

A Clark Ink Serial Novel

# The Legends of Nod

The Mech Valley Debacle



Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

Part 2 of 2: N'obotto Revealed

# The Legends of Nod

Also by Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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# The Legends of Nod

## The Mech Valley Debacle

“N’obotto Revealed”

Concluding the fourth volume in the first saga

*The Sword of Libran*

A story from

*The Epic of Prince Joryn*

by

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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**The Legends of Nod: The Mech Valley Debacle #2  
“N’obotto Revealed”**

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**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

**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; currently struggling with the unexplained personality that has emerged in the Unitron, Marley, seeing it as a problem to be solved, rather than an acceptable evolution of the robot's programming



**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, where he helped 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, where he helped 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; currently leading the mission, alongside Prince Joryn, to rescue Princess Pumpkitina from the robotic despot of Mech Valley, Torakku N'obotto; formerly known as Sandoro Cole

**Torakku N'obotto** – Robotic life form, age 1,000,089 years; despot of the city of Mech Valley

**Princess Pumpkitina** – Human female from the kingdom of Pumpkin Land, age nineteen years; daughter of King Balor and Queen Zarline

**Trig** – 5877 Brawn Co. Peace-Keeper (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, where he helped to turn the tide in favor of the Imperial army; formerly known as 5877 Brawn Co. Peace-Keeper 10091974

# **The Legends of Nod**

## **The Mech Valley Debacle**

**“N’obotto Revealed”**

## CHAPTER 1: THE CUBEK DISORDER

“SO,” KABED VENTURED, AS THEY made their way on foot from the sheriff’s office to the nearest of Torakku N’obotto’s thirty-six mansions, “Sandro Cole, eh?”

Longshot abruptly stopped walking and spun Kabed around by the shoulder to meet him eye to eye.

Hearing the slight scuffle, Lowgun and Joryn stopped, Joryn looking up from the map to see what was happening.

In an uncharacteristically fierce tone, Longshot said, “Listen, I like you, Kated. I really do. But if you *ever* call me that again, I swear to *all* the gods I’ll knock you flat out.”

Surprised by the intensity on the younger man’s face, Kated nodded. “Understood. I meant no offense.”

Longshot grinned, immediately himself again, and he patted Kated on his armored shoulder affectionately. “None taken, man.”

“Everything all right?” Joryn asked.

“Yep,” Longshot said. “Let’s keep moving.”

Joryn nodded. “We should be getting pretty close, according to the map.” He looked the map over, determining the quickest route from where they stood, and continued to lead the way.

Lowgun moved close to Joryn, speaking quietly in his ear, “That name we all heard the sheriff call Longshot? It would be wise not to ever mention it again. Sore subject.”

Joryn considered, recalling something the priestess had said. “Tianna gave me a warning

before we left,” he said at last. “She said that something about the mission felt off to her; that things might not be as they seem, but she also felt that you and Longshot were trustworthy; that Longshot had nothing to hide. Nothing *sinister* anyway. Those were more or less her exact words on the matter. She has never steered me wrong. However, I have to say that knowing someone has a secret past is ... unsettling. Can you assure me that there is nothing to be worried about, Lowgun?”

The reptisaur replied without hesitation, “Certainly, my prince. The matter is personal, and that is all that I feel I have the right to say. Longshot, by any other name, is still the same brand of crazy.”

Joryn snickered at that.

“Duplicity is not in his nature,” Lowgun continued. “To keep one’s own secrets makes one weaker; to keep another’s secrets makes one stronger. He will see this in time. Until then, as I said, the matter is a personal one.”

Joryn nodded, satisfied. “Thank you, Lowgun. Your insights are most helpful. Consider the topic dropped.”

“Thank you, my prince.”

The group turned a corner, walking out from the shadows of the many tall buildings they'd been weaving a path through, to find an abrupt change of scenery. Before them, the grass was green and sun-kissed, the space was open and pleasant. There were quaint little bungalows clustered together, a forest behind them, and people going about their daily business. Joryn smiled. “This must be a cubek neighborhood.”

The people, though vaguely human in appearance, were anything but. Where humans had curves, the cubeks had what Joryn could only describe as edges. Where features like human noses tended to slope, the cubek features presented a series of tiny, descending squares, almost as though they were made of tiny blocks.

The pixilated eyes of an old man, smoking an equally blocky pipe, caught Joryn's then. The prince smiled at the man. “Hello.”

The man took the pipe away from his mouth and said, “That N'obotto sure does have a lot of mansions, doesn't he?”



“I’d say so,” Joryn agreed. “Thirty-six. We’re heading to the nearest one ourselves ... for a party. Have you ever been there yourself, sir?”

The man regarded Joryn, once again removed the pipe from his mouth, and said, as if for the first time, “That N’obotto sure does have a lot of mansions, doesn’t he?”

“I ... yes,” Joryn said uncertainly. He looked to Longshot, who was giggling.

“They’re just like that,” Longshot explained. “They fixate. It’s part of Mech Valley’s enchantment. See?” He approached the old man. “Hey, man! I’m running off with your wife tonight! You okay with that?”

The cubek man removed his pipe from his mouth once again, looked over the young gunslinger, and said, “That N’obotto sure does have a lot of mansions, doesn’t he?”

To a cubek boy passing by on a unicycle, Longshot said, “Hey there, kiddo!”

The boy paused and said, “My brush! My brush! I can’t find my brush!” Then he rode on, seeming entirely unconcerned.

“Let me try this,” Kated said, amazed. He approached a woman who was sweeping the walk

in front of her house. “Pardon me, ma’am. My name is Kated.”

The woman looked up at him. “Please, can you help me find my daughter’s diamond necklace? I’ve looked everywhere!”

“Actually,” Kated said, taken off guard by the request, “we’re in a bit of a hurry. Have you reported it missing?”

“Please, can you help me find my daughter’s diamond necklace? I’ve looked everywhere!”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Kated turned and offered a shrug to his friends, as he walked away from the woman, who went back to her sweeping as though the conversation had never occurred. “This is ... horrible. These people *live* like this? *All* of them?”

“Yeah, but they don’t mind,” Longshot said. “They’re happy. They just have very simple lives. People say this was ground zero at the end of the Sorcerers’ War. A lot of funny magic still floats around in the air from the fallout, even after thousands of years. That’s how the cubeks came to *be* the cubeks. It’s an enchantment. Plus, they fit right in with N’obotto’s orderly designs.”

“Amazing,” Joryn said. “Is the magic contagious?”

“Nah,” Longshot assured him. “They’ve been like this for millennia. It’s genetic at this point. The cubek enchantment only affects the cubeks. Unless you get crosswise of one of them.”

“That doesn’t seem like an easy thing to do,” Kated scoffed.

Longshot shrugged. “Depends what’s got them going on any particular day. And there are other enchantments that affect them. You just have to be—”

The unified shouts of terror from the cubeks cut Longshot off, and all of the heroes looked around them to see the people of the neighborhood running into their houses and closing the doors behind them.

“That’s not good, is it?” Joryn observed.

“Pro’ly not,” Longshot agreed. “We just gotta get moving, before we figure out what got into ’em.”

“I think we just found it,” Kated said, his voice flat.

“Found what? Oh, smokes!” Longshot jumped back with a start.

Joryn took the shield from his back and drew his sword instinctively. “What *is* that?” He studied the towering monstrosity that was waving its tentacles before them. It stood twice as tall as any of the cubek houses. He couldn’t tell if it was an animal or a plant. It looked like a giant, colorful mushroom, with more tentacles than he could count at first glance, and razor-sharp teeth in its mouth. Joryn recalled the sheriff’s warning. “That’s a carnivorous squidshroom, isn’t it?”

“Yup,” Longshot said.

Joryn sheathed his sword. “I imagine the cubeks are accustomed to these things. We will do as they do.”

“That’s actually the best plan,” Longshot agreed. “Get into a house, and the squidshroom won’t follow.”

“Just don’t make any sudden moves,” Lowgun added. “They vomit acid. They start digesting their food before they eat it.”

“Ah, the wonders of nature!” Kabed sighed, sarcastically.

“From the sounds of things around here, I’d say nature may or may *not* have anything at all to do with it,” Joryn said. “Slowly,” he commanded, as he began creeping towards the nearest house.

The others followed his lead, nervously.

Without warning, the monster growled and began waving its tentacles agitatedly. It turned to Joryn and belched, launching a glob of green, acidic slime directly at him.

Joryn leapt out of the way, letting the glob hit the ground, where it instantly burned through the grass. “Run!”

He led the way into the house, the door of which he’d been prepared to knock down if it had not been so conveniently unlocked.

When the others were inside, Joryn closed the door behind them.

“Let me guess,” Kabed said. “No killing.”

Joryn nodded with a smile. “You know the drill.”

“Yeah,” Kabed agreed. “All life is sacred. Even if it’s trying to externally digest us.”

“Exactly.”

Longshot laughed. “Well I agree with *that* wholeheartedly. I only ever take my guns off stun

for things like those lifeless Gor'borg robots the Wanderer sent after us. So, do we just wait until it passes and then get on our way?"

"That's the plan," Joryn said.

"Works for me."

"Does no one live here?" Kated asked. "It's awfully convenient to just stumble into an unlocked, empty house like that."

"Oh, no, we're not alone. Pipe guy's right over there," Longshot pointed with his thumb, to where the man with the pipe was watching them as he smoked, thoroughly unconcerned. "Nobody ever locks their doors around here."

Kated and Joryn were both startled to see they had intruded upon someone's privacy, unused to the ways of the cubeks as they were.

Joryn addressed the cubek man, "I thank you for sharing your shelter with us. We will leave as soon as the squidshroom realizes there's no food for it in this neighborhood."

The man took the pipe away from his lips and said, "That N'obotto sure does have a lot of mansions, doesn't he?"

Joryn nodded, smiling. "Yes, he does." His eye caught something then, just beside his head.

He turned to Longshot, genuinely not knowing whether or not he was in danger. “Longshot, why is there a glowing brush floating beside my head?”

“Hey! You found it!” Longshot said.

“I did? Found what?”

“Yeah! That’s the brush that unicycle kid couldn’t find. He enchanted it when he told you about it. It’s how things work around here. Once the brush was declared missing, it lit up and started to float, so that someone like you could find it and return it to unicycle kid.”

“So ...?”

“So just grab it out of the air. If we see that kid again, you can give it back to him.”

Joryn reached out and plucked the brush from the air. It stopped glowing, and a riff of harp music accompanied Joryn’s procurement of the item. He looked around for the source of the music.

“It’s just in the air,” Lowgun said with a snicker, amused at Joryn’s bewilderment.

“Yeah,” Longshot agreed. “Air harp. Anytime an enchantment is broken, it triggers the air harp.”

“Of course it does,” Kaped grumbled.

Joryn put the brush in his pocket, trying to act as though he weren’t completely freaked out.

At the instant the brush went into his pocket, everyone turned at the sound of breaking glass, as a little creature launched itself through the window. The creature—a very short humanoid with a jack-o-lantern for a head, covered in dark orange blood—got to its feet quickly and ran right at Joryn.

Joryn drew his sword, to warn the creature off, but the creature was undeterred, as it reached into its pocket and threw several coins directly at the startled young prince. As the coins hit Joryn’s shield, they vanished, and a clinking, jingling sound, like coins being dropped into a pouch, sounded above Joryn’s head. “What was that? An ‘air bank?’ ”

“Yep,” Longshot said.

“Of course,” Kaped grumbled again, unnerved by the lack of any sense to their surroundings.

The little creature jumped up and down for joy three times, then ran back to the window and threw himself back outside.



“What was—?”

“Pumpkin Patch Kid,” Longshot answered Joryn’s unfinished question.

“They just do that,” Lowgun said.

“They just do *what?*” Joryn asked, plainly distressed.

“Whenever someone near them does something of merit, the Pumpkin Patch Kids drop everything to gift them with spirit coins. It makes them happy.”

“Oh,” Kated said with a sardonic smirk.

“As long as they’re happy then.”

“I’m so confused,” Joryn said.

“Can I just take this time to say how much I *hate* the Wyyrd Outback?” Kated grumbled.

The reptisaur laughed. “A man of science, in a realm where magic rules, must find the science in the magic in order to be at ease. A difficult task, but not an impossible one.”

Kated calmed. If nothing else, the reptisaur’s words at least set his mind to thinking and puzzling again, rather than just feeling overwhelmed. It was helpful to remember that, just because he couldn’t explain something, it did

not necessarily mean that it could not be explained.

“Wait a minute,” Longshot said. “If the Pumpkin Patch Kids are in Mech Valley, then that means they know we’re here to save the princess.”

“Which means—” Lowgun’s realization was cut off by the sounds of screaming, coming from outside.

“They’re out there with that carnivorous squidshroom!” Longshot finished for him.

The sound of the squidshroom’s belching outside was followed by more child-like screams of terror.

“We have to rescue them,” Joryn said.

“How?” Kated asked.

“One step at a time,” Joryn answered, as he strode determinedly to the door and walked outside into the fray.

“We have *got* to work on your strategy skills,” Kated shouted after him.

Longshot and Lowgun pushed past Kated, guns already drawn for the battle.

Kated walked out, resigned to a battle without any sort of plan. He turned to close the door

and waved at the pipe-smoking man. "Thanks again," he said, and he closed the door behind him.

Now alone in his house, the old cubek removed the pipe from his mouth and said, "That N'obotto sure does have a lot of mansions, doesn't he?" He smiled, having spoken his mind, and went back to smoking his pipe, wholly content with life.

The heroes emerged to find not one, but four carnivorous squidshrooms terrorizing the Pumpkin Patch Kids. "Joryn, I don't see how we can do this!" Kated shouted over the screams of the Kids.

Joryn surveyed the chaos in horrified dismay, as the Pumpkin Patch Kids only barely dodged glob after glob of the squidshrooms' acid. "We'll find a way. We have to!"

"Here's one," Longshot shouted, as he began firing stun rays at the nearest squidshroom.

Lowgun followed his lead, targeting another.

"Four of us, four of them," Kated shouted. "Let's do this!"

“Here, Joryn!” Longshot tossed one of his pistols, and Joryn caught it. “Always bringin’ a sword and shield to a gun fight.” He laughed.

