

Once Upon a Journey ♦ II

A Prince to Crown



SMSMITH

A journey, I reflected, is of no merit unless
it has tested you.

~ Tahir Shah ~

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Dedicated to my brothers for their love and example.

"If you happen to read fairy tales, you will observe that one idea runs from one end of them to the other—the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition. This idea, which is the core of ethics, is the core of the nursery-tales."

~ G.K. Chesterton ~

Ultimately, the impact that fairy tales have on us as adults stems from the influence they had on us when we were young, for it is in childhood that the seeds of virtue are sown.

~ Sheldon Cashdan ~

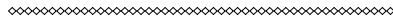


The old-fashioned stories of *Once Upon a Journey* take place in a mystical suzerain known, from ancient days, as Noo. Noo was founded by wandering survivors after a great cataclysm. Over time, various independent kingdoms—Zuukyn-Pristal, Gebble, Ohahdi, Tribbles, Hatuu, and so forth—were established; yet, through a centennial Grand Council, the various kingdoms continued to nourish a common heritage, language, and memory. Noo has endured for many millennia. Its *Chronicles* contain more journeys than can ever be told.

SMS ~ 2013

Journey ♦ II ~ A Prince to Crown

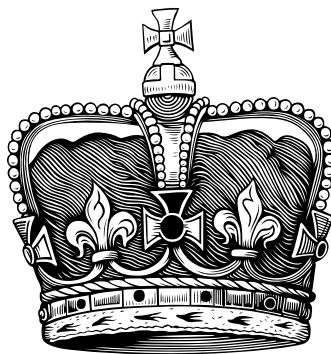
Twin sons of an aging king and queen face three unknown tests to establish who shall prove worthy of the crown.



Once Upon a Journey series:

- I *The Wren & the Raven*
- II **A Prince to Crown****
- III *The Day the Rains Came*
- IV *Journey to Welkindorn*
- V *Belle of the Ballroom*
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A Prince to Crown

LONG AGO in a land called Gebble, there lived twin sons of a noble king and a goodly queen. Both sons were handsome lads of the finest appearance, yet not a soul would have guessed them brothers. Far less would they have guessed them twins.

First-born FahhZu had hair as golden as the autumn leaves, and his face was cherubic—"like an angel's"—some had been heard to say. But this first-born, golden-haired prince was not—by any proper measure—an angel. In public, he pretended to be good and kind, but in private he made fun of everyone and was forever complaining to his raven-haired, twin brother. Sometimes, the golden one even smashed things when he did not get his way.

The second-born prince, whose hair was black as the starless night, was a quiet lad ever roaming the mountains and hills. This raven-haired prince, RahhZu, loved peaceful solitude, but he seldom found it for his elder, golden twin, who craved company, seemed forever at his side, jabbering, teasing, taunting, and time and again needing rescue from things he should have best left alone.

Yet first-born FahhZu was not without cunning. He knew his parents would be seriously unhappy with many things he did, so when bad things happened, when things were broken, or when cooks complained of stolen cookies or missing pies, the golden FahhZu knew exactly what to do. He accused his raven-haired brother.

"Appearance speaks louder than words," FahhZu would say; and so, many believed raven-haired RahhZu was the cause of mysterious dark deeds in the castle and in the land of Gebble.

To make matters worse, FahhZu was forever complaining to his parents and showing them

marvelous proofs of the many things of which he accused his brother. Thus, the good king and queen grew sad for they loved both their sons.

Yet, if the truth were known, RahhZu was the doer of many good and secret deeds throughout the land, which secrecy was greatly pleasing to his elder brother, for as FahhZu walked upon the cobbled streets, subjects would wink at him as if they shared a hidden truth. Some would thank him shyly for his goodness, and FahhZu would smile his mysterious smile and say, "But it's all a secret."

Yet the people could not keep such excellent truths, so in their smiles and whispers, they decided their first-born, golden prince was as wonderful as the sun that shone in the noon-day sky.

At first their conspicuous preference was hard for RahhZu to understand and he thought: If only my hair were not as black as the starless night, then maybe the people would not scorn me so. But nothing changed, except that RahhZu found

himself quarrelling more and more with his deceiving, golden-haired brother, which of course, did not help at all.

Their arguments grew until one fateful day their heated words had turned to violent blows. Afterwards, the bruised and bleeding raven-haired prince had gazed upon his bruised and bleeding golden-haired brother and made a vow. Henceforth and forever, he would discipline himself, no matter what his brother did.

