swore. “That means he *has* to be playing against the Green Monsters!”

“Okay,” Kated said. “I’m lost.”

“You and me both,” Joryn agreed.

“Kid Popstar?” Longshot asked, incredulously. “You seriously never heard of him?”

His friends from the Imperial palace stared blankly, wordlessly answering his question.

“You guys been livin’ under a rock?” He laughed. “Kid Popstar is the New Music sensation of the Outback. The whole thing started a couple a years ago, when Boss Tunes decided he wanted to control all the best music in the universe, so he opened a portal to the Outer World and found a sound he knew the universe couldn’t resist. That sound was Kid Popstar, playing in his garage. So, Boss Tunes pulled him into Nod to be his musical slave, but the Kid escaped and formed a band with two fairies, a magic platypus, and an anthropomorphic beagle. Boss Tunes has been trying to get him back ever since. And the Green Monsters are Tunes’ band that he sent out to try and wreck Kid Popstar’s career, to no avail. The two bands are pretty much eternal arch enemies.”

Kabed stared at Longshot, mouth agape, waiting for a punch line. Then, when he realized

there was none to be had, “That’s the most stupid thing I’ve ever heard.”

Joryn laughed out loud.

Longshot shrugged. “Welcome to the Out-back, man.”

“What in the world is a ‘popstar’ anyway?” Joryn asked, delighted at the word.

“I don’t know,” Longshot confessed. “But it sounds *fun*, doesn’t it?”

“It really does,” Joryn agreed. “*Popstar*.” He laughed some more, envisioning stars bursting into colorful light shows in the night sky.

“Are you sure you didn’t have any womp?” Kaped asked the prince.

Joryn giggled. “I think one could easily become intoxicated by a place like this without ever drinking a thing.”

Longshot spoke again to the singer at their table, “Miss Ducky, with the likes of the Green Monsters coming into the picture tonight, I can only promise that we’ll *try* to hang around and hear you sing. We’ve got business to attend to in the morning, and we can’t be too beat up. But if nothing else, we’ll catch your act on our way back through.”

“That’s all I can ask for, cutie pie.” She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

Grinning, Longshot nodded in the direction of the mayor. “But I can tell you who’s *sure* to stick around. My friend Maiyer there. He’s your biggest fan.”

“Oh!” Miss Ducky batted her eyes at the now pink-furred babbitt. “I can’t believe I didn’t recognize you right away, Mister Mayor. Always an honor to have you at the show. Well, I’ll sing a special song tonight, just for you.” She waddled up onto the table, leaned over, and kissed the babbitt right on the forehead, leaving him silently stunned. She looked around the table, acknowledging everyone. “Now I’ve got to go get prepped. You boys have a good time. And be safe.” She hopped off of the table. “Good to see you again, Longshot.” She turned to the mayor. “And you, Maiyer.” She winked, her long, elegant eyelashes fluttering slowly as she did so.

As Miss Ducky walked away, the red-furred babbitt began to tremble wildly.

“Um,” Joryn pointed out, nervously, “he’s *literally* got smoke coming out of his ears.”

“Should we ... move?” Kated asked uncertainly.

“Nah,” Longshot said. “Just watch.”

The smoke from the babbitt’s ears grew thicker, darker, his quivering more tremendous, and his entire body made a sound like a teapot boiling, as he finally exclaimed, “Yippeeeeeee!!!” The babbitt shot straight up into the air, his feet frantically dancing, as the last of the smoke blew out of his head, and the redness at long last subsided from his fur. He sank back into his seat, looking thoroughly spent.

“You gonna be all right, Maiyer?” Longshot asked, laughter in his voice.

“Of course I am,” the babbitt assured him. “I’m her biggest fan, don’tcha know.”

Kated regarded Longshot, a look of alarm painted on his face. “So, Miss Ducky ... um, you and she ... you didn’t ...?”

“No way, man!” Longshot slapped a hand down on the table and looked at Kated as though the tech wizard were insane. “She’s a *duck!*”

“Yes, she is,” the mayor agreed dreamily.

All of the heroes at the table laughed at the babbit's moony-eyed disposition.

As the laughter died down, Marley trotted up to the table with something in his mouth, humming a happy little tune. He stood at the open end of the table beside Trig, next to where Longshot was sitting, and he dropped the thing on the table. "I like burritos," he said merrily. He looked to Kated. "Do you like burritos?"

Kated shook his head. "I don't even know what a burrito is."

"This here's a burrito," Marley assured him, indicating the thing he had dropped on the table.

Trig moved his head closer to the burrito and snorted approvingly.

"Get your own, no-horn," Marley said, and he proceeded to snatch the burrito back up and swallow it whole, much to Trig's displeasure.

"Marley!" Kated scolded. "That was rude. Apologize to Trig."

The mechanical unicorn looked to the mechanical horse. "I'm sorry." He then looked back to Kated. "What am I sorry for, Man-Mommy?"

Kated shook his head and sighed, putting his hands to his temples.

Joryn chuckled. "It just occurred to me. Can he even actually eat?"

Kabed sighed again. "He can eat. All of the Unitron series are designed to metabolize certain materials as alternate fuel sources, when there isn't enough sunlight to keep them charged. The difference with Marley is they aren't in any way programmed to 'like' things."