“It doesn’t seem like it’s—” Joryn stopped mid sentence to raise his shield against another glob of acidic slime, as the fourth squidshroom charged. He fired at the beast with his borrowed pistol. “It’s not working!” He dodged another ball of slime, and the enraged creature continued to pursue him.

“Smokes!” Longshot shouted, barely dodging a slimy spitball himself. “Well, at least they’re mad.”

Kabed fired repeatedly into the squidshroom he had targeted, and he was instantly swarmed by Pumpkin Patch Kids, who threw spirit coins at him from all directions. “Longshot! I think your silver lining detector is damaged!”

“Yeah, man, but look on the bright side! At least they digest externally.”

“How in the hells is that the *bright* side?”

“ ’Cause I’d rather die out here than in their stomachs!”

A Pumpkin Patch Kid screamed out in agony, as one of the acid globs hit him, and he began to dissolve.

“No!” Joryn shouted. “We have to find another way.” He jerked his shield arm, which he seemed to have been losing control of throughout the battle. He fired at the beast, but it went right towards its kill, who had dissolved rapidly, shot out a massive tongue, like a frog, and pulled the now nutrient-filled slime ball back into its mouth.

“I’m gonna be sick,” Kabed shouted, continuing to pepper one of the beasts with ineffective stun beams.

Lowgun ran over to Joryn. “Stop doing that.”

“Stop doing what?”

“You’ve been fighting your own arm.”

Embarrassed, Joryn shrugged. “You noticed that? I don’t know what’s wrong with it.”

“I don’t think it’s your arm,” Lowgun said.

“Huh?”

“Your monster’s eating. Hold still and look.”

Joryn held his arm still and looked at it, noticing the shield was not only shaking, but sounded to be warbling like an extremely angry squirrel. “What in the—?”

“You told us the sword and shield were alive; that the shield literally flew back into the sky to rescue you after your battle with the Wanderer. So ... let it do what it can on its own.”

“That’s crazy!” Joryn said. “But so is everything else around here.” He pulled his arm out of the straps on the shield’s underside and didn’t even have time to hold it before the shield shot away from him and flew directly at the squidshroom who had just swallowed the digested Pumpkin Patch Kid, smashing into its head.

Enraged, the squidshroom turned and chased after the shield, which was already heading to the next of the beasts to do the same. Soon, the squidshrooms were standing in a circle, with the shield flying around, knocking them all in the heads as hard as it could.

The shield’s angry warbling grew louder.

“All right,” Joryn said. “Shield’s definitely cussing us out right now. Fire on those squidshrooms!”

The four heroes fired into the confused circle of squidshrooms, the surviving Pumpkin Patch Kids gleefully showering them with spirit coins and cheers.

Having finally had enough, the carnivorous squidshrooms turned and fled back into the forest from whence they had come, and the shield dropped to the ground with a thud.

The Pumpkin Patch Kids ran to the shield and threw spirit coins all over it, which vanished into the spirit bank as usual.

“Are you telling me that shield has a ‘spirit bank’ account?” Kated asked.

Joryn walked over to the shield, as the Pumpkin Patch Kids made way. He looked down at it. “So, you can fly, you can talk ... sort of, and that battle was definitely all on you. Thank you.”

The shield lay silent and unmoving, as if it were any other shield.

“Nothing?” Joryn picked up the shield, putting his left arm back through the straps. To the others, he said, “I may never solve the mystery of

these weapons. But that was certainly ... convenient.”

Longshot laughed, walking over to take his pistol back from Joryn. “Yeah. Maybe we should just send the *shield* to N’obotto’s mansion to save the princess. Sure would save *us* a lot of trouble.”

Joryn laughed too. “Somehow, I don’t think it works that way. The only two times I’ve seen it take initiative like that were when the battles had already been lost. It certainly didn’t fight the Wanderer for me, rather than being dropped out of that air ship first.”

“That’s why I hate magic,” Kabed said. “No rhyme or reason to any of it.”

“You don’t believe in anything, do you?” Longshot asked.

“Of course I do,” Kabed countered. “I believe in anything that can be quantified. Everything else is suspect.”

“So that’s why you can’t accept Marley’s life spark. You don’t believe *any* of us have souls, huh?”

“Actually, I do, but I’d hardly call it a belief.”



“That’s an intriguing comment,” Joryn said. “What does it mean, exactly?”

“Only that Deluvian science is far beyond anything the Empire of Nod has ever seen. We long ago quantified the spirit realm. We know for a fact that all life forms are immortal spirits, and the body is simply a temporary vessel. Consciousness does not die.”

“So Marley—?” Longshot started to ask.

“Is not conscious,” Kaped cut the gunslinger off. “I know that, because I programmed him not to be. The Unitrons aren’t sentient like Trig is. They are run by a *program*, and Marley’s is malfunctioning. It’s as simple as that.”

“So,” Lowgun asked, joining them with a flick of his reptilian tongue, “in all the scientific progress made in Deluvia, nothing has ever been seen to exceed its programming?”

“Well ...” Kaped had no answer.

“I feel like humans exceed their programming as a rule,” Joryn said. “All life forms with ambition do. And didn’t we evolve, maybe even at random, from simpler life forms over the ages?”

“At random,” Lowgun added, “or with some invisible guidance. Either way, my primordial ancestors are thought to have been simple lizards. But over time, we changed shape, learned to use language, tools, build cities, write our histories. We are definitely more than we started out to be.”

“Yeah,” Longshot agreed. “I may not believe in the gods as such, pullin’ all our strings ... swear to ’em easy enough, only ’cause I don’t think anyone’s at home. But I’ve seen enough to know we have spirits. I always thought maybe our spirits guide our evolution. Species, individuals, whatever. Sorta like each one of us is his own higher power.” He thought of his own short, full life. “Either way, we do evolve, winding up different people than we started out, maybe not in any way the people that everyone else planned for us to be. Just like Low says.”

Kabed sighed, amused and exasperated. “You just aren’t robotics experts. *Robots* don’t *evolve*, unless their designers *make* them evolve. I’ll never believe that being crushed by a boulder somehow brought Marley to *life*. He’s really nothing more than a talking pocket watch, in the

grand scheme of things. Like I said, I *made* him that way.” Something caught the Deluvian’s eye then. “What is that?”

He walked over to the edge of the forest, where something was shining through the trees. “It’s that damned diamond necklace that cubek woman lost.” He reached out and grabbed the floating bauble. Harp music ensued out of the ether, and he rolled his eyes in aggravated annoyance.

Joryn laughed, as Kated walked back to them. “You hate magic, but you’ll play along. Is that it, Kated?”

“Well, *you* got one. I figure we can return them if we happen back this way on our way home.”

“Or we could do so right now.” Joryn nodded towards the cubek houses, where people were returning to what they had been doing before the wild squidshrooms had interrupted their routines.

Several Pumpkin Patch Kids ran up to Kated and showered him with spirit coins for finding the necklace. As they jumped and cheered, one of them fell on its face and lay

motionless. The others stopped, looked at their fallen companion for a moment, then jumped on him and started to eat him with rabid enthusiasm.

“What in the *bells?*” Kated shouted, as he backed away in horror.

“Oh, yeah,” Longshot said. “They eat their dead.”

“But he was *fine!*”

“Sure, before he dropped dead.”

“But he was *fine!*” Kated repeated. “Why would he just ‘drop dead?’ ”

Longshot shrugged. “ ’Cause he got old. That’s how Pumpkin Patch Kids go. All young and youthful for decades, then one day, their time just runs out, and they drop dead. Then their buddies gobble them up.”

“Right,” Joryn said, averting his eyes. “Let’s get moving. Before I lose my breakfast burrito. I think I see that unicycle kid. I’m going to take him his brush before we head out.” Joryn walked as fast as he could, away from the scene of the Pumpkin Patch Kids’ morbid feast.

“Breakfast burrito,” Longshot repeated with ravenous longing. “Ya gotta admit, Marley has great taste in food ... for a talking pocket watch I

mean.” He winked at Kaped and followed Joryn, accompanied by Lowgun.

Ignoring the comment, Kaped surveyed the reemerging cubeks, until he saw the familiar woman sweeping. “There she is. I’m gonna take this back to her. I’ll be right with you.”

Kaped approached the woman, noting out of the corner of his eye that the unicycle kid seemed thrilled to have his brush returned, and the Pumpkin Patch Kids had abandoned their feast to gift Joryn with further spirit coins. The tech wizard shook his head, then addressed the woman, presenting the necklace. “Ma’am, I found this in the trees. Is this the necklace your daughter lost?”

She looked at the necklace, then snatched it out of Kaped’s hand and looked him in the eyes, clearly upset. “Thief!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “Help! This man stole my daughter’s diamond necklace! Police! Thief!”

Kaped nodded tightly, irritated beyond his capacity both by the woman’s irrational reaction and by the Pumpkin Patch Kids who had now surrounded him in order to merrily pelt him with spirit coins. “Glad I could help.” He turned and

walked away, finding his way around the obliviously cheering Pumpkin Patch Kids, only to see his friends urgently running towards him.

“What did you do, man?” Longshot asked, panic on his face.

“I just returned her necklace. Should I even be surprised that she was crazy?”

“Makes no difference. We gotta go!”

“What’s going on?” Kated asked.

“At this point, I assume Longshot knows better than we do,” Joryn said. “If he says run, we run.”

“But, I didn’t even *do* anything!”

The sound of angry chatter filled the air, and the woman pointed at Kated. “Thief! Help! This man stole my daughter’s diamond necklace! Police! Thief!”

The angry sounds grew louder, as a swarm of very small, very angry gnomes, dressed in green and glowing with electricity, appeared over a nearby hill.

“Electrichauns!” Longshot shouted. “We *have* to run! Being called into action infuriates them, and when they get mad, they become invincible and won’t stop chasing us until we get

inside somewhere and they can't see us; or until they kill us with their lightning bolts!"

"Let's get back into one of these houses then," Joryn suggested.

"No!" Longshot insisted. "All the cubeks are gonna band together now. They won't let us in. The mansion should be just over that next hill, right?"

Joryn nodded in the affirmative and started running towards the hill. "Let's move!"

As they all ran, Kabed muttered to himself in a simmering rage, "I *really* hate the Outback!"

The electricchauns gained ground quickly, shooting bolts of electricity from their hands, closer to the mark each time.

A blast hit Longshot on his left heel, as the heroes hit the top of the hill and headed down, and he leapt straight up into the air.

Seeing that Longshot had become an easy target, Kabed turned in the same instant and fired into the swarm of electrified gnomes with his stun rays.

Longshot hit the ground running, and Kabed followed without missing a beat, in spite of the stray Pumpkin Patch Kid who leapt out of

the brush beside the road to shower him with coins for his heroic deed.

A stray energy bolt hit the cheering Pumpkin Patch Kid directly on the hind quarters, and he squealed and ran as swiftly as he could back to the cubek neighborhood.

“Joryn!” Longshot cried. “Shield these guys, will ya?”

“I can’t! They’re too small. I don’t want to risk seriously injuring them.”

“Smokes, if ya ain’t right, but—”

“They’ve got no qualms about seriously injuring *us!*” Kated countered. “Besides, I thought they were invincible.”

“Right,” Joryn agreed, remembering. “So then what would ‘shielding’ them do, other than slowing us down and angering them more?”

“Point,” Kated conceded.

“There’s the mansion,” Joryn pointed. “Almost there! Keep running!”

Lightning bolts flew on all sides of them, and when they reached the enormous wooden door of N’obotto’s mansion, one of the bolts finally landed with vicious accuracy.



Kabed's entire body jerked and spasmed, as the lightning bolt that had hit him in the back coursed violently through his tech armor.

"Kabed!" Joryn wanted to take hold of his friend, but the wild electricity posed too great a threat.

The electricchauns threw even more deadly bolts their way, and Joryn used his shield to deflect them.

"Open the door!" Longshot shouted. "I've got a plan!"

Lowgun opened the great, creaking door, pulling the reluctant prince behind him.

Longshot set his guns to kill and fired at the invincible electricchauns, sending enough of them stumbling backwards, irritated but unharmed, to give him a chance to turn his back to them.

He ran around Kabed, set his guns back to stun, and fired at close range, the force of the blasts pushing Kabed's now motionless body forward, until it was well enough inside the mansion to close the door.

As Longshot slammed the door shut behind him, the charging electricchauns crashed into it full force.

Stunned, they stepped back to assess their situation.

“What just happened?” one of the creatures asked in a squeaky little voice.

“I don’t know,” said their leader. “It seems they walked into that thing and disappeared from reality.”

“What was that thing?” another gnome asked.

“Some sort of a tree; maybe a cloud. I don’t know. I’m not a scientist!” the leader answered.

“Was it a bucket full of honey?” another asked.

“No,” the leader assured her.

“I say, pretty surely, it was a door,” another electricchaun chimed in.

The leader regarded the young gnome shrewdly. “How did you know that it was a door then, laddie?”

The youngster answered. “By first crashing into it with me wee head, sir! And then ... afterwards ... well ... never mind. I don’t know what that thing was. Nobody ever taught any of us how to tell a door from a bucket of honey anyway.”

“Right you are!” The leader proclaimed. “We’ll never figure it out! So, let’s go drink and smoke our lovely pipes!”

The electricchauns all cheered, following their leader calmly back over the hill and forgetting the chase completely.

## CHAPTER 2: N'OBOTTO'S MANSION

**I**NSIDE THE MANSION, THE HEROES CAUGHT their breath. Kated grumbled, trying with enormous difficulty to stand, “Lucky for me, this tech armor is impervious to stun rays, even when it’s not functioning properly ... you maniac.” He laughed in spite of himself.

“You’re welcome, buddy,” Longshot answered smugly.

"I'm just glad you're all right," Joryn said. "Both of you."

"Yeah, man," Longshot agreed. "Those electricchauns don't play around. Good thing they're also insane idiots and probably forgot all about us as soon as I closed the door."

Kabed tried to take a step, but a surge of residual electricity continued to wreak havoc with his armor, and he spun around instead. "This is bad," he said simply.

"We can carry you if we need to," Joryn offered. "We just need to find a safe way to do it. We could use my cape as a stretcher."