Keeping such a vow had seemed impossible at first, yet somehow over the years, RahhZu had managed it, until at last, he found how things that had drawn his anger did not seem to matter so much any more.

Thus, did the handsome, twin princes arrive at their twenty-first year and to the day when the king and queen, in their aging, called their two sons before them, and the king said, "It is time to think of a new king and queen, and, as is our custom, we would choose our first-born—our golden-haired son—unless it be shown that he

is not worthy of the kingship. Is there anything either of you wishes to say?"

FahhZu spoke immediately, "Oh, father, as first-born, I have tried my whole life to merit this kingship. As witness, I would have you seek wherever you wish in the kingdom, if you should think me unworthy."

"I should not think that necessary," the king said.

"Do you have anything you wish to say about this matter?" the good queen asked, speaking to her raven-haired son.

"I wish only that truth be your best guide," RahhZu said mildly, "for a good king and a good queen are more precious, even than gold."

"You see how he speaks against me!" FahhZu cried. "How in subtly of words he tries to usurp me."

"Words are not the inheritor of this throne, my son," the good queen said, "nor is mere birth, for there are more than words and birth in going from prince to king. And that is why we have

called you here—to prove yourselves—who shall be king. And though you are still young, yet we have raised you to meet this time of proving.”

“But Mother, Father,” FahhZu cried, “have I not proven myself sufficient already? Have I not shown my merit in a thousand, thousand ways? Have I not the appearance of a king?”

“You are, indeed, a beautiful son,” the king said, “but your mother and I know that many tests come to those who rule; thus, as in ancient times, our sons must meet three initial proofs toward their kingship. Only in such proofs can we know who shall next be king of Gebble.”

“But Father!” the golden one cried, “I am no match for my brother’s trickeries—as I have proven to you many times.”

“The Ancient Ones are fair,” the queen said, “for the manner of their testing is not revealed. You shall know only that in coming days or years—we know not—three identical times of testing shall come to each of you, and then we shall know who is next to be king.”

"And be assured, our sons," the king said, "these are not tests of cleverness nor wit. Only he who is fit to be king will choose the better course. We wish you both the best, for we would that you both be kings, if you would be."

Upon these words the princely sons were sent forth from the presence of the king and queen.

In private, FahhZu said, "I am going to win this if it kills me." So for several days he crept about the castle trying to overhear something that would give him clue, but never did he hear anything of use. It was vastly upsetting for FahhZu was sure his parents had spoken of the Ancient Ones only to make it all sound mysterious. He was convinced that somewhere, there were wily servants preparing kingly tests. Thus, his days were occupied, scuttling about the castle, which proved a great relief to RahhZu, who, at last, had several days of the peaceful solitude that he loved.

But alas, such blissful days proved all too few, for one, sun-bright morn, a wing-weary pigeon

arrived bearing a message in silver bands about its leg. It was addressed to the king and queen of Gebble; and in the most beautiful writing, they read the words:

Their Majesties, the King and Queen of the great kingdom Ohahdi invite the twin princes of the great kingdom Gebble to attend a feast in honour of the nineteenth birthday of Tiahsa, the one and only princess of Ohahdi.

At the hearing of these words the queen of Gebble trembled between gladness and dismay. "Why, our sons seem so young," the queen said, "It all seems so sudden, I—"

But the happy king interrupted, "Why, my dear, our sons are men, and if memory serves me, they shall not have forgotten that sweet Ohahdi princess who visited us—what shall it be—ten years past I should think."

"She was a ... nice, little girl," FahhZu said when he was told of the matter, but all the while

he thought: This must be a test for she was a homely thing—just like that wretched wren she stole from me. Why, if she hadn't pitched me off aim, I could have killed it with my very first stone, so I certainly hope marrying her is not a test, for my brother can have her, for all I care.

But his face did not reveal his thoughts for he smiled and nodded as the king and queen reminisced about old times; yet all the while he kept thinking how dreadful it was, not knowing what was a test and what wasn't. Thus, he went on murmuring in his heart.

Meanwhile, RahhZu, with a far away look in his eye, said, "Yes, I remember well that princess. She was the bravest, little girl I ever met." And there were no other thoughts that opposed his speech.

So it was, on the third day thereafter, the twin princes set off together on the long journey to the kingdom of Ohahdi. Now the shortest way led through the brooding, dark woods of RooDun.