"Hm," Joryn said. "Life spark it is then?"

"There has to be something better than 'a sorcerer did it,' to explain Marley's malfunction. I'll figure it out yet. And correct it."

"Maybe you shouldn't," Joryn suggested, as Loxie returned with their drinks.

"What? Why wouldn't I?"

Joryn shrugged. "Maybe it isn't a malfunction. Maybe it's just who he is."

"That's absurd. I designed him. I *programmed* 'who he is.' This is a malfunction. End of story."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Loxie said as she purposely spilled a bit of Longshot's womp on his shirt while setting the glass on the table. "Clumsy me." She smirked, having doled out the drinks, and walked away with a satisfied bounce in her step.

“Yeah,” Longshot muttered. “No tip for her.”

“Or maybe you owe her a fairly substantial one,” Kated suggested, sipping his own womp to hide his amusement.

“Yeah,” Longshot conceded. “Maybe.”

Lowgun nodded. “I’ve lost a lot of money paying for Longshot’s apologies.” He sipped his tea.

“Ain’t nobody asked you to, scale head,” Longshot grunted indignantly.

“Will you pay for *my* apology?” Marley asked Lowgun. “I’m a malfunction.”

Kated was startled by the twinge of guilt the Unitron’s comment elicited in him. He tried to brush it off, reminding himself that the Unitrons were not programmed to have feelings.

Marley was quickly distracted from the subject, however, when he noticed Maiyer for the first time and pointed with his hoof. “What’s *that* thing?”

“Well!” the Mayor stammered. “Well, I’m a babbit, don’tcha know! What are you?”

“I’m a Unitron malfunction.”

“Marley!” Kated said sharply. “You’re being very rude! It’s not nice to point, and it’s *definitely* not polite to refer to people you meet as ‘things.’ Maiyer could have easily said the same thing to you.”

“Is it rude to call someone a malfunction?” the Unitron asked.

“I ...” Kated was momentarily nonplussed. “Well, it is ... if they are sentient beings, I mean.” He cleared his throat, deflecting. “Now, apologize to Maiyer. If I can’t correct your behavior while we’re traveling, I can at least teach you some manners for the nonce.”

“No way, Mustache! I won’t pay for an apology, until you apologize too. It’s only fair ... my dawg.”

“It’s not *fair*, Marley. You’re a machine.” He looked to Trig, regretting his choice of words. “Some machines *are* legitimate life forms, of course ... What I mean is, you don’t have a ‘life spark.’ You’re just taking in bad information and regurgitating it. Picking up random words and phrases and repeating them. You don’t like pancakes. You don’t like burritos. You don’t have

feelings. You are simply *malfunctioning*. And you're embarrassing me."

Marley banged a hoof on the table defiantly. "You don't *understand* me! You don't understand ... my generation! I'm all about this life!" He turned around completely then and rested his rear end on the table.

"Life spark," Joryn said under his breath, laughing. When Kabed glared at him, Joryn took a swig of his tea and shrugged innocently.

"Celestial hoodoo," Kabed grumbled.

"Oh, my," Maiyer said. "Are all of these 'Unitrons' so animated?"

"No," Kabed grumbled. "He's the only one who acts like this. The rest *follow their programming*."

"Ooh!" Marley exclaimed, staring at the stage at the front of the womp shop. "A muffin!" He turned around to face Kabed again. "Why do some muffins follow their programming, while that one walks around and talks? Hmm?"

Kabed looked to the stage himself, noting the five-foot tall muffin with arms, legs, a face, shiny black shoes, and a fancy blue vest. He put his drink down, determined to silence the

Unitron with a definitive answer that would not validate the robot's own malfunction. "Because! Because ... we're in the Wyyrd Outback, and things are different here."

"Why?"

"Because ... there were wars."

"Why?"

"Because ... sorcerers ... Oh, hell! A sorcerer did it!"

"Oh!" Marley said, approving. "I like science."

Kabed hung his head in his hands and groaned.

"It's okay, my friend," Joryn said, patting the tech wizard on the back. "Sorcerers actually *did* do all of this." He indicated their surroundings.

"Well," Kabed grumbled, the womp beginning to go to his head, "not *all* of it. The ancients of Deluvia are still partly to blame."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing. Old stories. I'm drunk, damn it. Pay no attention."

Longshot laughed, looking to Joryn. "He sure gets in a snit when he drinks. Let's order him another one!"

“That’s more than enough,” Lowgun said. “No more womp. You’ll already be paying for it in the morning.”

Longshot snickered, quoting the Unitron, “You don’t understand my generation.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Lowgun agreed. “At least it’s something I can brag about to the ladies.”

“I think it’s about to start,” Joryn said, nodding towards the stage.

The big, sentient muffin held a microphone in his hand and cleared his throat before addressing the womp shop’s patrons. “And now, the moment we’ve all been waiting for! Let’s all give a round of applause for the young man who brought New Music to the Outback, and let the battle of the bands commence! Ladies, gentlemen, and other, variously-gendered life forms, I give you ... Kid Popstar!”

The curtains lifted amidst wild cheering, revealing the band: a human in his late teens, waving at the crowd with a beaming white-toothed smile, a humanoid beagle holding an electric guitar, a platypus sitting behind an elaborate drum set, and two little fairies, a male

and a female, hovering over an electronic keyboard with energetically flapping wings.