"Don't be ridiculous," Kabed grumbled. "I appreciate your concern, but I don't need to be carried around like an invalid. Incidentally, the armor is safe to touch now. The excess electricity's been absorbed into its systems. That's the problem."

"Well, we certainly aren't going to leave you here while we raid the mansion. What good will it do us to rescue Pumpkitina, only to have you captured in the process?"

Lowgun flicked his tongue nervously, smelling the air. "We're about to have company. Joryn

is right, Kated. We can't risk leaving you behind. Put your arms over my and Longshot's shoulders."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Longshot protested. "I already saved him *once* in the last five minutes."

"Grow up, sidekick."

"I am *not* your sidekick!"

"Guys," Joryn said, "company's here. Let's try to play nice."

"What is that?" Kated asked, incredulous. "A robot peacock?"

The beautifully painted mechanical bird, decked out in a velvet, burgundy leisure suit, cleared its throat and began warming up its voice. Then it sang, in a tremendously operatic sort of way, "Welcome to Torakku N'obotto's mansion."

"Thank you," Joryn said. "We're touring the Outback, and we wondered if we might have a tour here."

Kated took another step forward, and his arms began flailing around helplessly under the control of another surge of residual excess power from the electricchauns' assault. He swore and

growled, as Longshot and Lowgun tried to take his arms but were thrown back.

Joryn tried to retain his composure as he waited for the peacock's reply.

The robotic bird continued its song, as if Joryn had said nothing, "I am authorized to speak for our illustrious overlord, who has reigned here for millennia."

Longshot and Lowgun each took one of Kaped's arms over their shoulders when he stopped moving.

"Well, this doesn't seem so bad," Kaped said, nodding towards the bird. "Gotta wonder who wrote those lyrics though."

"I regret to inform you," the peacock sang proudly, "that the master is not in."

"No trouble at all," Joryn said. "Do you know when he'll be back, or where we might find him?"

The peacock's song continued, "I am now both authorized and obliged ... to kill you all, with a little help from my friends."

Twenty more robot peacocks, painted and dressed as well as the first, dropped on cue from the ceiling.

“Actually,” Kaped said, “pretty sure I hate this song.” He pulled his arms away from Longshot and Lowgun to reach for his gun, but the legs of his tech suit betrayed him, kicking forward and landing him on the ground. “I hate everything about today,” he moaned.

“Longshot, Lowgun,” Joryn said. “Get ready.” He drew his sword.

The peacocks began singing the scales, higher and higher.

“Kill or no kill?” Longshot asked.

“No kill,” Joryn answered. “We don’t know if these robots are sentient or not.”

From the ground, Kaped offered, “Well if I could sit up, and if my tech armor weren’t malfunctioning, I could probably scan them and let you know.”

Longshot scoffed with a grin. “Your opinion on that topic is highly suspect at the moment, buddy.”

“Why you ... cocky ... son of a ...”

“Skeezworm. Yeah, I know,” Longshot finished for him.

“That *isn't* what I was going to say!” Kaped grumbled.



When the peacocks hit the high note of the scales for the last time, their eyes lit up red, and they all launched fireballs out of their open beaks in the direction of the intruders.

“What’s happening?” Kated asked.

“Stay down, Kated!” Joryn ordered, as he lifted his shield to block the fire.

Lowgun and Longshot managed to avoid the flying fireballs and took aim with stun guns, hitting four of the peacocks, who simply vanished.

“Smokes! It’s a recycler system! No need to hold back!” Longshot announced, as he shot down another two singing peacocks.

“Recycler?” Joryn asked.

“There’s a main processor in the mansion, a central intelligence that prints these guys out. They don’t have their own minds, and when they get damaged or disturbed, it just pulls them back into recycle. I’ve seen it before around these parts.”

“I need to be sure. Keep guns on stun, and throw me one,” Joryn said.

Lowgun tossed one of his guns to Joryn, then grabbed Kated’s gun out of its holster with

his tail and brought it to his hand to replace the one he had loaned out. Before Kated could protest, the reptisaur said, "What? *You* weren't going to do anything with it."

The peacocks started tap dancing.

"Oh, wow!" Longshot said. "I always wanted to learn how to do that."

"For real?" Lowgun asked, skeptically.

"A boy can dream, can't he?"

Kated managed to sit up. He hit a tiny button on the side of his helmet, and a yellow light visor projected down over his eyes. "Longshot's right. At least the scanner seems to be working ... mostly. These guys are just shells. No brains of their own. Obviously controlled by a central mind somewhere else." Kated's left arm flew into the wall then, cracking stone, and his legs kicked up, flipping him over, end over end, landing him on his face.

The birds' dance ended, and they returned to their scales, firing again at the highest note of the octave.

"Good then," Joryn said. "No holding back." He blocked fire with his shield while

charging at the nearest robot and taking off its head with his sword.

Longshot and Lowgun continued to fire into the swarm, dodging fireballs, and sending the enemies into the invisible recycler.

To the heroes' dismay, more of the birds fell from the ceiling to replace the ones who had fallen.

Lowgun noticed a glowing octagon on the far wall, by the stairs to the second floor. "Joryn, do you see that light on the wall by the stairs?"

"Yes. What is it?"

Lowgun shot down another two peacocks, who were now tap dancing, launching fireballs, and drawing swords simultaneously. "It's a security system I've seen before. If we can get to it, and hit it, the mansion will think the threat has been resolved, and the birds will stop falling in on us."

"On it," Joryn said, as he continued to chop through the lifeless machines.

"Wish I could help," Kabed mumbled into the ground. His light visor flickered, then disappeared. "Great. Now my scanner's not even working anymore."

“No worries, Kated,” Longshot crowed.  
“I’ll protect you!”

“Oh, shut up,” Kated mumbled.

As Lowgun and Longshot continued to fire stun rays at the birds, Joryn chopped his way through relentlessly, making his way to the wall. He noted, silently, that the robots never turned to follow him, only seeming to be able to move in one direction.

The last bird blocked his sword deftly with a rapier, giving Joryn a start. None of the others had seemed at all efficient with their blades.

Joryn backed up, blocked the next blow with his shield, dropped the sword, removed the gun from his belt, and shot the robot right in the head. Free to strike his true target at last, Joryn pressed in the octagonal light fixture on the wall, and it went dark, as the recycler was deactivated.

Turning around, he watched as his friends quickly eliminated all of the remaining robot peacocks, and no more of the birds dropped from the ceiling to replace them. He tucked the gun back into his belt and picked up his sword. “That was fun.” He walked over to join Longshot

and Lowgun, beside Kated, as they were helping the tech wizard to stand.

“Sorry I was useless,” Kated offered.

“Not at all,” Joryn assured him. “Your scanner at least told us for certain that the robots were what Longshot suspected they were.”

Joryn handed the gun back to Lowgun. “Thanks.”

Lowgun nodded, tucking Kated’s gun into his belt and taking the gun from the prince.

“Still,” Kated said, “I think I can—”

“Lose the armor, Kated,” Joryn said.

“What?”

“You need to lose the tech armor. It’s going to hold us back and get somebody killed if we go on like this. We need to get up those stairs, search the mansion. We may encounter more of those birds, or worse, for all we know. We need you to be able to hold your own in a fight.”

“But ... I’m not wearing anything else. I mean ... there’s nothing *under* the tech armor.”

Longshot hooted with laughter. “Guess we’re in for a show from here on out.”

“No!” Kated protested. “If you maniacs think I’m going to fight singing and dancing

robot peacocks, while in the nude, you're even crazier than the despot who *designed* this place!"

Joryn puzzled over the problem. "I really don't see any other way. Maybe you could tie my cape around—"

"In case you hadn't noticed," Kaped informed him, "there isn't much left of your cape."

Joryn pulled his cape around and noted the holes that had been burned into it during the battle by close encounters with narrowly evaded fireballs.

"Don't sweat it, buddy," Longshot said. "I've got you covered." He started unbuckling his belt.

"Wait a minute!" Kaped shouted frantically. "I don't want to see *you* fighting weird peacocks naked either!"

"No, no. I actually wore underpants today. Lucky for you. I'll just let you borrow those. I prefer a little breeze in my britches anyway."

"You have *got* to be kidding me! You want me to wear your dirty, sweaty underwear?"

"Would you rather go naked?" Joryn asked. "Pick one. That's an order. Naked, or Longshot's

underwear. But you *are* ditching the tech armor. We don't have any more reasonable options."

"Fine. I'll wear Longshot's underpants. But they'd better be clean."

Longshot shrugged. "Clean is relative, I s'pose."

Kabed nodded, tersely. "If the gods were real, I'd be asking why they hate me."

Longshot laughed and continued removing his boots and pants, revealing a pair of white undershorts with little red hearts printed all over them. He moved to pull those off as well and was stopped by all three of his companions shouting, "No," at the same time.

"What?" he asked with a grin.

"Turn around for that part ... please." Joryn said, suppressing his own laughter at the whole situation.

Longshot shrugged, his grin growing. "Why? I got nothing to be ashamed of."

All three of his companions once again shouted in unison, "Turn around!"

"Fine, fine," he said as he complied. "Your loss, your dollar." He pulled off his underpants, covered from behind by his customary long,

brown greatcoat. He pulled his pants back on, zipped, buttoned, and buckled back up, and tossed the shorts over to Kaped.

Kaped looked to the reptisaur. “Mind helping me out of this?”

Lowgun nodded and started helping Kaped out of his faulty armor. A button on the inside of the helmet switched the armor off, and Kaped was able to undress without further interference from his own limbs. To Kaped’s regret, without being powered on, the tech armor he had designed was much too heavy to maneuver in, or to finish taking off by himself, otherwise, he would have simply kept it on as if it were regular armor.

Everyone turned around, for the sake of Kaped’s dignity (though Longshot needed some prompting), as the tech wizard changed from the waist down, out of his armor and into the little white shorts, which fit his more muscular frame much tighter than they had Longshot’s long and skinny, not-quite-fully-grown body.

“All right,” Kaped said at last.



The group turned and snickered, more at Kated's discomfort than at his actual appearance in the shorts, which was also amusing in itself.

"Nobody get excited," he grumbled.

"Don't be silly, Kated," Joryn said. "You know I don't see you that way."

Longshot shrugged, a goofy, unabashed smile on his face. "I do." He winked at Kated flirtatiously.

Kated glared at Longshot. "I am *not* an object! And my eyes are up here!" He pointed, and he walked past his companions towards the stairs. "Well, are we going or not?"

"Lead the way, hotshot," Longshot said with a laugh.

"Never mind. I'll follow you three."

"Dressed like that, I guess it's only fitting you take the *rear*," Longshot quipped.

Everyone laughed, except for Kated, who covered his backside from view, as well as he could with his hands, and took a position behind his companions.

As Longshot and Lowgun walked on, Joryn put a hand on Kated's shoulder, still laughing.

“Don’t worry, Kaped. Things can only get better from here, right?”

“Well, at least I’ll agree they can’t get any *worse*.” He followed Joryn up the stairs, to the second level of the mansion.

The heroes exited the stairwell on the second level to find a layout similar to the first level, with a door at the far end of the long, rectangular floor. The only difference was that this floor was adorned with a number of fairly large caskets.

“This looks menacing,” Joryn said.

“At least you shut off the security system,” Kaped pointed out.

“Well,” Lowgun said, flicking his tongue nervously, “on the *first* floor.”

“What, you mean we might run into more of those peacock things up here too?” Longshot asked.

Everyone’s attention was drawn by the creaking sounds filling the room.

“Tell me that’s a door,” Kaped said, knowing it was wishful thinking.

“No,” Joryn said, with resignation in his voice. He sighed. “It’s the caskets.”

“Ah, smokes, if it ain’t the truth.” Longshot drew his guns.

Kabed reached over and reclaimed his own gun, which was still tucked into Lowgun’s belt.

The four of them watched with dread, as the rotting remains of forty very large rabbits staggered out of the caskets, moaning and shuffling right in their direction.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Joryn suggested. “The Outback is a very odd place, after all.”

“Are you *serious*?” Kabed had no doubts that the emergence of giant zombie rabbits did not bode well.

Joryn, with sword and shield ready, lest diplomacy should fail, stood before the hulking zombies with forced confidence. “Hello. We mean you no harm.”

One of the rabbits coughed out a cloud of dust, still shuffling towards Joryn and his friends, then said, “Join us ...”

Quietly, Joryn muttered to his friends, “Do you think that’s a friendly invitation?”

The rabbit continued "... in the grave."

"That answers that." Joryn took a defensive stance with his sword.

Longshot hit one of the zombies with a stun ray, and it vanished the same as the robots had done. "Huh? I don't get it."

Lowgun hissed, "These things recycle too. Probably mechanized corpses."

"Who cares how it works," Kabed said. "Shoot 'em!" He fired into the approaching zombies.

Then fifty robot peacocks dropped from the ceiling and started warming up their voices.

"No, no, no!" Joryn said. "I don't see a button on the far wall this time!"

"Me neither," Lowgun confirmed. "But there *are* stairs over there. If we're lucky, this is only the second level defense, and we can fight through and get away by ascending the stairs to level three."

"It's all we've got to work with," Joryn agreed. "Let's do it! I don't know what to make of the rabbits, without Kabed's scanner, so I'll focus on the peacocks. You three handle the zombies. Stun only."

“They’re *zombies*,” Kated protested, as he shot one and watched it vanish.

“Kated,” Joryn countered, as he ran his sword through a singing peacock, before it could get to the high note on the scale, “last night, I poured a drink on a potted plant, and it chewed me out and called me a tourist. I don’t know *what* counts as sentient life anymore. As long as we’re in the Wyyrd Outback, it’s better to assume that everything is alive, until proven otherwise.”

“But they’re *zombies*!”

“And you’re fighting them in Longshot’s underwear, so don’t tell me to expect things to go the way we think they should in this place.” He slashed another peacock across the chest and raised his shield to block an oncoming fireball. “And let’s not forget what was happening to some of the patrons, when we left the Womp Shop last night.”

“Guess I’ll give you that one. By the way, is it cold in here, or is that just me?”

“Pro’ly to keep the corpses fresh,” Longshot speculated.

“They’re *not* fresh,” Kated argued.