There were many strange and terrifying tales of RooDun, so the royal sons of Gebble had been cautioned mightily against taking that shortened way. Indeed, the twin princes had ventured into RooDun only once in their boyhood—the golden one to prove his superior courage, and the raven one to rescue his screeching brother from a sinking bog that superior courage had failed to discern. But that sinking bog had not cured the golden one from lingering about the edges of RooDun, nor of mocking his raven brother's firm refusal to venture in again.

But as they approached the juncture that would lead through or around the woods of RooDun, according to their choice, the golden prince, astride his swift and goodly steed, felt a surge of courage. Of course, such courage had nothing to do with the fresh wheel tracks that veered off the main way and into the forbidden path ahead of him, but if he hurried, FahhZu felt sure he could lend company to that wayward coach—perhaps even, offer his protection.

"I guess this is where we part ways," FahhZu said, "till we meet at the other edge."

"What?" RahhZu said in surprise, for the whole of Gebble had added their cautions against all tempting shortcuts.

"I desire to take this way," FahhZu said. "The way the coach went," he added, pointing to the new wheel tracks in the dust, "and as I know you are afraid, I shall go alone. And don't think I don't mean it."

"The wise course is around," RahhZu said, "whatever other people choose."

"Well, so be it," FahhZu said. "I, for one, choose courage." As he said the words, it came to him that courage would surely be one of the tests for a king, so without further ado, he spurred his horse down the broad path that had always led so invitingly into the intriguing woods of RooDun. His heart was already pounding wildly with courage.

He heard his brother call his name, but he paid no heed until he heard his brother's shouted

words, "Foolishness is not bravery, my brother."

At that, FahhZu reined his horse so sharply it nigh sat on its haunches. When he had recovered their balance, he shouted back the most mocking thing he could conjure. "Pigeon boy," he cried, and spurred his horse on again.

When RahhZu caught up with him, FahhZu was irate. "You're spoiling everything," he cried.

"That's probably true," RahhZu said, "for we are both fools to do this, but I am not going to wonder the rest of my life what happened to you. So, I'm coming—like it or not."

FahhZu could think of nothing sufficiently disparaging to say, so he tried to make the silence as heavy as possible as they trotted along, side by side, each following the groove of a coach track upon the narrowing roadway.

After a time, with all the other intense silence that surrounded them, FahhZu began to feel some measure of relief in his brother's company, though a thousand RooDun witches could not have forced him to confess it.

Yet, as time passed, it began to seem like a strangely, ordinary day. Both princes began to wonder if, indeed, the woods of RooDun held nothing but fabrications of wild tales and vivid imaginations. Save that off the path, they both knew there was at least one sinking bog. In that knowledge, they remained committed to the pathway, which RahhZu silently prayed would yield nothing beyond that heavy, skin-prickling silence—so unsettling in a dense forest!

They had just passed a lop-sided, weather-beaten sign that read, "Half-way"—where RahhZu had murmured, "Hmmm, half-way to what?"—when they rounded a bend and came unexpectedly upon the maker of the wheel tracks. There, stopped dead-centre, filling the narrow roadway, was an elegant, though decidedly aged coach. There was no way around, except into the dense woods. The golden one muttered at this inconsiderate blocking of the roadway. He was about to veer into the woods when a raspy voice sounded from the interior of the coach.

"Is there anyone can help me?" the voice wheezed.

This could be a test, FahhZu thought. I had best proceed cautiously till I know. But while he was pondering possibilities, his brother dismounted and arrived at the coach door.

"What seems to be the trouble?" RahhZu asked.

"There's a dreadful crack in one of my wheel spokes," the voice wheezed. "My coachman has gone for help with my horse, but it seems such a long time. Do you think you can help?"

"I don't know," RahhZu said, "but we shall do what we can." With that he rounded the old coach to inspect the faulty wheel.

FahhZu rounded the same dusty coach with a wary eye. This wagon has seen better days, he thought—perhaps in the days before history. And the wrinkled hand that held the hooded cape close looked as prehistoric and ill-used as the coach. There can be no test here, he decided, so he spoke quite loftily as befitted his royalty.

"Well, we are not tool carriers—that's for sure," he said. "Though I suppose we could leave word of your plight at the next village, in case your coachman has got lost, or died, or something."

"Can't you stay with me till help comes?" the voice asked. "It can be worrisome in these woods you know."

"I'm sorry," FahhZu said in the same lofty tone. "We are on highly important business that cannot be delayed."

Meanwhile, he thought: What is my gullible brother doing, rummaging in those infernal saddle pouches of his. And who, in kingdom, could be bothered to bother this old woman? Why she could sit here forever and none would touch her or this decrepit coach—most of all, me.