The human lifted his microphone and shouted, “Hello, Boom Town! Are you ready to pop?”

More cheers.

Joryn and Kaped had never seen anything like it. The concerts they were accustomed to were much finer affairs, involving dress clothes and generally more dignified patrons.

“All right!” Kid shouted jubilantly, and the music began to play.

“Oh, he’s good!” Maiyer shouted over the sound of the band’s music. “But I still can’t wait for Miss Ducky to go on, don’tcha know.”

Joryn smiled at the babbler, and he took in the high energy sounds coming from the stage.

Kid Popstar began to sing, and the crowd went absolutely wild.

Joryn laughed, once again, delighted by how lively things were in the Wyyrd Outback, compared to Imperial Nod.

“Not so fast, Kid!” an angry voice came over the speakers. A floating stage crashed through the wall beside the main stage and flew

into the building. Three green, hairy, otherwise nondescript monsters were on the floating stage with their own microphones and instruments. “What this crowd needs is our famous ‘Zombie Rock.’” The frontmonster laughed maniacally.

“Oh, no!” Kid Popstar exclaimed at the sight.

“The Green Monsters!” both fairies shouted in unison.

“You guys were supposed to go on *after* us,” Kid said, indignant. “Then the crowd votes on who they liked best. This isn’t supposed to be an *actual* battle!”

“Too bad, Kid,” the lead monster said. To his band mates, he gave the order, “Hit it!”

The Green Monsters began playing their own music, drowning out the music of Kid’s band, met with boos and jeers from all of Kid Popstar’s devoted fans.

Longshot eyed the crowd warily. When he saw that the first few rows of fans had actually turned into zombies in response to the Green Monsters’ music, he shot Lowgun a look.

The reptisaur nodded and began to get out of his seat.

Kid Popstar gave a thumbs up to the lanky robot in the sound booth, signaling him to up the volume. “All right, gang! Two can play at this game! We need a pop song that can turn these zombies back into normal ... whatever they started out as!”

More cheering from the non-zombie crowd greeted the declaration.

Kabed sat with his eyes closed, rubbing his temples with his fingers. “This ... is ... so ... *stupid.*”

Longshot nudged him then. “C’mon. It’s time to go, man. These battles of the bands get dangerous when the Green Monsters start breaking all the rules.”

“Shouldn’t we help?” Joryn asked, concerned, as they all began to get out of their seats.

“Nah,” Longshot assured him. “It’s just a musical thing. The zombie effect is temporary anyway. The Monsters have to keep playing in order to keep them under their spell, and Kid Popstar has *way* more energy than they do.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s all right,” Lowgun said, pointing at the crowd. “Look, he’s already got things under control.”

Joryn watched as the upbeat, excessively happy song coming from Kid Popstar’s band began turning the zombies back into a variety of whatever they had been before, and he smiled. “The Wyyrd Outback is so ... full of wonders!”

“It’s stupid,” Kated said flatly. “Let’s get back to the inn.”

Joryn nodded. “Yes. Even being turned *temporarily* into zombies would probably wreck our day tomorrow.” He turned to the babbitt, the only one of their group who had remained seated. “It was an honor to meet you, Mayor Maiyer.”

“Oh, the pleasure was all mine, don’tcha know!”

Longshot tipped his hat to the babbitt. “Give our regards to Miss Ducky.”

Maiyer’s fur colored once again, as he waved them away. “Of course, of course! Good seeing you again, old friend.”

Longshot smiled, and he turned without another word to make his way outside with his friends.

**CHAPTER 6:  
THE AUTHORITY CALLED,  
AND THEY WANT THEIR  
'77 BRAWN CO. PEACE-KEEPER BACK**

**T**HE FOLLOWING MORNING, THE HEROES awoke, Kabed and Longshot more worse for wear than the others, and they quickly set out from the inn and on to Mech Valley. When at last they arrived at the valley's eastern edge, they paused to gaze down at the sprawling city below.

“Yep,” Longshot said with a nod. “That’s it all right. The place where all the bad happens.”

“There looks to be a lot of activity down there,” Joryn noted.

“Good,” Lowgun said, flicking his tongue. “That should make it easier to blend in.”

Joryn nodded thoughtfully. “Well, men, what are we waiting for? Let’s get down there, find the mansion, and rescue the princess.”

“Sounds like a fairy tale,” Kaped smirked.

“I’ve heard stories about the women in N’obotto’s mansion,” Longshot said. “Finest in all of Nod, and dressed, well, not to leave much to the imagination. So I hear.”

“Like the prince said,” Kaped decided, “what are we waiting for?”

The group made their way down the narrow cliffside trail that led to the city of Mech Valley, Lowgun for once keeping pace with the equines in his *Dragon Racer*, though he yearned still to race ahead. When at last they entered the city, they blended quickly into the bustling crowds.

“So, which way to the mansion?” Joryn asked Longshot.

“Good question,” the gunslinger answered. “Let’s ride into the market. I’m sure we’ll find a map there.”

Joryn nodded just ahead of them. "I think we're there. One of these merchant booths is bound to have a map of the city for sale." He dismounted, wanting to give Illium's back a rest.

Kabed and Longshot followed suit, though their own steeds had no such need of respite.