“Well, maybe fresher than they woulda been.”

The group shot and hacked their way through the enemy horde, with more and more appearing after each one they took down.

“There’re just too many of them,” Lowgun said. “We should retreat.”

“Not yet,” Joryn said, chopping the head off of another robot. “There’s a casket at the end, by the stairs, that hasn’t opened up yet. If my guess is right, there’s another off switch in there. The problem is ...” He turned, as another robot dropped down behind him, and he ran his sword through it, spinning quickly to raise his shield against the fireball being launched from the robot on the other side of him. “... getting to it!”

On his arm, the shield started shaking and warbling again, sounding angry, but not pulling Joryn’s arm as it had done in the cubek village.

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” Joryn replied, “but if I throw you now, I won’t have any defense against those fireballs.”

“I don’t think it’s talking to *you* this time,” Lowgun said, as he stunned two more zombies. “Look at your sword.”

“What?” Joryn looked at his blade, seeing that the lettering etched into it was glowing in response to the shield’s apparent criticisms. “That’s funny. Do you think they’re talking to each *other*?”

“Can’t you call Libran or something and ask him?” Lowgun asked.

“Sadly, no. At least, I don’t think ...”

The shield started warbling more agitatedly, and the sword lit up and pulled Joryn’s arm down to point directly in front of him. The white lettering along the blade turned a bright, burning orange, from the hilt to the tip, and fired a massive fireball of its own all the way down the hall, taking out zombies and robots alike.

“Yee-haw! How did you do that?” Longshot asked, elated.

Joryn was stunned. “I have no idea, but I’m taking advantage of the opening, and I think this proves the zombies aren’t alive. The sword wouldn’t take a life on its own like that.”

“Like I’ve been saying,” Kaped shouted after him, as Joryn ran to the end of the hall, “they’re *zombies*!”

Joryn reached the end of the hall, weary, as if the sword had taken energy directly from him to summon the flames. He strained to push the lid off of the stone coffin, finding to his relief that his guess had been correct. He quickly pushed the illuminated, octagonal button that he found on the floor of the sarcophagus, and the robots once again stopped falling from the ceiling.

The remaining zombies abruptly stopped moaning, turned, and shuffled back to their caskets.

“I don’t know enough swear words to properly react to what just happened!” Kaped shouted.

Joryn laughed. “Probably no one in the whole Empire does.”

“And your sword just shot out a fireball,” Kaped noted.

“It did.”

“I knew a guy who had that problem once,” Longshot said, with a wry grin. “But the doc cleared it up with some—”

“I don’t want to know that,” Kaped cut him off.



Longshot only laughed, enjoying getting a rise out of the tech wizard.

Joryn considered. “I’ve *got* to learn all there is to know about these weapons, about their history, how they work, what they’re capable of ... when I get back from the Whispering Plains I mean.”

“You sure it can wait?” Kaped asked.

Joryn thought of Galen, of how long they’d been apart. “It’ll have to. Now, let’s get upstairs and see what further horrors await us.”

“Can’t get any worse, which means it can only get better from here,” Longshot said, as he followed Joryn up the stairs.

Kaped sighed, tiredly. “People keep saying that.”

Exiting the stairwell on the third floor of the mansion, all four of the heroes were far more on alert than they had been on the second, knowing now that each level had its own security system to defeat.

Joryn surveyed the great hallway, before they went any farther. “More caskets.” He looked

up to the ceiling. “I guess we won’t see them until it’s too late, but it’s safe to assume there will be more of those dancing peacocks coming from above.” He noticed something new. “And no doubt those clay jars on either side of the caskets have some new nightmare to unleash.” Nodding ahead, he said, “Judging by the size and grandeur of that door at the end of the hallway, I’d suspect they’re about to give us everything they’ve got. Which is a good sign.”

“You’ve been spending too much time listening to Longshot,” Kated argued. “How is *any* of that a good sign?”

Joryn smiled. “It means they’ve got something to protect, behind that door. Which means, maybe, we’re right where we need to be, if we’re going to rescue Princess Pumpkitina.”

“Heck yeah!” Longshot agreed. “Let’s get this party started!”

Joryn began moving forward, followed by the others.

“Hey!” A voice shouted. “You can’t be in here!” A two-foot tall creature that was clearly half platypus and half scorpion jumped out of one of the clay pots.

“Yeah!” Another voice chimed in. “Get outa here! This is N’obotto’s place!”

“Those are—” Joryn began.

“Scorpioplats!” Longshot cut in. “Definite life forms. N’obotto somehow won the loyalty of the entire species centuries ago. Now they serve and protect him with their lives.”

Kabed shrugged. “Well, other than being unexplainable freaks of evolution—”

An energy bolt flew from the tip of the first scorpioplat’s tail, and Kabed had to duck to avoid it.

“They sting,” Longshot said.

“Still, they’re easy targets.” Kabed took aim and stunned the offending creature, who fell down immediately.

Seventy-eight more scorpioplats then crawled out of their clay jars. “He zapped Ollie! Get ’im!” one of them shouted.

“Oh, this day,” Kabed groaned.

The heroes found themselves dodging sting bolts left and right.

“Ow!” Joryn cried out. “I can’t block them all at once!”

Kabed, Longshot, and Lowgun fired at the angry creatures, stunning as many as they could.

“Is it bad?” Kabed asked.

“No,” Joryn answered. “Just irritating.”

“Yow!” Longshot yelped. “Got me! Ow! Got me again! Here’s for that, ya little imps!” He fired wildly into the swarming team of scorpions, knocking out another fifteen, before another stinger got through. “Smokes! Stop stinging me! There are *four* of us here, ya know!”

“Thanks for that,” Lowgun grumbled sarcastically.

“Any time, sidekick.”

“Don’t even start that.” Lowgun threw Joryn one of his guns again, and the prince caught it. “Just hold on to that one this time.”

Joryn nodded and added his own fire to the battle.

When the scorpions were all stunned and lying on the ground, the heroes breathed a sigh of relief. “Everyone all right?” Joryn asked.

Everyone mumbled more or less in the affirmative, in spite of the stings they’d all received.

“All right then, let’s get to that door.”

The creaking of the casket lids sent chills down their spines, as they realized it was not going to be that easy.

“Oh ... smokes,” Joryn said. “Get ready for it.”

Forty more of the seven-foot-tall zombie rabbits emerged from the caskets, shuffling all around them. “Join us ... in the grave.”

The heroes took aim with stun guns, vanishing the zombies as they hit them.

Before they could get rid of them all, however, thirty more robot peacocks dropped from the ceiling and started warming up their voices.

“Where’s that flame of yours, Joryn?” Longshot wailed, as the zombies threatened to overtake him.

“I don’t know how to make that happen!” Joryn answered, frantic.

“We’ve got more problems,” Kated said, stoically.

The stunned scorpions began to quiver on the ground, then rise back up to rejoin the fight.

“Those things don’t stay down,” Kated growled, trying to stun as many as he could before they could get all the way up.

“Flame’s out of the question now anyway,” Joryn shouted. He turned and stunned two of the zombies that had surrounded Longshot. “Count of three, we run the gauntlet!”

“Then what?” Kated asked.

“Then we hope that door’s just as unlocked as the one outside was. Run and shoot, boys! One, two, *three!*”

Joryn led the charge, only bothering to shoot the zombies, peacocks, or scorpions that were directly in his path, dodging fireballs and sting bolts as deftly as he could along the way. When he reached the door, he turned and fired back at the enemies who were still giving chase, waiting until all three of his friends had joined him. “Let’s go!”

He turned the knob on the door, and the four of them were instantly sucked right off of their feet and straight into a cold, black chasm of utter nothingness.

Without having had time to get their bearings in the void, the unexpected impact of a stone floor

beneath them began to bring them out of their disoriented states.

Joryn blinked his eyes, standing uncertainly and trying to take in their new surroundings. “This is a big, empty room.”

Kabed stood and laughed shortly. “You should have been a scientist.”

“Sorry, Kabed. Just thinking out loud. I can’t tell if it’s a prison, or ... there’s another door over there. A smaller one.”

“Well,” Longshot asked, “What’re we waiting for? That’s probably where they’re holding Pumpkitina.”

At that moment, thunderous, menacing laughter filled the empty stone room, and a giant onion, ten times the size of the average human, floated down from the ceiling.

“What in the name of all of the—?”

Kabed’s words were cut off by the thing itself, which landed on its enormous shod feet, opened its two bulbous eyes, and waved around its two gloved, armless hands in anger. Opening its massive mouth, to reveal rows upon rows of viciously serrated teeth, it spoke in a booming voice, “I am Onion Master; servant of the mighty

Torakku N'obotto! And you shall go no further!  
Prepare to die!”

“No!” Kated shouted. “That’s *it!* I can’t take this *anymore!* And I refuse to stand here, in Longshot’s *underwear*, and fight a thing called ‘Onion Master!’ ”

Longshot winked at the disgruntled Deluvian. “You can always take ’em off.”

“You wish!” Kated snapped.

“Well ...” Longshot considered. “... *yeab!*” He laughed.

Almost quivering with confused reactions, not knowing whether to laugh, or cry, and for some reason feeling tears well up, Joryn struggled to address the enormous vegetable. “Onion Master,” he stopped, putting a hand to his mouth, faking a cough to hide his sudden laughter and wondering if he, like Kated, had finally seen too much of the Outback. Regaining his composure, he resumed, “Sir, we mean you no harm.” He wiped the tears from his eyes, but more came. He suddenly remembered they were, in fact, in the room with a giant *onion*. He spared a glance to see his human companions likewise afflicted, wiping away their tears. “If we could



only speak with Torakku N'obotto, there is a matter we very much need to address.”

“Silence!” Onion Master bellowed. “Death to you all!” Without warning, Onion Master began leaping around the room, back and forth in a zigzag pattern.

The heroes desperately moved their stung and weary bodies to avoid being crushed beneath the monster’s giant shoes.

Wiping more tears away, and struggling to see through his watery eyes, Joryn shouted, “Stun him!” He fired wildly into the air, never certain, through the veil of tears, if any of his shots were hitting their mark.

“Fools!” Onion master roared with laughter. “I am unkillable! My master’s nanites in my veins prevent me from dying ... *ever!* Onion Master is forever!” He laughed some more.

“That science is legitimate!” Kated shouted, also firing almost blindly into the air.

“Good!” Joryn shouted. “Set weapons to kill, maybe they’ll stun!”

The heroes complied with Joryn’s order, and everyone fired into the air.

“Argh!” Onion Master cried out.

As the massive onion took a hit, his entire body lit up red, flickering.

“It’s working!” Joryn shouted. “Keep hitting him!” He fired, making another direct hit.

“Fools!” Onion Master bellowed again. He opened his mouth, releasing hundreds of normal sized onions that exploded in mid-air.

“This can’t get anymore idiotic,” Kaped shouted. “I hate this place more than words can express!” He hit Onion Master with another blast from his light gun, but the monster only laughed, continuing to jump around, trying to crush them, and to open his mouth, releasing onion bombs into the air.

“He’s just a big onion, Kaped,” Longshot teased. “What’re you afraid of?”

“I didn’t say I was afraid, just annoyed.”

“I know what’ll get him,” Longshot said with a grin. “Why don’t you take off those underpants and throw them at him?”

“Will you ...” Kaped fired again, moving quickly to avoid being stomped by the beast. “... stop trying to get me out of your pants?”

“Would you rather I tried to—?”

“Just stop,” Kated snapped. “Think about your girlfriend.”

Longshot laughed at Kated’s disposition and went on shooting.

“Told you,” Lowgun said dryly. “Flirts with *everyone*.” The reptisaur unsheathed a sword from his back, flew into the air, and landed several blows on Onion Master before his feet returned to the ground, causing the monster to light up red, just as the light rays and lasers had done.

“Argh!” Onion Master bellowed yet again. “I will not be defeated!” The villainous vegetable surprised everyone then by shooting two massive, red heat rays from his eyes, incinerating Kated where he stood.

“NO!!!” Joryn was horrified at the suddenness of his friend’s death. Shock began to take hold of his body, as he went ice cold from head to toe.

Lowgun, likewise, was momentarily stunned to the point that he almost didn’t move out of the way in time to avoid being crushed by Onion Master, who didn’t miss a beat.

Even Longshot had lost his humor, as he stared wide-eyed at the pile of smoking ash that

had only moments before been Kated. He nodded, forcing himself to snap out of it. "It's ... It'll be all right. I'm ..." His eyes looked upward, as if trying to see his own thoughts, while he calculated something as well as he could. "Yeah ... pretty sure."

"What?" Joryn asked, too stunned to move, the tears streaming down his face no longer entirely the work of Onion Master's stench.

"Look out!" Longshot flew at Joryn, knocking him out of the way, as Onion Master came crashing down with evil laughter, perfectly unfazed by the precious life force he had just extinguished.

"Mourn later, if we've got to," Longshot said. "This fight ain't nearly over!"

Joryn nodded, wiping the tears from his eyes and getting back to his feet, firing fiercely at the relentless monster who had killed his friend.

Kated found himself floating above the chaos, even more annoyed. "I'm *still* wearing Longshot's underwear? Is this how the spirit realm works?" He sighed, looking down at the pile of ash. "If

I'm going to continue my mission, this is going to take some explaining." He turned to leave, knowing where he had to go.

"Don't be hasty, Son."

"Father?" Kabed was overwhelmed with emotion. "What are ...? How ...? *Why* didn't you come *back*?"

The bearded, youthful looking man smiled sadly. "I wanted to, Kabed. If you had more time here, you might come to understand. When I died, I saw into the future, all of what was to come, regarding my own line. What would happen without me was far too important. You. Your mission. Your closeness to the chosen of Libran. None of it would have come to pass, if I had returned. Your mother would never have—"

"But those ... *fingrins*!" Kabed wept openly now. "They tore you apart. I was only four years old! I wasn't ready to lose you. I hadn't been prepared that you might *die* some day! You were the first of your line to die in over a thousand years. Please. Come with me."

The man laughed. "Where, my son? To what end?"

Kabed looked down at his friends, fighting Onion Master below; the pile of ash that had once been his own body. “You know where I have to go now. What I have to do.”