"I can give any wish you desire," the voice rasped, breaking in upon his thoughts.

"What!" FahhZu scoffed, twisting his face in mocking disbelief. "Why, you can't even fix a cracked wheel spoke and you promise any wish I desire!"

“’Tis true,” the voice said, and then in a harsh whisper “Even to reveal of coming tests.”

At that untimely moment, RahhZu spoke at the other door. “I have several strips of rawhide,” he said, holding them up so the coach’s occupant could see. “So if you have a basin for water, and a little time, we can perhaps secure this wheel enough to get you safely to the next village.”

A wrinkled hand reached out and took a rawhide strip to twist it in her fingers. “Oh, that would be lovely,” the voice said. She slipped her gnarled hand into the coach’s door-pouch and withdrew a shiny brass basin—much to the surprise of FahhZu who could not fathom, from his vantage point, how there had been room for it in the small pocket. But his thoughts were instantly arrested as the old lady handed the basin and rawhide strip to his brother and whispered, “For this kind deed, I give whatever you desire.”

FahhZu sputtered in disbelieving shock at such double-dealing and might have spoken his mind, had his brother not spoken first.

"My lady," RahhZu said, "we have no need—not even desire—for reward."

The raspy voice took on a sweet, enticing note. "Perhaps, if I were to tell of—"

But FahhZu could not contain his anxiety. "My g-good lady," he cried, in stammering haste, "pl-please—" as the hooded figure turned toward him and silently waited, slowly drumming gnarled fingers upon a cloaked knee.

FahhZu, in frantic sweat to pursue this astonishing possibility on his own, at all costs, added in haste, "'Tis water we need—desire—for the rawhide, my lady."

As gnarled fingers reached toward the door-pouch, FahhZu rushed on. "Pond water, my lady. From a pond. A real pond. Lots of pond water."

FahhZu heard his brother sigh. He knew from long experience that accompanying the sigh would be heaven-cast eyes and a shaking head. But FahhZu kept his focus upon the cloaked lady. His brother's long-suffering expressions were of no import to him whatsoever.

"As you wish," the lady finally wheezed, sighing too, as she turned toward the raven prince and pointed ahead. "Just thirteen steps there, then thirteen more round that little bend."

But before RahhZu could take a step, long, knobbly fingers gripped his arm, and in a whisper, which the golden prince could plainly hear, she said, "I can tell of coming tests."

At that, FahhZu nearly screeched in rage, but his brother saved him the awful necessity by speaking the incomprehensible.

"I suspect, my lady, that to pursue such offer would be to fail," RahhZu said as he patted the old woman's hand. Then he turned and started up the path as she had directed.

FahhZu thought he had never heard anything so ridiculous in all his life. There was no way he would be so foolish, so he watched anxiously from beside the carriage door. He hoped the old woman hadn't noticed his impatience, because the moment his brother disappeared round the bend, he, FahhZu, was going to get his wish.

But just as RahhZu got to the bend, a great rush of wind burst upon the scene, whipping the stylish clothes of the golden prince into wild disarray. Grasping a quaking birch, FahhZu held on for his life, and then, both princes watched in startled wonder as the creaking, horseless coach, suddenly sped into the dense growth—to vanish in a whirlwind of leaves and dust.

The raven prince trotted back and tried not to smile too broadly at the sight of his golden brother yanking and jerking his ruffled clothes into some semblance of their prior order.

"I knew this seemed strange," RahhZu said. "I suspected from the outset, she might be one of those witches of RooDun, but I did not know for sure; and in any event, a cracked wheel is a cracked wheel."

FahhZu was furious. He hadn't once suspected. To him, she was but an ugly old woman who might just happen to know something of the tests devised by his parents. But that she could be one of the infamous witches of RooDun had never

crossed his mind. If his brother had spoken up, or hinted, or something, then he, the golden prince, would know all he needed to know at this very moment, but as it was—

He was so angry he could not even speak. He leapt upon his restless steed and rode off at a furious gallop, beating his poor horse mercilessly. He knew his brother hated such horse whippings, but it made him feel good—especially that no one could stop him.

Except, the next FahhZu knew, he was lying face down in the dirt with his brother kneeling beside and shaking him; their lathered horses standing near. FahhZu felt bone-sore, and his right arm hurt dreadfully.

When at last, FahhZu could rise, his brother said, "Well, I hope this will teach you not to wave your whip like that when stampeding through trees such as these. You are lucky your arm is not broken. And though I would not wish such hurt on even an enemy, you surely had deserved it."