Longshot turned to Lowgun. "You might want to lose the *Racer*, Low. Gonna be hard to get through all this walking traffic. Might even be faster on foot. I'll let you saddle up with me on Trig if it comes to a long walk."

Lowgun nodded agreement, keyed a command into the *Dragon Racer's* control panel, and got to his feet. The *Dragon Racer's* decorative eyes blinked twice, then it backed up on its own, turned, and headed back to the cliffside trail to await its master's call.

"What was that?" Joryn asked.

"The *Dragon Racer's* got an autopilot," Longshot explained. "Low can call it back whenever he needs it."

Joryn turned to the reptisaur. "Aren't you worried about theft?"

Lowgun shook his head, smiling smugly. "No one's going to steel her. She's got a built-in

automatic defense system. Plus, if all else fails, she can run to another location, and no one can catch her. Trust me.”

With a smile, Joryn assured him, “I do.”

A lanky humanoid robot carrying an awkward stack of parcels crossed their path then, followed by a bulky, hairy human man with an eye patch. The robot tripped on a rock, struggling to regain its balance, the parcels shifting in its arms until the top two packages fell to the ground.

“Watch it, you clumsy pile of scrap!” the bulky man spat harshly at the robot. He unclipped a shock whip from his belt and whipped the robot’s back with a loud crack, sending a jolt of electricity through the poor machine.

Longshot froze in his tracks, sneering.

“I’m so sorry, Master!” the robot wailed pleadingly. “Please forgive me! I won’t let it happen again!”

“Shut up and pick up those packages!” The man gave the robot another lash, as it scurried to stack the parcels back in its arms, and the robot cried out in pain.

Longshot reached for the guns at his sides.

Joryn, similarly angered, grabbed the hilt of his sword, eyes narrowing in silent threat to the bulky man who hadn't noticed them at all. He paused, however, when he noticed Lowgun reaching out to put a hand on Longshot's forearm, forestalling the gunslinger.

The reptisaur spoke quietly, "Choose your battles. If we take on every robot-slaver we pass, what are the chances we'll ever make it to N'obotto's mansion at all? The choice is yours, of course. I only mean to remind you what we are here for."

Hearing the wisdom of the reptisaur's words, Joryn released his grip on the sword hilt, though it pained him bitterly to do so. He saw the same inner struggle on Longshot's face, as the younger man let go of his guns and breathed out his frustration. It was a moment of kinship between them. For all of Longshot's bravado and apparent arrogance, he had a heart for justice just as Joryn did. And apparently, he had a wise elder brother, just as Joryn did too. Lowgun's words had sounded so like something Kail might have said, forcing Joryn to stop and consider the bigger picture. At that moment, the relationship

between Longshot and Lowgun was clearly defined for Joryn. They were brothers. They bickered and teased each other as a rule, but they each had the other's best interests at heart; the elder ever ready to offer his wisdom to the younger. They couldn't have been more like brothers if they'd been born and raised together from birth. In that brief moment, Joryn's respect for the young human and the reptisaur multiplied exponentially.

Joryn sighted a booth where a strange creature was selling various printed materials. A newsstand, he thought. He pushed through the crowd and approached the booth. "Excuse me." *Sir? Ma'am?* For the life of him, Joryn couldn't tell which form of address was appropriate for the creature, so he opted simply to leave it at that. "Do you have any maps?"

The multi-tentacled creature rubbed its drooping chin, adjusted its lopsided skullcap. "Maps? What kind of maps?"

"Maps of the city," Joryn answered. "My friends and I are tourists here. We're looking to see the sights."

“Ah! Yes! Tourists!” The slimy, green-skinned creature giggled. “I have a some of the maps for you.” The creature started to turn, then froze at the sounds of a sudden commotion.

Joryn followed the merchant’s gaze, turning to find himself staring at something that made his blood run cold. Being rolled through the crowd in a flimsy, wooden cage on wheels was the battered form of a Gor’borg, the very robotic soldiers who had so recently devastated Imperial City.

People were crowding around, having never seen this particular model of robot before. Voices rang out to the proud man whose beasts of burden were pulling the cage:

“I’ll give you ten-fifty for that!”

“I’ll give you double that!”

“Triple whatever *anyone* else offers!”

Kabed approached Joryn, quietly whispering into his ear, “What in the *bells*? How did they get *that* thing down here?”

Joryn shrugged, noting that Longshot had once again reached for his guns up ahead of them, and Lowgun was making no moves to stop

him. "I don't know. Maybe it's a stray. Something left over from the invasion."

"The lights on its chest—"

"Still running," Joryn finished for him. "It's active. But you remember how they were. Non-sentient. Unable to handle more than a single directive at any time. It must be sitting idle, because it has no idea what else to do in this situation. Nothing here lines up with its orders."

Just then, the ape-like robot soldier perked up, as it scanned the crowd. "Execute!"

The blood ran from Joryn's face at the sound of the deep, synthetic voice.

"Execute Prince Joryn of Nod!" The Gor'borg threw out its arms and broke the sad, little cage to splinters all around itself. It stepped to the ground, looked around for a weapon, then, finding none, flexed its fingers, gazing straight at Joryn.

The crowd retreated in a panic.