His father regarded him with the same kind, gray eyes that Kabed remembered so clearly from his childhood. “Even if I wanted to, and I don’t, I wouldn’t be able to, not in the way you want.”

“What do you mean? Why not? If I can go, so can you.”

“I’ve been to Merigo, my son.”

Kabed was stunned. “Merigo is ... *real?*”

His father laughed. “We may have proved the existence of the mind and spirit after the death of the body, Son, but we never *fully* quantified the afterlife. Not really. In Merigo, all things are made clear, one becomes perfectly enlightened. I can visit you whenever I like, go anywhere that I like, any time. But I will always be one with Merigo. It is the fate of all minds.”

“But, I ... If you can’t join me, then what are you doing here?”

“Making sure that you don’t rush off.”

“But I have to! My mission—”

“Is not in jeopardy.”

“I just got reduced to a pile of *ash* in front of my friends! How is that not—?”

“Sorry I’m late!” An overweight, bearded fairy, no larger than Kated’s head, wearing a pink tutu and a black overcoat, flew up to the two spirits.

“Who are you?” Kated asked.

“Oh, the name’s Mel.” He held out a fey hand. “Sorry I’m late, like I said. Cards got me distracted. Almost had a win, too. Anyway, I’m here now, so, let’s get down to business.”

“Business?”

“Yeah, man, I’m a resurrection accountant.”

“A *what?*”

Kated’s father laughed. “Son, remember where you are.”

“Yeah, I’m floating around in the spirit realm!” It dawned on him. “In the thrice damned Wyyrd Outback.”

“Precisely,” his father said, a loving gleam in his eyes. “Just go with it.”

Mel looked between the two spirits. “Is there a problem here, guys? I mean, I can’t exactly come back later. I would if I could, but, policy ... you know.”

Kabed just stared at the fairy, whose tiny wings didn't look physically capable of keeping him in the air.

"All right," the fairy cleared his throat. "Let's see here." He started counting coins, in the air, floating above Kabed's head. He mumbled, "Squidshrooms ... right, right. Necklace ... electricchauns ... nasty little bastards ... eighty ... ninety ... two ... three ... *eight* hundred." He lit up. "All right! You're good. I mean, it's your choice, of course, but I gotta start the count-down. I've got other places to be. Ten ... nine ... eight ..."

"Good for *what*?"

"Resurrection, man. Only costs a hundred spirit coins. Now, where was I? Oh, yeah ..." The fairy counted in his head, trying to pick up where he should have been in the countdown had he not stopped to chat. "Three ..."

"Say yes," Kabed's father urged.

"Yes!" Kabed blurted, just as Mel counted down to one.

"Done deal, man!" The fairy waved his wand, and trumpet music filled the air, following



the sounds of spirit coins clinking from one account to another.

Kabed felt himself falling, back down to the physical world. He could still hear his father calling after him.

“I love you, Son. I’m proud of you! Complete your mission. For your mother, and for—”

Kabed’s eyes popped open abruptly, cutting off his father’s words, and he inhaled deeply, as if for the first time. He found himself standing on his feet, still wearing Longshot’s underwear, and holding his gun. Not wasting any more time, he began firing into Onion Master’s massive form once more.

“*Kabed?*” Joryn stared in open-mouthed disbelief. He looked to where the smoking ash had been and found it was no longer there. He crowed with laughter. “Is this *real?*”

“It’s real, man,” Longshot said. “Don’t get distracted. Resurrection accountants always come around, if you’ve got enough spirit coins.”

“Resurrection—?” Joryn’s words were cut off, as he dodged another crushing blow from Onion master’s feet.

“True story,” Kated said. “The Outback’s garbage, but the Pumpkin Patch Kids can stay.” He fired up at Onion Master, and the monster blinked red.

This time, Onion Master stopped, panting, trying to catch his breath. There was no more bellowing laughter, no more bragging about his superiority. “Fools!” he said weakly.

“I think we’re wearing him down,” Long-shot speculated. “Even an *unkillable* onion can get beat down. Yee-haw!”

Onion Master abruptly perked up, laughing wildly. His jumping grew much, much faster, and he launched more and more bombs out of his mouth as he went, firing death rays from his eyes at random.

“This ends *now!*” Joryn shouted. He aimed his sword and shouted with the full force of his will, “*Fireball!*”

The Sword of Libran in his hands lit up as it had before and launched a massive fireball directly at Onion Master, and Joryn again felt a drain on his own natural energy.

The villain cried out in horror as the flames engulfed him, and when they subsided, he

blinked red rapidly, until he fell to the ground, slumped in defeat. “No, no! You have beaten me! No one has *ever* beaten me before!”

A holographic image of a robot’s head appeared in the air then, and Onion Master quivered in fear. “Master!”

The rich, baritone voice of Torakku N’obotto stated harshly, “Onion Master, my nanites report that you have failed to protect my mansion from intruders! Receive your punishment.”

The floating hologram vanished then, and Onion Master whimpered, “No, no! Master! Please! Give me another chance!”

A massive trapdoor opened beneath his feet, and Onion Master fell into the void below, crying out in horror.

The trapdoor closed behind him, and the heroes laughed in relief at the battle’s long-awaited conclusion.

Nodding towards the little door in the wall, Joryn asked, “Longshot? Would you care to do the honors?”

“You bet I would!” Longshot marched over to the door and threw it open ... only to find a

stray Pumpkin Patch Kid sitting at a table, eating a sandwich, and reading a newspaper. “What the smokes?”

“Huh?” The startled creature looked up. “What do you want? Spirit coins? I don’t do that anymore. I’m just a groundskeeper now.”

Joryn and the others walked into the little room after Longshot.

“We thought this was a prison,” Longshot said.

“No, ya big, human idiot! This is the break room. Jeez!”

The four heroes moaned, exhausted and frustrated.

“Thirty-five more mansions to go,” Joryn sighed.

“I can’t do that,” Kabed said. “I can’t do ... *this* thirty-five more times! There *has* to be another way.”

Still as determined as ever, Longshot insisted, “Well, I’m not giving up! I’m *going* to rescue Princess Pumpkitina from Torakku N’obotto’s clutches if it’s the last thing I do! Where’s that map?”

“Incinerated,” Joryn lamented. “All the way back on the first floor.”

Longshot clenched his fists in frustration. “Ah ... we can find another one.”

“Excuse me, humans, but did you say Princess Pumpkitina is in trouble?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Longshot answered. “Kidnapped by N’obotto a couple months back. The king and queen sent me to rescue her, and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna leave Mech Valley without her.”

“Well,” the Pumpkin Patch Kid said, “in that case, to hell with this lousy job! What kind of maniac builds a mansion and then fills it up with robot turkeys and giant caskets full of zombies anyway? Do you know how hard it is to *mop* around here? I was gonna quit anyway. And as it happens, I’ve got a map of Mech Valley right here!” He went to the wall and lifted a panel, revealing an enormous, animated map of the city, with all of N’obotto’s mansions clearly marked and numbered.

Joryn sighed with relief. “Thank you ...”

“Paulie,” said the Kid.

“Thank you, Paulie.” He studied the map. “Closest one is right there. Doesn’t look too far away.”

“If only we knew which mansion she was in,” Longshot lamented. “And where N’obotto was.”

“Well, we’re just going to have to use our heads and figure it out,” Kated insisted. “There is no way we can go one mansion at a time until we find them. We barely made it through this one alive. In fact, I *died!*”

Longshot laughed. “Aw, don’t be such a baby. Everybody dies, man. Besides, even *I* don’t want to go through town one mansion after the other like that. You’re right. We’ll put our heads together.” He shrugged. “Maybe Paulie knows something.”

“Or,” Joryn said, putting a finger at the top of the map, where an enormous mansion, surrounded by lightning and flying bats, silhouetted by the moon, was depicted, “we could just skip the rest and go straight to *this* one.” He turned, grinning. “What are the chances the one mansion at the top of the map, that stands out

from all the others in its sinister visage, could be *the* mansion? It's absurd, I know, but—”

“Remember where we are,” Kaped finished for him. “Sounds good to me.”

“But we'd have to walk from one side of the valley to the other, without our steeds,” Longshot pointed out. “Plus, there're squidshrooms and electricchauns out there, and I'm still a wanted man, even with the sheriff's protection. Someone's liable to spot me and turn me in to N'obotto, or shoot me on sight, just to cash in on a bounty, if we're out there for that long.”

“Well,” Paulie spoke up, “there is a shortcut.”

“What kind of a shortcut?” Joryn asked, hopeful but wary.

“Follow me,” the diminutive Kid said proudly.

Paulie led the heroes up the stairs within the break room, into another room.

“This is a toilet,” Longshot said.

“And *I* have been maintaining this mansion for N'obotto for years,” Paulie pointed out, smugly. “Put a lot of touches from back home into the operating systems.”

“You’re from Pumpkin Land,” Longshot beamed. “That’s right! We’re in business, boys!”

Kabed looked at the commode, and his countenance fell like a stone. “Pumpkin Land ... inter-dimensional waste-disposal system.”

Joryn met Kabed’s eyes with dread. “They also use it to travel.”

“Yeah!” Longshot hooted excitedly.

“I am *not* traveling by toilet!” Kabed barked.

“You keep sayin’ stuff you’re not gonna do,” Longshot patted him on the shoulder. “Then you keep doin’ it.” He stepped over to the commode, looked to Paulie. “So, this thing can take us straight to the big mansion on that map?”

“It sure can!” Paulie proudly assured him. “Let me just set the dial.” He adjusted a knob on the wall beside the commode. “There. Ready for travel.”

“Well then,” Longshot stepped up onto the pot, splashing his boots down into the bowl with excitement, “let’s get moving!”

Apprehensive, Joryn asked, “How are we even going to *fit* through there?”

“Psh,” Longshot answered. “It’s a worm-hole, man. Activates when you pull the lever.”



“I almost wish he’d said magic,” Kaped groaned. “Wormholes are dangerous anomalies.”

“In nature,” Lowgun said. “But Longshot and I have both traveled this way before. These wormholes are controlled, manmade portals. We’re perfectly safe.”

“But we’ll be in a toilet.”

“Only for a second,” Longshot countered with a grin. “It’s fun. Come on.” He nodded to Paulie. “Ready as I’ll ever be, buddy.”

“Good luck! And long live Princess Pumpkitina!” The Pumpkin Patch Kid pulled down the lever, and Longshot was sucked away instantaneously.

“But ... okay ...” Kaped was momentarily nonplussed. “We just flushed Longshot down the toilet. I mean ... we seriously just ... *flushed* our friend down the toilet.”

Lowgun stepped confidently into the bowl next, and Paulie pulled the lever, sending him on his way.

Kaped turned to the prince. “Joryn ... I want to go home now. Can I just ... leave? Maybe even wake up from this and find it was all some mad dream?”

Joryn pinched Kabed, just over a rib.

“Ow! Why’d you do that?”

“To see if I was dreaming.”

“You’re supposed to pinch *yourself*, you demented mooncalf!”

Joryn laughed. “Well, at least we know *you’re* not dreaming.” He motioned towards the commode. “After you.”

“By your leave, my prince,” Kabed muttered bitterly. He stepped into the toilet bowl, trying to imagine himself on a beach far, far away. “All right. Let’s do this.” He pointed to Joryn, as Paulie pulled the lever, “I hope you get doo-doo on your—!” and he was gone.

Joryn followed Kabed into the water-filled toilet bowl. He looked to the Pumpkin Patch Kid. “We are in your debt, Paulie.”

Paulie nodded. “Just get my princess home safely, sir, and all will be repaid.”

Joryn nodded with a smile, and Paulie pulled the lever one last time.

### CHAPTER 3: UNINVITED GUESTS

JORYN POPPED UP OUT OF A TOILET AT THE other end of the wormhole, as if no distance had existed between its two ends at all.

The vulnerable scorioplat in the stall with him squealed in humiliated surprise and ran from the room in confused terror.

Joryn stepped out of the stall, kicking water from his boots, and found his friends waiting for him by the counter in front of a large mirror.

“We tried to tell him it was out of order,” Longshot said of the scorioplat.

“Did it work?” Joryn asked, shaking off the slight disorientation and trying not to lose his focus wondering just how he had entered the portal feet first on one end and emerged headfirst on the other, which seemed to be the source of his trivial perplexity. “Is this the mansion?”

“Seems that way,” Kabed said. “Sounds like quite a party going on.”

“Always is, way I hear it,” Longshot said.

“I suppose there’s no way N’obotto hasn’t been alerted to our arrival,” Joryn said, considering the squealing scorioplat he’d embarrassed.

“Not necessarily,” Longshot said. “Lot a strange folks hang around at these parties. Hard to keep up with even half of ’em. Anyone who saw us come up out of the toilets probably thought it was just one more thing. Nothing to raise alarms over.”

Joryn nodded thoughtfully. “I hope you’re right. I guess we might as well get out there and see what we’re in for then.”

“Right,” Longshot said, perking up.

“Right,” Lowgun agreed, straightening his holster.

“Wait,” Kated said, not ready at all. “What about ... *this*?” He indicated his lack of substantial clothing. “Even if it’s a crazy crowd out there, do we really want to draw unnecessary attention by me frolicking around in silly underpants? If N’obotto takes notice, he’ll surely realize we weren’t on the guest list.”

“Good point,” Joryn agreed.

“I’ll take care of it,” Lowgun offered. He flicked his tongue, smelling the air and learning what little he could in this way about what might lay beyond the door. “Wait here.”

“What are you planning to do?” Joryn asked.

“Get him some clothes. Should be plenty of passed out party-goers to choose from.”

“Yeah?” Longshot asked. “And what are we supposed to do in here while you’re gone?”

Lowgun chuckled. “Stand at the urinals. And look busy.”

“This is the worst quest ever,” Kated said.

Ten minutes later, Lowgun returned with a bundle and tossed it to Kated.

“Good job, Low!” Longshot crowed.

Kabed unbundled the clothes, all of them black; pants, boots, long sleeve button-up shirt, and a long coat, similar in style to Longshot's, though not nearly as heavy. "Strange clothes," Kabed decided, "but I don't care. It's better than running around like a fool in these silly shorts." He began to dress. "Good thing you found someone passed out so fast, Low."