"Eat it," FahhZu snapped; and for the rest of

their passage through the brooding woods of RooDun, the twin princes rode in uneventful, heavy silence—until at the wood’s edge, FahhZu said, “And you, my little brother, were scared of that! Some king you’d make.”

Two days later, FahhZu was back to his chatter of all things concerning himself as the princes of Gebble arrived at the borders of the kingdom of Ohahdi. There was yet considerable distance to the centre place, so FahhZu was cheered to see a border town. It was admittedly a lowly place, but it would have a refreshing inn and a market where they could send to replenish supplies.

The almost worst part of this kingly testing, FahhZu decided, was to travel without servants. As if kings ever had to do without servants! It was simply archaic.

They were just speaking of supplies, when a young urchin presented himself at their service. In his longing to give orders, FahhZu commissioned the boy before he realized how utterly

unsuitable the tattered lad was. But as there seemed none else readily available, he let his poor choice stand for it would be highly undignified for a prince to buy his own bread, cheese and figs, despite RahhZu's willingness.

With enthusiasm borne of needed service, the urchin scampered off, his pockets heavy with coin, to buy the coming days' supplies. But alas, the princes had scarcely filled their flasks from the inn's well, when the lad came wailing up the cobbled street with blood from a forehead wound flowing into the tears that were streaming down his face. His clothes were torn beyond their tatters and his pockets were turned outwards.

"Why, that little thief!" FahhZu muttered as he watched the boy's wailing progress. "I'd lay odds, he planned this, and it's all for show. And don't you," he said, thrusting a finger in his brother's face, "don't you fall for some sobbing story of thievery. He's not going to take us twice—not even once, if I have my say."

By the time the wailing boy reached them a small throng had gathered to hear the sad tale. It was told as it appeared. The poor urchin had been accosted by young thugs and when he refused to deliver up his trust, they had set upon him and taken it by force. The poor lad was heart-broken. In sobbings, he offered the princes ten years of his labour to make up for their loss. He had nothing else to give, he said.

"His story is surely true," the crowd agreed. "He's a good lad. And see the blood. See how distressed he is."

FahhZu, whose first birth entitled him to first consideration, didn't believe a word of the lad's story. Why he, the golden one, had put on better shows himself as a child. But he was not about to alienate the sympathetic crowd, so he said in a most kindly manner, "Come, come, my boy, this is surely a heart-rending thing, but the street is no place to examine such a matter."

So, putting his arm firmly about the boy's still trembling shoulders, he manoeuvred him

into a parlour off the inn's entrance and bolted the door—but not before RahhZu had squeezed himself in, too. It did not matter to FahhZu. Justice was going to be served, brother or no brother. He turned to the hiccupping boy and held out his hand.

"Hand it up," he said in his sternest voice.

The lad looked confused. And then, understanding, he cried, "You think I would trick you? I am not such a boy." His tears dried instantly, and he drew himself tall, "I may be poor, but I am a good lad—at least I try to be. And to prove it, I will do as I said. I will serve you ten years."

"I would have your head before trusting you with one sovereign more," FahhZu cried. "And I will surely have it unless you make good what you have taken; and I care not how."

The lad's eyes widened in dismay and he looked toward the raven-haired prince for help. To his astonishment, that is what he found.

"Here, lad," RahhZu said, offering the startled boy a leather pouch. "Pay him what he asks from

this, and then you shall be free of his wrath.”

The astounded boy hesitated and in that tiny hesitation, FahhZu snatched for the pouch, but RahhZu knew his brother too well, so the pouch was not where the golden one expected.

RahhZu spoke calmly. “Brother,” he said, “you said you did not care how he made good. Well, this is my private money to give as I please. I give him loan or gift, whatever he should wish, so then he shall owe me or not, as he should wish; and you shall be repaid our journey’s money and be without further cause.”

FahhZu was incensed, but knew no logic to argue it out, save one to his advantage. “Thieves pay double their crimes, if you care to belatedly remember, my not-so-clever brother.”

“All right,” RahhZu said, and turning to the amazed boy, he offered the sack again and said, “You may pay him double.”

“I can’t!” the boy exclaimed.

“Yes, you can,” the raven-haired prince said, “for there isn’t much choice in the circumstance,

as we both clearly see. And as you can further see, pride is not going to be very useful in resolving this. So take it, and pay me back—if you must—however much or whenever, though I would prefer, if you just carry it forward to some other ill-fated fellow.”