Joryn and his friends stood their ground. Joryn drew the Sword of Libran from its sheath at his side. The others followed suit, Kaped drawing his light gun, Longshot his own pistols, Illium and Marley opening the hatches at their

sides and aiming their light guns at the robot. Lowgun did not reach for his swords, or his gun but seemed to be waiting for the perfect moment, the right time to strike, expending only as much energy as was necessary for the task.

Trig whinnied nervously and stomped at the ground.

“Trig,” Longshot commanded, “keep cool. I’ve got this, buddy.”

Joryn and Kabed exchanged a glance, wondering why Longshot hadn’t given the usual command for the horse to “switch” into its massive gun form.

“Your call, Joryn,” Kabed said softly.

“Joryn,” Longshot called out. “What do we do? Run and blend back in, or fight this thing?”

“We gonna kill the monkey?” Marley asked without any hint of distress.

“It seems startled,” Joryn said. “Maybe we can back away, and—”

“Execute the twelfth-born pretender spawn of Sapro!” the robot said, and it began charging towards the prince.

“Our time of blending in’s over anyway!” Joryn shouted. “Take it down!” Joryn took a

stance with his sword, waiting as the monster charged.

Longshot, Kabed, Illium, and Marley all opened fire on the Gor'borg, lighting it up before it even reached Joryn.

“Execute!” Smoke was rising from beneath the Gor'borg's armored plating, as it continued to move forward. “Execute Joryn of Nod!” It aimed an arm in Joryn's direction and launched its right hand as a projectile.

Joryn swung with his sword and cut the hand, which seemed poised to grip him, into halves.

While it seemed much longer to the heroes, the entire ordeal lasted only a moment. At last, the sturdy Gor'borg succumbed to the damage inflicted by Joryn's entourage. “Eeeeeex ... eeeeeee ... cute!” It fell forward, smoke pouring out of the myriad holes blasted into its body, and it clattered to the ground in ruins.

“Whew!” Joryn exclaimed. “That one was well put-together. And that thing with its hand. That was new.”

Kabed considered. “The ones we fought before had laser guns. I guess they have a backup plan for when they’re disarmed.”

“Right.” Joryn snickered. “When they’re disarmed, they dis-hand.”

“Stop that.”

“What? You know that was funny.” Joryn laughed, desperate to relieve the tension of the nightmarish moment. He turned to Longshot, curious. “Why didn’t you let Trig—?”

“Drop your weapons! Hands in the air!”

Joryn looked around to find the source of the harsh voice, only to see that they were surrounded by men and women dressed similarly to Longshot, all aiming guns in their direction. “I’m sorry?”

“Drop ’em, pretty boy, or we drop you!” A woman ordered him.

Longshot, holding up his hands, even as Lowgun began to raise his, said, “Authority. We’re busted.”

“Oh ... smokes,” Joryn cursed.

“You got that right, man,” Longshot agreed.

Joryn sheathed his sword and raised his hands in the air.

Moments later, the men and women from the Authority moved in and took the sword from his side, placing his hands in iron cuffs and doing the same to all of his men.

“Everyone clear out,” a new voice commanded the officers, in the office just outside of the jail cell that held Joryn and his friends. “I’ve got special orders for these prisoners. Gonna deal with them myself.”

“Anything we can do to help, Sheriff?” the woman, who had previously seemed to be in charge, asked.

“No. Just me and them, Deputy Bell. Why don’t you take everyone out and try to round up the electricchauns early today? I’m gonna want ’em off the streets.”

She nodded. “Sure thing, boss.” To the others, she said, “You heard the man. Let’s get out there and round up the electricchauns.”

In the jail cell, Longshot groaned. “Oh, that voice. Here we go.”

Kabed stared, a mix of disbelief and admiration warring on his face. “Not her too?”

“Huh?” Longshot asked, snapping out of his reverie. “Oh!” he shook his head, processing the question. “No.”

Once his underlings had gone, the sheriff walked slowly over to the iron bars that held the prisoners in place, his measured steps, as his boots hit the wooden floor in turn, sounding to Joryn like nothing less than a countdown to further disaster. “Well, well, well,” the sheriff said. “Sandoro Cole. Somehow I knew we’d meet again before one of us curled up and died.”

“Uh, hey, Rykko. Fancy meeting you here, huh?”

Glaring wordlessly, the sheriff unlocked the cell door, warning the others with a gesture to stay put, as he grabbed Longshot by the collar and pulled him out of the cell. He closed the door then, uncuffing the young gunslinger.

Not sure whether to feel nervous or relieved, Longshot looked up to the taller, much more heavily muscled man before him. “So, ‘sheriff,’ huh? How’d you manage to land that gig? Last time we saw you, you were—”

The sheriff grabbed Longshot’s collar again, fiercely. “Cole.” He shook his head, his lips

twisting in anger, his free hand clenching into a fist at his side. “You son of a skeezworm.” He stared daggers into Longshot’s eyes.

“I ... I really do leave people with that impression, don’t I?” Longshot confessed, trying to pull away involuntarily.

The sheriff added his other hand to Longshot’s collar, holding him in place.

“And the name’s *Longshot*. That other name has no meaning to—”

Longshot’s words were cut short, as the sheriff tightened his grip on the younger man’s collar and pulled him close. Before anyone watching the scene unfold could begin to guess what would happen next, the sheriff kissed Longshot as fiercely as he’d grabbed him, and Longshot returned the kiss, swooning visibly.