The reptisaur shrugged. "Well, he wasn't passed out at first. Or even drunk. But he looked to be about your size, so I helped him along in that direction."

"Drunk?" Kabed asked.

"Nah, skipped that and went right to passed out."

Kabed shrugged, buttoning up the shirt and putting on the overcoat. "Whatever works." He slipped into the black boots and adjusted his pants. "All right. *Now*, let's get out there and see what's what."

"Pretty big crowd," Lowgun informed them. "Should be pretty easy to make our way around to get the layout."

"Right," Joryn said. "Then let's get to it."

Joryn led the way out of the community restroom and out into the bustling crowd of partygoers.

In little time at all, the heroes found themselves in what appeared to be the main audience chamber of the great mansion. The house had been full of nearly naked females of various species, with the vast majority being human, and Joryn had to keep Kabed and Longshot focused on the task at hand more than once. In this room, however, he saw no way to keep the two of them focused, as there were scantily clad human females everywhere; serving drinks, flirting with the guests, dancing on a stage just beside an enormous stone throne ... where sat the imposing robotic form of Torakku N'obotto himself.

Joryn was in awe of the massive robot, slightly taller than most one-story houses in the capital kingdom, even while seated. N'obotto was smoking some sort of a pipe and wearing what appeared to be a red bathrobe, as he watched the dancing girls on the stage with unyielding interest

and still more women fawned over him, resting against his legs and arms as though he were both their lover and their god.

Joryn's reverie was broken by Longshot's stunned words.

"Pumpkitina?" The young gunslinger stared open-mouthed and wide-eyed at the lead dancing girl on the stage, wearing next to nothing and moving provocatively, with a special look directed straight at N'obotto, as though she were enjoying herself.

The patrons hooted and whistled as she shook her physical assets in their direction, offering shouted commentaries on her form, both boisterous and lewd. It was more than the love-struck hero could take. "Oh, hell no!" He unholstered a gun and fired into the ceiling. "Get off of that stage!"

The dancing and the music abruptly stopped, as the room found the source of the gunfire and stared, wondering if it were just another drunk guest or a more serious threat. "That's my girlfriend up there, and I'm taking her home right now!"



Laughter filled the room, none more booming and amused than the rich, smooth laughter of N'obotto himself.

Joryn, Kated, and Lowgun all reacted in silent exasperation to Longshot's impromptu display of bravado.

"So much for blending in," Kated said at last.

"It's done," Joryn said, forcing himself to adapt to the situation. "We have to see it through now and have Longshot's back. Either we're *all* getting out of here alive, or none of us are."

Torakku N'obotto stood, the girls at his arms and legs scurrying to find a safer place to be than right on top of him. He pointed to Longshot. "Guards! Remove this *thief* from the room and take him to my dungeon." As a team of scorioplats, armed with electro-spears, moved in Longshot's direction, N'obotto bragged, "I've been following your exploits from afar, *Longshot*. My mercenaries have had many encounters with you throughout the Outback, only to return empty handed, time after time. Yet I always knew you couldn't outrun my long arm forever. But I

never thought you would be foolish enough to show up *here*, of all places.”

Longshot unholstered his other gun, and Joryn, Kated, and Lowgun followed suit.

“I see you’ve brought friends,” N’obotto said. “Now they shall be my prisoners too!”

The scorioplatt guards drew nearer.

“No way, N’obotto,” Longshot said, defiantly. “That’s my girlfriend up there! That’s Princess Pumpkitina of Pumpkin Land! And *you* kidnapped her! If anyone’s going to answer for their crimes today, it’s *you!*” He grinned at the giant robot, like a starving wolf staring down his prey. “Come on, Pumpkitina, sweetie! We’re leaving!”

“Longshot,” Pumpkitina wailed. “What are you doing? Get out of here!”

“Don’t worry about me, darlin’.” Longshot fired at the approaching guards and moved towards the stage, Joryn and the others moving with him and aiming guns at the crowd, discouraging anyone from jumping the gunslinger from behind, and also helping to stun any of the guards whom Longshot had missed.

The heroes took the stage, and all of the dancing girls ran, screaming, except for Pumpkitina, who stood defiantly, hands on her hips, glaring in anger at Longshot.

Longshot put an arm around the princess, and she instantly pushed him away.

“What are you *doing*, you idiot?”

Longshot grinned confidently, in spite of his surprise at being rebuffed. “I’m rescuing you! Taking you back to Pumpkin Land, Princess. I’m a knight now, and—”

“I don’t *want* to be rescued, you crazy son of a skeezworm!” she screamed.

“That again,” Longshot sighed. “Can’t anyone come up with a better insult? Besides, what’d I ever do to *you*?”

“Nothing!” she said. “Until now! Look, man. It’s over between us. It’s been over for months. You just haven’t accepted it yet. I’m happy here. *This* is where I want to be. I don’t want to be with *you*, and I *don’t* want to go back to Pumpkin Land!”

Longshot searched his memory, trying to recall any indication the princess had ever given him that things were over. He could think of

nothing of the sort. There had been the encounter with N'obotto's mercenaries, and they had taken off with her. Before that moment, they had been happy. There seemed only one explanation. "You're under a spell! Don't worry, we'll get you sorted out once we get you out of here, and that big old hunk of tin is gonna pay!" He grabbed her, picking her up though she kicked and screamed, and carried her off of the stage.

She cried out, "Torakku! *Help me!*"

As Longshot and his friends made their way quickly through the terrified crowd, guns aimed threateningly in all directions, Torakku N'obotto raised his arms and growled like thunder.

The heroes watched, as he seemed to disintegrate into smaller and smaller fragments, spreading out into the air.

"Oh, no, no, no," Kated said, white-faced. "It's not possible. They were exterminated by King Imperius, millennia ago. It can't be."

"What is it?" Joryn asked, alarmed by Kated's bloodless countenance.

"He's a Refragmentor."

"A what?"

When N'obotto had dispersed into microscopic dust, the fragmented particles flew back together in a different shape; that of a massive, flying rocket chariot.

“Run, run, *run!*” Kaped urged, and the heroes did just that, leaving the great room with Pumpkitina as quickly as they could.

N'obotto, enraged at the violation of his sanctuary, fired up his rocket engine and flew straight through the far wall in pursuit of the intruders.

## CHAPTER 4: THE TRUTH OUTS

**A**FTER RUNNING FROM ROOM TO ROOM in search of the exit, and Torakku N'obotto crashing through wall after wall in his effort to subdue them, the steel despot finally pinned them down in the dancing girls' dressing room.

“Nowhere left to run,” Joryn said. “Don’t worry, Princess. We’ll have you out of here and back to normal in no time. Just like Longshot promised.”

Still squirming in Longshot’s grip, the princess snarled, “For the last time ... I don’t *want* to be ‘rescued!’”

N’obotto refragmented into microscopic nanoparticles, then came back together in his previous, more-or-less humanoid form, towering above the four intruders and their intended prize. “Unhand Pumpkitina, or be destroyed.”

“We choose neither of those options,” Joryn countered. “Torakku N’obotto, perhaps, if we talk this through, we can come to some agreement. We have connections in more than one ruler’s court who can make it worth your while to remove the spell from Princess Pumpkitina and return her to Longshot and her parents.”

“Foolish human *worm!* You can’t *actually* believe I have her under a spell! How dare you try to twist this situation to make *yourself* look like some kind of *hero!* Prepare to meet your gods!” N’obotto’s arm refragmented and came back

together as a massive cannon, which he fired forthwith.

Joryn and his companions jumped out of the way and returned fire as quickly as they were able.

“It’s useless,” Kabed said, more determination to survive in his voice than hopelessness. “Killing a Refragmentor has to be done through its software, one nano-particle at a time. Anything we throw at him here, he can avoid by refragmenting in sections. He can repair himself just as quickly as we can throw any damage on him. Not to mention the fact that he’s made of Deluvian steel. He’s practically impervious.”

N’obotto fired again, and the heroes dodged and fired back as they had done before.

“And we’re going to wear out way sooner than he will,” Kabed continued. “He could do this all day, every day, for centuries if he had to. We’ll be lucky to last ten minutes with the day we’ve had.”

“You said some king supposedly wiped these things out?” Joryn asked.

“Yes,” Kabed answered. “But he was a very *bad* king. He was held accountable for his crimes



and actually executed by his sons and daughters. It was a dark blip in Deluvia's history."

N'obotto paused, only further enraged. "You're a *Deluvian*?"

Meekly, Kated answered. "Uh, yeah. Sorry? I wasn't even born when your people were wiped out." Scientific wonder taking over then, he added, "How did you survive, anyway?"

"I wasn't in Deluvia when the mad king wiped out the surviving Architects. I had remained here, after the Backwards War, building a life in the desert wastes that were left behind. I fought side-by-side with the humans of Deluvia in that war. I was one of the Architect class, who *forgave* the humans for our earlier enslavement and worked with them to defeat the Destroyer class who sought to wipe *you* out. I kept my peace with Deluvia for nearly a million years, until the genocide. How *dare* you humans turn on us! We were your saviors!"

"I assure you," Kated said. "It was only one man behind the genocide."

"One man to give the orders," N'obotto argued, "ten thousand to follow them."

“It was a very, very long time ago. And ... I’m sorry.”

“Sorry will not save you, Deluvian. Release Pumpkitina.”

“No way!” Longshot snarled. “She’s coming with us!”

“She is under no spell, little outlaw,” N’obotto said. “I have nothing to do with sorcery. The Sorcerers’ War left another mark I cannot forgive. I rebuilt here, took control of the valley, to bring *order* where magic had left only chaos. I would not *ever* resort to spellcraft to hold a beautiful woman against her will. Would *you?*” N’obotto fired again.

“Is that the best you can do?” Joryn asked, tauntingly. “Mighty Refragmentor? Fire at us and watch us run? You know you can’t kill us without killing the princess too.”

“I can, and I will!” N’obotto raged.

“Not like that, you won’t! Come on, N’obotto! Show us what you’re really made of, or stop pretending!”

“Joryn,” Kaped asked nervously, “what in the *hell* are you doing?”

“Hopefully ...” Joryn began, watching the robot.

N'obotto raised his arms, like a human flexing his muscles, and growled, “And so I shall!” The Refragmentor refragmented, turning into a cloud of nanites floating in the air before them.

“... getting him to do *that*,” Joryn said quickly. He aimed his sword at the cloud of nanites and shouted with the full force of his will, “*Fireball!*”

The Sword of Libran sent a ball of fire into the heart of the nanite cloud.

“*Fireball!*” Joryn shouted again, repeating the process. “*Fireball!*”

N'obotto pulled himself together, screaming in pain as the metal that made up his body burned deep red. He fell to the ground ... and started to sob. “Please,” he said. “Please don’t take her from me.”

Pumpkitina finally broke free of Longshot’s grip, elbowing him in the ribs, and she ran to the injured despot. “Torakku!”

He held a massive hand up to stop her. “Do not touch me, my beauty. It will take some time for my body to cool.”

Pumpkitina wept at the sight of the humbled Refragmentor. “Oh, Longshot. What have you done to him?”

“Plenty enough for us to get out of here,” Longshot said. “Now let’s get out while the gettin’s still good.”

“Longshot, you *stupid* ass! I’m *not* under a spell. I *wanted* to come here. I *told* those mercenaries where to find me, and I’m sorry they tried to take you too. That was never the plan.”

“*What?*” Longshot was incredulous. “That ... That isn’t ... That *can’t* be true.”

A sick feeling began to form in the pit of Joryn’s stomach, as he started to suspect Tianna’s prediction, that all was not as it seemed, was coming true in the worst possible way.

“I *hated* being a princess, Longshot. I *hated* it! I needed to get away from that life, and frankly, you and I had run our course. I heard you talk about Mech Valley, all those stories about the way Torakku N’obotto treated his women ... and that’s what I wanted. I’m sorry I never *told* you it was over. I just didn’t want to hurt you. Mostly because I hate being annoyed by other people’s feelings, and you had a lot of them.”

Longshot was stunned. “That’s ... really shallow.”

“So am I,” she said. “Don’t try to fit me into some box of what you think I *should* be. It’s not okay. Just accept me for who I *am*. I’m not a princess, and I’m *not* your girlfriend. Not anymore. And really ... I never was. Not in my heart of hearts.”

More oily tears fell from N’obotto’s glowing eyes. “I love her. I would never make her stay here, if she didn’t want to be here. She’s my favorite girl.”

“But,” Joryn was incensed, “if you love her, why do you treat her like that? Why objectify her body, make her dance for everyone, let them say the things they say to her? That doesn’t sound like love to me.”

“Maybe not for you,” N’obotto said. “But for me ... I love her beauty. I love watching her dance, watching her human body move in all the ways that it does. I love making her pretty outfits, seeing her wear them for me ... brushing her hair and doing her makeup.”

“And I love being objectified,” Pumpkitina added. “I love hearing the lecherous things that

the guests have to say about my body. It's an ego boost. It makes me feel like a work of art. And N'obotto makes me feel even more special with his gifts and attention. This is the life I want!" She looked to Joryn. "And who are you to define love for other people? Just because what makes my friendship with Torakku special to us doesn't work for you, doesn't mean it isn't really love. Neither one of us is forcing the other to do anything."

The sick feeling hit full force, and Joryn admitted aloud what he had begun to fear, hanging his head in shame, "We're the aggressors here." He looked to his friends. "We're not the heroes in this quest; we're the villains."

"That's not true," Kabed argued. "We came here to rescue her."

"We made assumptions," Joryn countered. "We *thought* we were coming here to rescue her, but we were actually coming here to abduct her, by force, against her will. And we were willing to tear through thirty-six mansions to do it, if there had been no other way, in order to force Pumpkitina into a life of misery, because it's where *we* thought she belonged."

“But,” Longshot said, “I thought she’d been kidnapped. I thought ... I thought we were doing right.”

“I know,” Joryn said. “And it’s plainly not your fault. She led you and her parents to believe she’d been kidnapped, after all. But in the end, it isn’t the truth, and the cold, hard fact is, we *invaded* Mech Valley, to take what we wanted, to kidnap Pumpkitina ourselves, and, for lack of a better phrase, to force her back into the slavery of the life she’d had before.”