“Oh, joy, joy,” FahhZu scoffed. “This lad will never in his life have an extra sovereign to his name. You have just wasted good money on a ne’er-do-well.”

“Oh, I think not,” RahhZu said, and held the bag out again. At last, the lad took it and began counting out double his loss into the twitching palm of the golden prince.

When the lad was done and about to draw the pouch closed, RahhZu asked, “If you could have anything you wanted, what would it be?”

The boy drew the strings tight and handed the bag back as he spoke with a wistful sigh. “Someday, I am going to have a horse.”

“You! A horse! For what?” FahhZu sneered. “To best some thieving partner, I suppose.”

The boy drew back his thin shoulders and spoke with fervour. "Someday I'm going to have a horse—and then a hundred horses, for I am going to be a merchant. I'm going to visit every kingdom, and I'm going to carry the writings of every place to every other place. And I am going to build huge houses to hold them all."

FahhZu snorted in mockery. "A merchant of writings! Ridiculous."

"Sounds intriguing to me," RahhZu said. And so saying he reached into the pouch and took out a gold coin. "This is for your first horse," he said, holding it out to the boy.

FahhZu cried, "That's way too much for a horse!"

And the boy cried, "I can't."

"All right," RahhZu said. "We could do it this way. You buy me your good horse with this; then use that good horse for—let us say, ten seasons—then come and find me in Gebble and give me my horse and one other for its use. Does that sound fair?"

The boy paused for only a moment before he said, "I'll give you ten horses—one for every season."

"A deal," the raven prince said, and held out his hand.

"A deal," the boy said, taking the prince's hand and shaking vigorously, but there were tears once again in his eyes. He blinked them back.

"Some deal," FahhZu scoffed, believing in his heart that in ten lifetimes they'd never see the face of this boy again. It was all such a waste and if he got the remotest chance, that coin would be rescued to join the several new ones that now warmed and weighted his pocket.

He was so intent on forming some plan to get that wasted coin back he did not notice his brother's departure till the parlour door thudded shut in a gust of wind. Rushing to the window, he observed the urchin and his brother stop at the inn's well and then turn to saunter down the street that had been a wailing way such a short

time before. The boy was mopping his face clean with the prince's once pristine, but now sopping and soiled, cravat.

"Where in deuce, do you think you're going?" FahhZu cried after he managed to crank open the stubborn window.

RahhZu turned and said, "To the market—for supplies and a horse. Did you want to come? We thought not, for you didn't answer when we asked."

"I am not going to the market to jangle coin, thank you very much," FahhZu said and cranked the window shut. It would have closed more to his satisfaction had it swung freely.

As RahhZu and the urchin passed the place of beating and robbery, the urchin plucked at the prince's sleeve and said, "They're right there still—in the shadows."

RahhZu stopped and cleared his throat. "I have a small speech for you—all you—there in the shadows," he said.

The only sound was a small scuffling and a few sniggers, so the prince continued.

"At the core, you are better than you did, so this one time, I'm not going to come after you for your crimes, but let me say—if you think my heart is soft, take a look at my countenance for there are two sides to me. I shall let you decide which side you might wish to encounter at some future date. I let you know this, for I am leaving a horse or two of mine in this lad's care. And if I hear you have caused him any grief or trouble, I shall remember your past sins to the utmost. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a long silence.

"Do you understand me?" the prince said in a voice so stern it demanded an answer. At last the answer came.

"Aye," a voice squeaked from the shadows.

With that, RahhZu and the urchin proceeded to the market, where with fine dickering, their coin managed a gallant steed of such spirit and splendour, the boy could scarcely comprehend

the events. To find the very horse of his imagination was almost beyond believing.

The lad was overwhelmed; and more so, when four merchants accepted the prince's recommendation to use the lad for their next-morning deliveries. Another agreed to feed and stable the boy's horse for an exchange of services.



As the prince and boy said their good-byes, the lad held back his tears, but they flowed all the way home through the evening shadows till he reached his widowed mother's humble abode. The tears kept flowing too, during the telling of his day, till his poor mamma cried as much as he. And then they said a long prayer in which they forgot to ask for anything, for it seemed they now had all they would ever need.

At last they fell into their beds, hardly daring to sleep for fear it was all but a dream.

When RahhZu reached the village inn carrying their supplies, the sun was long set. Upon his pillow, he found a note addressed to, "My foolish raven-haired brother." It was short and to the point that the sooner they left that "miserable, thieving border-town," the better the golden prince would feel, so the "raven boy" had better be ready for an early start.