Kabed stared openmouthed.

Joryn caught the tech wizard’s eye with a wry grin. “I get it, you know. The sheriff’s pants fit *nice*.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Kabed said.

“Yeah,” Joryn said, teasingly. “You *wouldn’t*.”

As he continued to stare, mouth agape at the lingering kiss between Longshot and the

sheriff, Kated added, "I just realized; all those times I thought it seemed like Longshot was flirting with me, he actually was."

Joryn cocked an eyebrow, thinking back. "Yeah. Me too."

"I *told* you," Lowgun said from behind them. "Flirts with *everyone*."

Just then, the passionate embrace of the two men abruptly came to an end. The sheriff pushed Longshot away, then slapped him across the face, harshly.

"Should have seen that one coming," Kated muttered under his breath.

Joryn snickered at that, having thought exactly the same thing.

"You said you would call," the sheriff accused Longshot, predictably.

Rubbing his face, again, Longshot protested, "Look, Rykko, I was going to; I just ... Nah, you know what? I know. I *said* I would call, but I never meant to. I'm a jerk, I know, but face it, Rykko, you were just too close to home. I had to get away from *all* of that. And my *face* is tired of trying to convince people that I had better intentions than I did. But you, Rykko ... we go

way back. You know I wouldn't have bolted like I did without a reason."

The sheriff nodded, both men now oblivious to their captive audience in the jail cell. "You know, your parents—"

Longshot stopped him, holding up a finger firmly. "No. Don't even go there, man. *Longshot* has no parents, no back story. I'm not that same kid anymore."

"Cole—"

"*Longshot!* You knew me by that name the last time we met. Back in the Cherry Arbor Skywalk."

"Yeah," Rykko said with a longing nod. "That was some time."

"Three months," Longshot said. "And they were good times, Ryyko. But you knew it couldn't go on forever, man. We were on the run."

"Yeah, from *here*. I remember. And in spite of it all, 'Longshot,' you were still the boy from back home that I fell in love with. And you always will be. At least to me." He walked over to the jail cell, studying Longshot's friends. "Low-

gun,” he nodded to the reptisaur. “Still not keeping this kid out of trouble, I see.”

“I do try.”

“I know you do,” the sheriff offered a short laugh. “You always did. But Trig. Now that’s the real problem we’ve got here.” He turned back to Longshot. “Ain’t it?”

“Rykko,” Longshot’s eyes begged, as he spoke the simple word, “please.”

“Look, San— Co—” The sheriff groaned in frustration. “*Longshot*. You *knew* the risk when you brought that thing back here. What in the hell were you thinking? He’s— *It’s* contraband! Come to think of it, what the hell were you thinking when you stole it from N’obotto’s labor camp in the first place?”

“I didn’t *steal* him!” Longshot considered. “Well, all right, *technically* I stole him, but *really* I rescued him. They were gonna scrap him, Rykko.”

“I know,” the sheriff assured him. “I’ve read every report since I took this position a year ago. Trig’s a ’77 Brawn Co. Peace-Keeper. Trig’s not even his real name. He’s designated serial number 10091974, and I know the number by heart

because he's the reason you're one of the most *wanted* men in Mech Valley! How far did you think you could get in this city with a weapon like that, just flaunting it out in the open?"

"We were being discrete until that Gor'borg went all one-track-mind on us. Those things are bad news—"

"*Those* things are bad news!" Rykko pointed to Trig. "You know the Peace-Keeper series was recalled for a *reason*, Longshot. I've got the whole story now, and it's grizzly."

Longshot, his face all seriousness and determination, shook his head, desperation in his eyes. "Trig's not like that. He never malfunctioned. It wasn't right to slag *all* of 'em when just a *few* of them went wild."

"It wasn't personal, Longshot. They're all wired exactly the same."

"They were *alive*, Rykko. Trig's a *life form*. It wasn't right to treat them all like property. N'obotto had no right to wipe out a whole race for the actions of a few."

"As far as the law is concerned, he did."

"The law's not always on the side of what's right," Longshot countered. "You know that."

Rykko relented with a tired sigh. “Yeah. Frankly, that’s why I took this job. Brought in some friends from back home. Thought maybe I could make a difference.”

“Then now’s your chance, hotshot.” Longshot winked, regaining his swagger as though it had never been cowed. “Look, you *know* Trig. You know me and Lowgun. We’re not the bad guys. And Trig’s not like the Peace-Keepers who went batty.”

“Not yet.”

“Not ever!” Longshot’s tone left no room for further debate. “That horse has saved my life more times than I can count. We run with the Imperials now. Heck, I’m even an Imperial knight! Me an’ Lowgun both. Knighted after the attack on the palace. Before that, Trig helped Prince Joryn storm Mount Chirop and force a peace accord. He’s a hero. Please, don’t turn him over to N’obotto’s goons.”

Somberly, the sheriff said, “I haven’t the least intention of that, love. Never did. I just couldn’t believe what I read about him. And I really couldn’t believe you had the gall, or lack of common sense, to *ever* come back here with him

in tow.” He shook his head, leaned back on his desk, then looked Longshot up and down appraisingly. He smiled with absolute approval of what he saw. “An Imperial knight, huh? Well, ain’t that something? ’Course, you know Mech Valley has no relations with the Empire. Not even a loose business alliance like TexStar has. So, don’t count on those connections to get your fat out of the fire.” He chuckled. “Not that you’ve got *any* fat to pull out, scrawny.”