Longshot shook his head. “Smokes.” He looked to his love, then to the weeping, giant robot beside her. “But how do you think she’s going to keep feeling special considering all the human girls you have around here? What’s the draw anyway? Can you even *feel* attraction to human women ... or anyone, for that matter?”

N’obotto’s voice was strained. “All this talk ... about not actually being the person everyone wants you to be ...” More oily tears fell, and he put his face in his hands.

His body had visibly cooled, and Pumpkitina dared to put a hand out and touch her injured friend.

N'obotto looked up again, facing his attackers. "I love watching these girls, as I said, but it's not out of an attraction ... not of the sort you mean, anyway. The fact is ..." He started to sob uncontrollably.

"It's okay," Pumpkitina soothed him. "What is it, Torakku?"

"I've ... never told *anybody* this truth before. It's too hard. It ... It doesn't make any sense."

"You can tell me."

"You can tell us," Joryn agreed, throwing down his gun and his sword. "We never intended to do what it seems we have done here. We do not wish to be your enemies. Please, give us your trust and forgiveness. If it will heal you to unburden yourself, we will listen."

Joryn's friends put their weapons down as well, following his lead.

N'obotto nodded, sniffing. "Thank you." He paused, the equivalent of taking a deep breath, then he said it; the truth he'd been holding in for over a million years. "I don't surround myself with women and objectify their glorious forms because I want them ... I do it ... because ... I want to *be* them. I want to be ... a



woman. A *human* woman. In fact, in my heart of hearts, I have always *been* a human woman. But I can never be ... what I truly am. Not on the outside. I'm ... I'm trapped in this horrible robot body forever!" More sobbing.

Joryn and his friends were collectively stunned, beyond words, looking to one another for any clue that there was an appropriate response to be had, and finding none.

"I don't get it," Kated said. "I mean, you were *programmed* to be what you *are*."

"But he's a life form, Kated, right?" Longshot asked.

"Yes, the Refragmentors are living machines, but, even still. There's no explaining this. Even if he is a life form, he's got a program. Maybe there's a malfunction."

"No," Joryn said. "you're both wrong. He isn't a life form. *She* is a life form."

"But he has masculine programming," Kated countered. "He was built to be a masculine Refragmentor. He wasn't *meant* to be a human woman."

"Maybe she wasn't meant to be," Joryn said. "Not by the Deluvians who created her. But how

far a shadow must a parent's intentions cast, before the child is free to live her own life, her own way ... as who she truly is?"

Kabed thought of Marley, and he winced. "In Deluvia, if he ... if *she'd* been born human, we would have just given her a pill, and over a little time the body would conform to the mind. It is not an uncommon thing for humans to be born in what they feel is the wrong body, and the Deluvians give precedent to the workings of the mind. But N'obotto's a Refragmentor. There is no pill. No physical reworking that can be done to get her body where her mind is."

"You see? There's nothing for it!" N'obotto proclaimed in despair. "I've designed so many pretty dresses for myself, bathing suits, blouses ... but I never had the courage to make them, let alone to actually *wear* them, because I had to accept who I was on the outside ... because no one will ever accept me any other way. I can take so many forms as a Refragmentor ... but they all have edges and corners; they're all giant, and masculine, and made of Deluvian steel. I can never become a human. I can never live my truth." He shook his head. "Never."

He stood up, opening a panel on his chest, and he reached in, manipulating his inner mechanics. "So there is only one thing left to do. No one can ever know my secret shame. The secret must now die with us all." He removed his hand from inside of his chest, and a timer started counting down.

"SELF DESTRUCT OF TORAKKU  
N'OBOTTO COMMENCING IN FIFTEEN  
SECONDS.

"FOURTEEN."

"Wait!" Joryn shouted.

"THIRTEEN."

"Torakku, no!" Pumpkitina pleaded.

"TWELVE."

"It is the only way," N'obotto insisted.

"ELEVEN."

"Thank you for listening to me."

"TEN."

"But *we* accept your truth!" Joryn shouted desperately, as the countdown continued. "It's what's on the inside, in your mind and heart that matters most! Like Kabed said. Your friends will accept you! Your *true* friends! And you will be free to live your life! We will do anything to *help*

you live your truth! From this point forward, you will *be* a human female in our eyes! In the eyes of all of your friends!”

“TWO.”

“N’obotto! You can finally *live!*” Joryn pleaded.

“ONE.”

“All right.” N’obotto reached in and turned off the time bomb in her chest. “But ... I don’t know. I’m afraid. How should I tell everyone? What if some of them hate me?”

Breathing a sigh of relief, along with everyone else, and wiping the sweat from his brow, Longshot said, “Well, if anyone doesn’t want to stand by you when you tell them who you really are, it’s no loss to you. Just shows those folks never were your friends to begin with. Shows you who *they* really are.”

“And you should tell them as soon as you can,” Joryn said. “Don’t wait any longer. You’ve lost too much time hiding behind your outward appearance already. Tell everyone out there, if you feel safe doing so. If the worst they can do is walk away from you, then you have no danger to

fear, other than continued repression from *yourself*.”

“Well, there is a concert tonight, at the mansion,” N’obotto said. “It’s a special concert, in honor of my one million eighty-ninth birthday. All of my friends will be there. It would be the perfect moment. But ... I have nothing to wear.” She began to cry again.

Pumpkitina hugged the robot’s massive leg. “I love you, Torakku. And Longshot is fantastic with a needle and thread.”

“Ain’t nobody better,” Longshot bragged.

N’obotto put her hands to the lower part of her face. “Would you ... would you *do* that for me? After all the time I’ve spent sending bounty hunters to capture you?”

“It would be my honor, Miss N’obotto.” He looked to his companions. “And I bet I can get my friends to help too.”

“Oh!” N’obotto jumped for joy, and the ground rumbled beneath her mighty feet. “I’m so scared and excited! I feel *everything*! I’ll go get my designs, and there’s plenty of fabric right in this room. I’ll be right back! And ... from now on, please, call me Emily.”

“Why Emily?” Pumpkitina asked.

“Because, I knew a lady once named Emily. Long, long ago. She was so smart and pretty, so strong and unyielding. She read books and taught children all that she knew for her whole life. She was everything I wanted to be, everything that, deep down, I already felt that I was. I’ll be right back!”

As the newly renamed Emily N’obotto ran from the room to retrieve her clothing designs, Longshot shrugged, the bright grin returning to his face. “Well, looks like we saved the day after all. Completely by accident. And that’s not even the best part.”

“What’s the best part?” Lowgun asked.

“Looks like I’m single again.” He winked, and Lowgun shook his head.

Kabed went to Joryn, who was smiling in wonder at the outcome of the day. “Joryn?”

“Yes, Kabed. What is it?”

“Can we *never* come to the Outback again?”

Joryn answered his friend with merry laughter.

## CHAPTER 5: THE LADY OF MECH VALLEY

OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL HOURS, Longshot led the effort to sew a giant dress for Emily N’obotto, and the girls of the mansion helped to do her makeup and fit her with a giant wig.

When the time came for the concert, N’obotto’s majordomo, a living muffin named Mac, took the stage, having been let in on the secret, and made a grand announcement. “Ladies,

gentlemen, and other variously gendered beings, we all know that today is our illustrious overlord's one million eighty-ninth birthday."

The crowd, which now included Joryn, Longshot, Kated, Lowgun, and Pumpkitina, went wild with cheers.

Mac continued, "And, we have all heard the rumors for years."

The crowd was nervously silent, unsure how to respond, many of the guests thinking of the rumors they'd heard over the years; of the alleged dress patterns designed by N'obotto *for* N'obotto that no one dared to speak of within earshot of the tyrannical despot.

"Well," the muffin continued, unfazed, "it is my distinct pleasure to be the first to introduce the new Lady of Mech Valley, Miss Emily N'obotto!"

Emily took the stage, nervous but resolved to see the coming out process through, and she was greeted by wild cheers and applause from all of her guests. Not only was N'obotto freed from hiding her true self, but her friends were freed from having to hide their own suspicions as well. Emily waved to the crowd, oily tears streaming



down her face and making her mascara run; a problem she gladly embraced as a part of being who she really was.

After a few elated moments, Emily took her place in the crowd, awaiting Mac's next announcement.

"And now for the birthday surprise Lady N'obotto has been waiting for. We've kept it a secret for months, my lady, only letting you know that we had booked a band for your birthday. So now, let me lift the final veil of the evening and introduce ... *Kid Popstar!*"

The crowd went wild, as Mac ran from the stage, and Kid Popstar and his band ran on.

"Oh my gosh!" Emily screamed, jumping up and down with glee. "Kid Popstar!" She actually squealed with delight. "He's my favorite! Oh, thank you all so much! I love everyone!"

"Hey, Mech Valley!" Kid Popstar greeted the crowd. "Are you ready to *pop?*"

Cheers and screaming ensued, as they always did at this prompt from the famous musician.

Kabed held his head in disgruntlement, beginning to count the seconds until the concert would end.

“Oh, wow!” Longshot beamed. “Could you have imagined the luck? Twice in two nights, we just *happen* into a Kid Popstar concert.” He held up his fists and screamed up to the stage, “Woohooo!”

Joryn, grinning ear to ear, patted Kaped on the back and laughed out loud.

“Not so fast, Kid Popstar!” A floating stage crashed through the wall, carrying the Green Monsters, Kid’s eternal arch enemies.

Kid rolled his eyes and groaned. “Not again.”

“Don’t worry, Kid Popstar!” Longshot shouted. “I’ll save you!” He leapt onto the stage and started firing stun rays at the Green Monsters.

Deftly maneuvering their floating stage out of the way of the blasts, the lead monster growled, “Get off the stage, cowboy! This is between us and the kid, ya little freak!”

The Green Monsters’ eyes went wide, under the shadow of Emily N’obotto, who stood and climbed to the stage herself. “Don’t talk to my friends that way!” She grabbed the floating stage, as the Green Monsters yelled for help, and threw

it with all of her might, through the roof, sending it flying well on its way out of Mech Valley. N'obotto shouted after them, "And don't ever let me catch you in Mech Valley again!"

The crowd cheered, and Lady N'obotto left the stage, satisfied that there would be no further interruptions from the Green Monsters.

Longshot tipped his wide brimmed hat to Kid Popstar. "Sorry for being so bold, Mister Popstar. Didn't mean to get in the way."

As Longshot turned to leave the stage, Kid Popstar grabbed his arm and turned him around. "No. Thank you." He looked to Lady N'obotto, who was standing in the front row of the crowd. "And thank *you*." Meeting Longshot's eyes, he added, "I'm sick to death of those guys interrupting my shows. Because you climbed up here, for once I can just get on with the music." He winked. "You're my hero." Kid Popstar pulled Longshot in for a deep and lingering kiss, and Longshot gave back as much as he got as the crowd went crazy with cheers of approval.

"Do you think we've lost him?" Kated asked Joryn and Lowgun.

The heroes only laughed.

## CHAPTER 6: THE ROAD BACK HOME

**T**HE HEROES STAYED THE NIGHT AT N'obotto's mansion, leaving early the next day. N'obotto loaned them a hover limo and robot driver, who returned them to the sheriff's station, where they were reunited with their steeds.

As Joryn, Kabed, and Longshot greeted Ilium, Marley, and Trig, Lowgun summoned the

*Dragon Racer* to return from hiding and waited outside for the vehicle's arrival.

"I'm glad to see you unharmed, my prince," Illium said. "Did all go as planned? Where is Princess Pumpkitina?"

"It's a long story, Illium, and we've a long ride back for me to tell it. Suffice it to say, we learned some hard lessons in N'obotto's mansion, but everything is going to be just fine."

"I look forward to hearing the tale."

Marley approached Kated with a bounce in his step. "Man-Mommy! You're back!"

Kated laughed, happy to see the Unitron. "Hello, Marley. Did you miss me?"

"YES! I *did!* I made you this!" Marley walked over to the sheriff's desk and picked up a piece of paper with his mouth, carrying it over to Kated.

It was an insane looking water painting of Kated, that was almost entirely mustache. "Marley, did you paint this by yourself?"

"Sure did, Mustache. That way, you could see how much I missed you."

Kated affectionately patted the robot's steel neck. "I missed you too."

He considered all that he had seen in Mech Valley; all the ways in which life and consciousness had taken unexpected turns, transcending their rigid templates to become true expressions of their boundless spirits; the Refragmentor robot who identified as a human female, the princess who was happier as a dancer, the sentient snack foods and balloons of Boom Town, the love-struck babbit and the singing duck whose species were among the results of unforeseen mutations and magical fallout; even the history of Trig, who would have been executed over the programming glitch he had never succumbed to, had Longshot not rescued him; all of these species and individual beings who had broken through the stifling limits that others had tried to set for them. Why should he be surprised, at this point, by a Unitron who was clearly doing the same? He could no longer think of any valid reason to insist that Marley's claims were impossible, no matter how unlikely. For the first time, he regarded Marley not as a disappointment, but as a miracle; a mystery not to be solved and corrected, but to be fully embraced, and met with unassuming wonder.

The time had come to admit that he had been wrong. “And if you say you’re alive ... I have no reason to doubt you. I’m sorry for the way I spoke to you before.”

“Yay!” Marley cheered. Then, more seriously, he said, “All right, let’s go eat burritos.”

Kabed laughed. “We’ll stop for lunch in Boom Town, how about that?”

“Yes! I can talk to muffins!”

Trig nuzzled Longshot affectionately, and Longshot hugged his head in return. “Missed you too, buddy. And guess what! N’obotto’s dropped the charges! We talked him into it. Er ... *ber*. Long story. Anyway, seems she’s got a new heart for diversity these days, and she took me at my word that you weren’t like the others.”

Trig pranced happily, snorting and whinnying with delight.

“Let’s get on the road, pal. No more lookin’ over our shoulders.” He turned to sheriff Rykko. “Thanks for looking after him. Thanks for being someone I always know I can trust.”

“Any time, Longshot.” Rykko held out a hand, and Longshot shook it. “I hope to see you again around here. Now that the bounty’s been

dropped from your head. Are you and Lowgun gonna come back to the Outback for good, now that it's safe?"