Surprisingly, they were both ready; and for three more days they travelled uneventfully on toward Ohahdi's central city, till on day three, they topped a rise and entered into a corridor of gold and purple banners streaming in the breeze. As they topped another rise, they could see hundreds of curious Ohahdees upon the towering city walls. It was an awesome sight and the golden prince felt immensely pleased at such a grand welcoming. He felt pleased, that is, until he discovered, on queuing to be greeted at the



city gate, that he and his brother were but two—and the last two at that—of fifty young princes invited to that great feast in honour of Ohahdi's princess. The city's grande-dame magistrate was profuse in her welcome to all, but it only fed FahhZu's disgust at being so crowded by inferior competitors—even though he was not remotely enamoured by the so-called prize. As to the commonness of everyone's traveling apparel—it was a disgrace to princes everywhere, he thought.

"Clearly, this is some besotted king," FahhZu murmured as he gazed at his reflection in the shiny shields of the plumed, castle guards. "Fifty princes for one homely daughter! It must be as they say, 'Blood is thicker than truth' for of a truth, this girl shall still be as plain, plain as that broken bird she saved for no purpose at all."

Now some assumed it was for the sake of the princess of Ohahdi that the golden prince preened about his appearance. But no. It was for the sake of being most handsome amongst fifty princes from almost as many kingdoms.

The next evening, the distinguished, exquisite throng of princes gathered in the great dining hall to await the advent of Ohahdi's princess.

Between the rows of castle guards, the one and only Tiahsa came, while a hundred eyes caught glimpses as she made her way to the dais to sit beside her parents. When she emerged into full view, every prince lost his breath in raptured silence. She was as serene and beautiful as they had anticipated.

But FahhZu could not believe his eyes. This was the princess of Ohahdi?! He would never have guessed it. Except, the nose was the same. Well, the eyes were too, and the face, sort of, except—! He was suddenly elated he had come. And if this was a test! Well, it was not going to be so hard after all to marry this girl. And of course, he was assured of that result for amongst all the princes, he, the golden-haired prince of Gebble, was, without contest, the most striking.

Thus, the golden prince waited in confidence for the princess of Ohahdi to gaze upon him. But

for the longest while, she never looked at any of them. She ate her meal as poised and composed as if she were dining alone.

FahhZu though, could scarcely raise his fork for fear the exquisite princess would rest her gaze upon him whilst he was in mid-chew, which would spoil the perfection of his face. So, his stomach remained empty, but his heart was full of imaginings.

Meanwhile, RahhZu enjoyed the splendid meal and tried to engage light conversation with those about him, but no one seemed in the mood, especially his brother.

Of course, RahhZu saw how beautiful Tiahsa was, but his chief reflection was of a scared, yet spunky girl from ten years past. But now, being one of fifty princes, he did not think it likely her favour should fall to him, though he would have given much for it to be so. Thus, his greatest hope was to speak with her for just a little—like old friends. And maybe to remind the princess of the small wren they had nursed together.

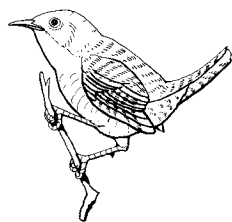
It was not until dessert was served that Tiahsa finally extended her gaze to take in all that was before her. When finally, at last, it came to him, FahhZu displayed his most charming smile—only to be taken considerably aback to see the princess wrinkle her brow and nose and ...

No—surely not a grimace? Ah yes, confused surprise to discover one so handsome as he. He smiled again and raised his gloved hand. The princess gave a lop-sided smile and dropped her gaze to the empty plate before her.

She had not pondered so about the previous thirty princes upon whom her eyes had rested, so FahhZu knew—it meant something special.

And to the princess, it did.

As she sat silent with her downward gaze, she was thinking. And suddenly she knew. “Why that is the grown-up, awful prince who tried to kill a poor frightened wren right in front of me—against the wishes of his raven-haired, twin brother!”



As soon as the princess thought of the raven-haired prince, she felt warm all over; and now, breathlessly hopeful that both brothers had been invited. Glancing up, she saw the raven-haired prince sitting beside the golden one, and he was looking at her with his crooked smile, with his eyebrows raised in just the way he had looked at her dozens of times a day for ten whole days, those ten years past. His look had seemed to fathom how scared she was to be left with strangers, even royal strangers, and how she missed her parents. Then, he had kept her so busy with adventures that when her parents had returned, she had cried and wanted them to go away and come back in a fortnight.