Longshot beamed. “I’m gifted like that. And you liked it.”

“It’ll catch up. I’ve seen the way you eat.” Rykko went back over to the jail cell, addressing the prisoners. “So, what do we do now?” He looked to Joryn in particular. “My guess, from your fancy cape, and from the look of the sword and shield we’ve got locked up in the back, is that you’re none other than Prince Joryn.”

Joryn nodded, realizing there was no point at all to any deception at this point. “I am. And these are my friends, Kabed, Marley, Sir Illium, of the Order of the Golden Field, and you already know Trig and my father’s own brave knights, Sirs Lowgun and Longshot.”

Rykko looked to Kated. "So, what's your story? Not a knight?"

Kated shrugged. "Trig and I don't hold the Emperor's favor quite so much as these."

"Really?"

"What can I say? The emperor holds a dim view of my past. As for Trig, actually, I can't really say why he wasn't honored with the others." He looked to Joryn for an answer.

Nervously, Joryn struggled to find a way to spin the truth. "My father ... He has views that ... He prefers his knights to be ..."

Rykko nodded. "I get it. He's a humanoid supremacist."

Joryn looked away, ashamed at his father's bigotry. Quietly, he added, wondering whether or not his eldest brother would disapprove of the humble display of rebellion, "I do not share my father's feelings on such matters." He met the sheriff's eyes. "In fact, we differ on many such issues. He is the emperor, so his word is the law. But I agree with Longshot. The law does not always fall on the side of what is right."

Visibly approving, Rykko said, "I have to say, it's an honor to meet you in person. I've

heard things from the folks back home over the past few months.” He looked back to Longshot. “I’m not gonna deny it. I’m impressed. I mean, *tremendously* impressed.” Returning his attention to Joryn, he asked, “So what brave deed is it that brings you and your merry men to Mech Valley in the company of a wanted fugitive and his illicit steed of steel?”

“I hate to be the one to say ...” Joryn looked to Longshot.

“It’s all right, Joryn,” the gunslinger assured him. He met Rykko’s questioning eyes. “It’s my girlfriend. Princess Pumpkitina. She’s been kidnapped by Torakku N’obotto, and she’s being held in his mansion. Her parents asked me to help. Then I teamed up with Joryn and his posse. But the Empire didn’t want to get officially involved, so they let us come out here, in an unofficial capacity, which is the reason for our not-at-all-prepared-for-this-sort-of-thing demeanor.”

“Your ... girlfriend.” The sheriff nodded, accepting it. “So, you’ve moved on.”

“Yeah,” Longshot said. “But it was a lot later. Way after you and me.”

Brushing it off, Rykko said. “Okay. Here’s what I’m gonna do.” He unlocked the cell door once again, and he began uncuffing the prisoners one at a time, leading them out of the cell. He left them in the office area, as he went to the back room and retrieved their confiscated weapons. After placing the bulk of them on his desk, he carried Joryn’s sword back to the prince personally. In awe, he said, “I can’t believe I’m holding the actual Sword of Libran.” He held it aloft, gazing at it in unconcealed wonder. “This blade is a legend. It’s like reaching back into time, touching the ancients themselves. The hand of Bran once held this blade, just as I hold it now. Amazing.” He handed it to the prince. “And now, the blade is yours. A worthy heir to its legacy. And a lovely one.”

Joryn bowed his head slightly, suppressing a blush. He met Rykko’s eyes. “Thank you. I strive to live up to the honor every day.”

As Joryn’s men gathered their effects, Rykko winked at Joryn and addressed the room at large. “So, here’s what I think’s best. I’m going to let most of you go on your way.”

“Most of us?” Longshot asked, incredulous.

Rykko motioned with his hand. “Now give me a minute, *Sir* Longshot. You’ll see where I’m goin’ with this. I’m gonna let the humanoids go on to the mansion as planned.”

“Now hold on a minute!” Longshot protested.

“Let me finish, brown eyes,” Rykko said. “I’m gonna hold these particularly attention-grabbing steeds of yours in a secret cellar that only I, as the sheriff, know exists right under our feet. There’s an outside exit as well, but I’m going to ask them to stay put until you all come back for them.”

“Why can’t you let us *all* go right now?” Longshot asked.

“Because, ever since the incident with the ’77 Peace-Keepers that went wild, this town has gotten pretty jumpy around mechanical horses. Even Sir Illium here would likely raise a panic if the townspeople thought he was a Peace-Keeper, with his bionic enhancements. The fact is, most people never saw the Peace-Keepers up close, so as far as any of them know, all three of these guys are deadly killers. The risk for them is too high

out there. Besides, you four can travel unnoticed a lot easier without them.”

“Forgive me,” Joryn said, wary of the sheriff’s motives, “but I’m afraid I’m not comfortable with that arrangement. I mean no offense to you, but the fact is I don’t know you at all. To ask me to trust my friends’ lives to your care, when you have already ardently pointed out how concerned you are about the possible danger posed by Trig, is asking too much. For all I know, you mean every word you say about protecting them. But please understand; I just can’t take that kind of risk with my friends’ lives.”