"Nah, I think it's time to open up a brand-new chapter, ya know? No more running from N'obotto's thugs; no more running after Pumpkitina. I think it's time to really stand for something. To really be who I was always meant to be."

"And who is that?"

With a wink, the young gunslinger said, "Sir Longshot, Imperial Knight and defender of the realm."

Rykko patted him on the shoulder with a bellowing laugh. "Well, Sir Longshot, if your adventures ever bring you back this way, don't be a stranger."

"Couldn't get any stranger if I tried," Longshot answered.

Once all of their farewells had been said, the heroes saddled up outside and got on their way.

A little way into their journey, Joryn asked, "So, Kaped, how old *is* Deluvia?"



The Deluvian shrugged. “Why do you ask?”

“It just seems not to add up, is all. Humans have only been in Nod for around six thousand years, but N’obotto, who was created by Deluvians, just turned one million eighty-nine. How is that possible? Aren’t Deluvian’s humans?”

Kabed deflected, “Human enough.” He laughed. “There’s a lot about Deluvia that takes a lot of explaining, and I wouldn’t know where to begin. I’d rather just tell you about it another time, if that’s all right.”

“Sure,” Joryn said, curious and a little disappointed.

“And on the subject of who’s human or not,” Kabed said to Longshot, “I pictured Pumpkitina as some sort of talking pumpkin. Then, when I met the Pumpkin Patch Kids, I thought she’d be one of *them*. But then we finally meet her, and she’s a stunningly beautiful human. What gives?”

Longshot answered, amused, “Aw, jealous, Kabed? Naw, Pumpkin Land is ruled by humans. They civilized the area, but the name comes from the giant pumpkins that grow there, and the Pumpkin Patch Kids, who are native to the

region of course. I'm not into pumpkins like that, man."

"Guess that's one thing you're not into," Lowgun muttered from the *Dragon Racer*.

"Still not into *you*, scale face," Longshot teased.

"And I'm still glad to hear it."

"So, Kated," Longshot asked, "now that I'm single ... and *you're* single ..."

"No!" Kated answered as swiftly as he could.

"Really?"

"Why is it so hard for you to grasp that I don't like men the same way you do?"

"Never? Not even once?"

"Never. I just like women. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"No." Longshot considered. "But then why are you still wearing my underwear?"

"Because," Kated answered stiffly, "I didn't want to change clothes in front of *you* again."

"Oh." Longshot snickered. "That makes sense. What about you, Joryn?"

"I've got a boyfriend."

Longshot laughed. “Not what I meant, man. And I’m not saying Galen doesn’t need to watch his back, because I would totally make a move if you were single. No shame here.”

“Ever,” Lowgun muttered.

“Quiet, sidekick.”

“Stop talking to yourself,” Lowgun quipped.

“Why you—”

Laughing, Joryn asked, “So what *did* you mean, Longshot?”

“I meant, do you *only* like men? Or have you ever been attracted to women, even once?”

Joryn shook his head. “Never once. Even when I was little, I’d get crushes on boys. For me, it’s always been men.”

“That’s so weird,” Longshot said, thoughtfully.

“Why is that weird?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess it’s not weird in itself that y’all have so few options. I guess I just never much thought about it is all. Sort of always thought *everybody* was ... well, like me.”

“There is more diversity in the people of Nod,” Illium chimed in, “than there are stars in the sky.”

“Well said.” Kated pondered the words. “So, Joryn, since we’re on the topic, and you only have amorous attractions to men, would you say you would rather have been born female? Like N’obotto? That your mind and body don’t match up? I mean, in Deluvia, there are all kinds. Some men who love men are men, while others take the pill and become women. Same with the women who like women.”

Joryn laughed at the idea. “No, Kated. I couldn’t imagine being a woman. I mean, I could *imagine* it, I just imagine I would hate it. My mind and body match up perfectly, and I’m glad to have been born male, just as I’m glad to be able to love Galen as I do, to see that particular beauty in other men that you yourself are blind to. Just as I am blind to the particular thing about women that sparks an urge in *you*.”

“Guess that means I’ve got 20/20 vision,” Longshot said with a grin.

“Yes,” Lowgun agreed, “but since we’re describing *you*, I’d say it’s more like you’re just cross-eyed.”

“Oh, scout ahead already, ya cold-blooded skeezworm.”

“Gladly.” Lowgun trailed laughter as he sped off ahead, to await them in Boom Town.

Joryn considered. “And back to the matter of birthdays, we’ve missed both Lily’s and Hero’s while we’ve been away, and before we return, we will have missed ...” he started, “... *yours*, Kated! Your birthday’s tomorrow! With all the excitement, I almost forgot.”

“Not to worry,” Kated assured him. “Deluvians don’t think much of birthdays anyway.”

“But you’re living in the Empire now. You know they matter to us. It seems there’s always a birthday party happening or being planned at the palace. I’m picking up presents for my sisters in Boom Town, but you’re actually with us, so we will celebrate you ourselves tomorrow.”

“Just what I always wanted,” Kated said, sarcastically, “a birthday in the Wyyrd Outback.”

“How old are you gonna be?” Longshot asked.

“Twenty-five.”

“Twenty-*five*? Smokes! You’re old!”

“You’re only six years away from it, kid, and twenty-five is only old to youngsters who haven’t even hit twenty yet.” He looked to Joryn,

speaking over Marley's made-up-on-the-spot song 'Happy Birthday Dear Pappy,' "But really, you want to get me a present?"

"Of course," Joryn beamed.

"Then promise me ... no more adventures in the Wyyrd Outback. That's all the present I need."

Joryn laughed. "Who knows where our adventures will take us in the future? I'd hate to promise and then be made a liar. Besides, we've got friends here now."

"Yeah, but how 'bout next time we see them, they come visit *us* ... and not for very long."

"I'll buy you some Womp, for the journey back. How 'bout that?"

"That'll do, my prince." Kabed smiled, glad to be headed back in the direction of the world and home he knew, eager to put his adventure in the Wyyrd Outback, including the strange encounter with the spirit of his father, of which he'd said nothing at all to anyone, behind him.

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When the weary travelers returned to Palace Nod twelve days later, they wanted nothing more than to rest in their own beds.

Prince Kail and his wife Maressah greeted them happily. “Little Brother! How did it go?” Kail asked.

“It went ... differently than we expected it to.”

“Care to tell me about it?”

“Well ...” Joryn thought about the details of their adventure, the sheer number of peculiar episodes that would have to be thoroughly explained, and how long it would likely take. “Not so much.” He smiled weakly. “Right now, I just want to rest, call Galen, and sleep for maybe a year or two.”

Kabed regarded the younger man with amusement. “Very well, Little Brother.”

Maressah noticed Kabed’s attire. “This is a new look for you, Kabed. Black suits you. Though I wonder what’s become of your fantastical armor.”

“It’s a long story, Princess. A *very* long and fairly inconceivable story. And I will gladly tell you all about it, over drinks. Lots and lots of drinks.”

The centaur, Dorran Equus, approached them out of nowhere. “I’m in.”

Kail laughed. “Leave it to you, Equus, to appear whenever anyone mentions food or drink, as though you’d been a part of the conversation all along.”

“Pancakes!” Longshot shouted, as he slid off of his steed, famished from the last leg of the journey.

“Pancakes!!!” Marley parroted, louder than the human had said it.

“Pancakes!” Equus agreed. “Now I’m torn! Do I want pancakes or a strong drink?”

“We’ll go to the dining hall,” Maressah said, patting the centaur on the back. “I’m sure we can sort it all out from there.”

In his room, alone at last, Joryn called Galen on the com screen.

“Joryn! You’re back! How did it go?”



“I’d say the mission was a success,” Joryn answered. “But the objective turned out not to be what we thought it was. Long story short, Princess Pumpkitina is not a princess anymore, she’s an exotic dancer; Torakku N’obotto is not a masculine robot anymore, she’s a lady; Kaped’s Unitron, Marley, is not a lifeless machine anymore, because he discovered his life spark, and Kaped has accepted it; and the common theme running across all of these discoveries is that all of them are happy, as I am, now that I can see your face again.”

“Wow! That sounds like quite a story.”

“It is. The thing is, I don’t know that anyone would believe it if I told it to them.” He sighed, smiling tiredly. “I’m free now, to come and see you. I need to rest, of course, but I’m so eager to leave. How soon can I be there and still be considerate of your parents’ sensibilities?” He remembered that Galen’s father had been in a coma when he’d left. “I’m stupid.” He shook his head. “How is your father since I left? How is your cousin Everron?”

“You’re far from stupid, my prince. And they are as they were before you left. Comatose, unresponsive. I wish you were here with me *now*.”

“I wish it as well. I’ve missed you so much, since we got back from Din. It’s been months! Months since I’ve seen you; months since I’ve held you, felt your arms around me, your kiss.”

“Stop now,” Galen said with a wry grin, “you’ll make me crazy. I miss you just as terribly. And it’s been three months, two weeks, and five days. You know ... if I were actually counting the days or anything.”

Joryn laughed at that, not wanting to admit that he’d been counting the days as well. “Say the word, and I’ll be there, Galen. I have permission to visit still for seven days, unless anything has changed since I’ve been away.”

“We know how that tends to go. Something always seems to come up. How ’bout I come to you, pick you up myself. Then we can fly off together back to the Plains.”

“You’re effectively the lord of the Plains while your father is ill. Can you take the time?”

“It won’t take any time at all in a Fighter Disc. I can pick you up as early as tonight, but I know you need to recover from your journey.”

“I’ll be recovered by morning,” Joryn said, wishing he could ignore the fatigue and be recovered immediately instead, sooner to be by Galen’s side.

Galen offered a broad smile that seemed to light up the screen. “Tomorrow then.”

Joryn beamed at his lover, caressing the screen as though he could touch him through it. “Tomorrow.”

## EPILOGUE: ONE TO GROW ON

LATER THAT EVENING, BEFORE THE SUN had set, a group of children were playing make-believe, on a playground, in one of the neighborhoods surrounding the Imperial mountain.

“But I want to play the wife!” Billy insisted.

“You *can't* play the wife,” Rolly argued with equal insistence. “Tammy has to play the wife!”

“Why?” Billy asked, angrily.

"Because she's a girl!"

"So?"

"Yeah," Tammy put in. "So? I don't want to play the wife anyway. I want to play the dragon-slayer!"

"But you can't!" Rolly said, exasperated. "*You're* a girl, so you have to play the wife, and *Billy's* a boy, so he has to play the dragonslayer, and *I'm* a reptisaur, so I get to play the dragon!"

"Now hold on a minute, kids," a new voice interrupted.

"Longshot!" the children cried out merrily.

"That's right," he said, patting Trig on the back beside him. "And in today's adventure, I—"

"What adventure?" Tammy asked.

"Well, *today's* adventure; the one me and Trig just got back from today that is," the gunslinger answered.

"Oh, okay," Billy said. "I was with Tammy on that one, cause, *I* didn't have an adventure today."

"Me neither," Rolly agreed. "Who just walks into a group and says something about 'today's adventure' like we have any clue what he's talking about?"

“I know! Right?” Tammy agreed.

“Well,” Longshot said, “if you’ll just give me a minute, I’ll explain. See, in *today’s adventure*, that I had, actually a couple weeks ago, but just got back *today* ... I met a robot who was actually a lady. And by that I mean, me and my friends learned that it’s okay to be something on the inside that doesn’t match up with how you look or how you were born. So that means it’s just fine, if Billy wants to be a wife, or if Tammy wants to be a dragonslayer ... well, in make-believe, ’cause we actually have a peace thing going with the dragons in real life, remember. And, it’s okay to be okay with how you look and how you were born too. So, if Rolly wants to play a dragon, because of his tail and scales or something, that’s just fine too. Because one time this robot who was evil and mean, stopped being evil and mean, and started being a woman instead ... like she’d always wanted to.”

The children looked at him, confused and bewildered.

“What I’m trying to say is, it’s what’s on the *inside* that counts. It’s who you are *inside* that makes you who you are. So there’s no such thing

as a 'boy job,' or a 'girl job,' or a 'human job' or a 'reptisaur job,' because we can do or be whatever we like. Because we are who we are, and nobody can ever tell us otherwise, just because of how we look on the outside. Got it?"

"Got it!" the children all crowed.

Rolly thought about his words from moments before. "I'm sorry, guys. I shouldn't have tried to force you into playing parts that you didn't want, based on my superficial ideas about gender roles. I just never thought about it until Longshot showed up. I didn't know that it was okay to be one thing on the outside and something else altogether on the inside."

Longshot patted the reptisaur child on the head. "Well, you know now, Rolly, and knowing is—"

"Who is that?" Tammy's mother asked, alarmed.

"Who is what?" Longshot jumped to attention, ready to face whatever threat, putting his hands near the holsters at his sides.

Billy's father noticed the guns. "He's got a gun!!!" He ran towards the children, and the other parents followed his lead.

“Don’t worry, kids! I’ll get ’im,” Longshot assured them, searching his surroundings for the offending gunman. “Trig, switch!”

The robotic horse leapt into the air, reconfiguring himself into a massive gun and resting along Longshot’s right arm.

“Get away from our children, you monster!!!” Rolly’s mother screamed.

Longshot turned around to try to find the seemingly invisible threat that had the parents so upset, only to be swooped up into the air without warning and carried away from the playground. He looked up to see a familiar face and a familiar pair of powerful, angelic wings that were now moving them through the sky with ease. “Quickwing? What’d you do that for? There was someone with a gun down there!”

“That was you, my friend,” the Celestian informed him. “The parents saw *you* talking to their children, with your guns in reach, and they thought you were a threat. Good thing I was flying by at the moment, or there may have been a serious incident.”

“Oh.” Longshot let it sink in. “My bad. I was just offering the kids the benefit of what I’d



learned is all. Didn't mean to make their parents nervous."

"Parents tend not to like it when strange, heavily armed men approach their children on the playground to deliver life lessons."

"Who'd a guessed it?"

Quickwing smiled, as he carried Longshot and Trig back to the palace. "Just let that be a lesson to you."

"Lesson learned, my friend. Lesson learned."

**The saga of *The Sword of Libran* will continue,  
with Book V:  
*A Hero Before His Time***

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of ten 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*.

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