“I do understand,” the sheriff said. “And I need you to understand that, in spite of his ‘family history,’ Trig is my friend too. I can’t risk his life any more than you can. And letting him wander around Mech Valley would be a death sentence for him and quite possibly the other two as well.”

“Then it seems we have reached an impasse,” Joryn said, his voice markedly stoic.

“Rykkö,” Longshot cut in. He looked the sheriff in the eyes, a serious expression set upon his face. “Do you give me your word that you’ll

do everything you can to protect them? Even if it costs you your own life in the effort?"

Rykko met Longshot's gaze, looking deeply into his ex-lover's eyes with the utmost sincerity. Putting a hand on the younger man's shoulder, he said, "Longshot, I give you my word, just as I once gave you my heart. Your steeds' lives come before my own, as long as their safety is in my hands."

Longshot nodded. To Joryn, he said, "That's good enough for me."

Joryn looked past the sheriff, to Illium, who nodded with a reassuring wink. "Very well then, Sheriff Rykko," he said. "It seems their lives are at risk whatever path we take. So, if your word is good enough for Longshot and Illium, then it is good enough for me to take *this* risk over the alternative." He held out his hand, and the sheriff took it, shaking on the agreement.

"So," the sheriff asked, "which mansion are you headed to?"

"Torakku N'obotto's," Longshot said. "Thought I told you that."

"Longshot," the sheriff said, bemused, "he has thirty-six of them in the valley."

“Thirty-six?” Longshot repeated in disbelief.

“Can we trouble you for a map?” Joryn asked.

“Surely,” the sheriff said, going to his desk. He pulled a map out of the center drawer and laid it out across the top of the old wooden desk. Joryn and his men gathered around, as the sheriff pointed. “Here’s the nearest one. Might as well start there as anywhere. You’ve gotta pass through a cubek neighborhood. Longshot knows how that goes. But you also need to be on your guard for the local wildlife. We’ve had some disturbances since one of the sunstone mines collapsed a few weeks back and upset the forest habitat of the local bears, wolves, and carnivorous squidshrooms. Should be no problem. The bears and wolves mostly run when they see anyone. The squidshrooms though ... Just keep your eyes peeled and get indoors if you see one. Also, look out for the electrichauns. My officers are out rounding them up for the day, but it takes a while. We deploy them to help keep the citizens in line. But they’re like a lot of the indigenous life forms of the valley. They fixate. Once an electrichaun tags you as a threat, every elec-

trichaun in the area will fly into a rage until they lose sight of you. And they don't make arrests, if you catch my drift. They're one of those things I'm in charge of, but their methods and whether or not we use them at all are things laid out in the rules.

"Remember that about this place. If you follow the rules, you won't run into any trouble. But if you break the rules, don't count on anyone who comes after you to listen to reason. N'obotto's got this whole city pretty much *programmed* to operate the way he thinks is best." Rykko rolled up the map and handed it to Joryn.

The prince smiled. "Thank you, Sheriff Rykko. You've proven yourself a friend to the Empire of Nod, as well as to the kingdom of Pumpkin Land."

The sheriff grinned broadly. "Believe me, your highness," he looked Joryn over, head to toe once again, taking in the beauty of the man, "the *pleasure* was all mine."

Longshot stared at the sheriff, eyes narrowed in response to an unexpected twinge of jealousy, as he shook his head in foggy disbelief.

Joryn nodded, smiling. He looked to the steeds. “Are you guys all right with the plan then?”

“We’ll be fine,” Illium said happily, as Trig whinnied his agreement.

“Do you have ... um ... Do you got some finger paints?” Marley asked the sheriff.

Rykko laughed, giving the Unitron an inquisitive look. “I’ll see what I can do, my friend.”

“Marley,” Kabed said, pointing a finger in the Unitron’s direction. “Be polite.”

“Okay, Mommy Mustachio.”

“It’s a goatee.”

“Can I eat it?”

“No! Now, be good.”

Suppressed laughter in his voice, Joryn bid farewell to the steeds, “Very well then. We’ll be back for you soon.”

To the sheriff, he said, “It’s time we were on our way.”

As the group of heroes from the Empire made their way out the door, Sheriff Rykko took hold of Longshot’s arm. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful out there, all right?”

“You know me,” Longshot said with a wink.

“Exactly,” the sheriff agreed.

Longshot held up a hand, as if to caress the lawman’s face, then stopped himself, putting his arm down and smiling with a nod. “Good seeing you again, Rykko.”

“You too,” the sheriff said.

Longshot turned away then and followed his friends, looking back with one last smile for the sheriff of Mech Valley.

As Longshot walked farther away, Sheriff Rykko watched him, longing for those bygone months in the Cherry Arbor Skywalk, remembering a happier day. “See ya around, Sandoro Cole,” he said to Longshot’s far-distant backside, as the heroes turned the corner and vanished from his sight.

***The Mech Valley Debacle* will conclude,  
with Part II:  
“N’obotto Revealed”**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of nine books, including the novel *Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*, the short fiction anthology *The Great Debate*, the Gothic horror series *The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas*, and two fantasy series: *Metrognomes* and *The Legends of Nod*. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is currently hard at work on the next adventure in *The Legends of Nod*.

[www.GlennSladeClarkJr.com](http://www.GlennSladeClarkJr.com)