Tiahsa remembered how she had cried for days, even weeks, after her return home because she missed her raven-haired friend. But then time had passed and with all the things that a princess does and sees, the memories of the twin princes of the kingdom of Gebble had faded.

But all those memories came flooding back as she continued her round of smiling and nodding to the assemblage of fifty princes.

By evening's end, Tiahsa knew that the only prince she wished to talk to or see again was the raven-haired prince. Yet, in royal tradition, she held back any sign of favour, though all during the entertainment, she tried to sneak glances at him. Sometimes he was looking her way, but mostly he watched the entertainment—which she could not blame, for it was truly astonishing. But nonetheless, it worried her. What if he still saw her as that plain, scrawny, home-sick princess? What if he didn't remember her at all? What if he already liked someone else?

All these *what-ifs* and a gaggle of other runaway thoughts harried her for the rest of the evening, but the thing that harried her most was the constant gaze of the golden-haired prince. She did not like it at all.

When the feasting and entertainment were over and all the princes had been escorted to

their respective quarters, the king said, "Well, my dearest daughter, what do you think? Which ones shall we interview on the morrow? Which one shall be first choice?"

Tiahsa merely smiled for she knew that in custom and courtesy, every prince would be received and interviewed in the coming days, in the order his name was drawn. Though, if the choice were hers, the princess knew in her heart, who should come first.

But alas, it would not be, for FahhZu had already taken care of all uncertainties concerning the order of his name. It was remarkably easy, because in Ohahdi, as in Gebble, there were those who could be persuaded to his desires. Thus, FahhZu approached the time of drawing, calm and assured in the knowledge that he, the golden prince, would be announced as first, no matter whose name was first chosen.

And so it was.

Indeed, the golden-haired prince was most impressive as he sat in first spot before the king

and queen and princess. Even so much so, that the king and queen told their daughter that surely it was sign of great significance that the golden prince—the most regal of them all—was first chosen. But despite everything the golden prince said and did, Tiahsa could not rid herself of that nagging—almost overwhelming—dislike from prior days.

It plagued her dreadfully that the golden prince should be first, especially when she had hoped so fervently for the raven-haired prince. Her disappointment was immense for in her dream that very night, she knew the raven one had come first. But to have him come last! She could not comprehend it—though it would have been plain as daylight had she only known how in bribery, one being last, came first; and the other, being first, yet came last.

As it was, her parents insisted, “Why surely, the draw is a portentous sign. Though you have said that between the two, you prefer the raven-haired one, yet the draw must be a sign.”

Tiahsa had groaned. "Whenever I look at FahhZu, I see a mean, nasty boy," she said.

"But, my dear," the queen said, "obnoxious boys grow out of such ways—as this golden one has abundantly shown. We could not ask for a finer son."

But the princess held back her consent.

At last, the king and queen sent all the princes home, except for the golden- and raven-haired twins from Gebble, for the decision had come down to those two—though RahhZu supposed he remained solely as a courtesy and companion to his golden brother. He wished he could have gone too, for it was wrenchingly painful watching all the displays his brother conjured to impress Ohahdi's princess.

Every day, the king and queen pressed the princess for her choice; and told her again how they favoured the golden one; and why all signs pointed to him. And how the raven-haired prince seemed nice enough, though they had begun to hear rumours whispered round that he was not

what he seemed, or rather just as he looked. And though nothing was proven—yet, was it not often true that where there were whispers there were deeds; and so on, and so on.

Tiahsa felt terribly confused. She grew more anxious with every passing hour—afraid even to show favour to RahhZu in case his brother should send him off in a fit of jealousy.

Meanwhile, the kingdom's chief counselor stood silent, observing all. At last the king and queen asked his opinion, but all he offered were words that said nothing. And the reason he spoke in such riddle and fog was because of his conscience. As chief counselor, he had drawn the names; he had been the one bribed. He now felt distraught beyond measure for creating the whole dreadful dilemma.

At the time of his bribery, he had thought a minor switching of two random names could have no consequence. He had never imagined it could devolve to two brothers. How was such possible out of fifty names? Two brothers whose

names were drawn first and last, and yet who were now thought to be last and first! Who could have possibly predicted, it should come to such significance?

That trivial twist had seemed such a minor concession for the exquisite pendant and bracelet that FahhZu had dangled before him. It had seemed true what FahhZu had said. How a chief counselor's beautiful wife deserved better than she had.

So the counselor had taken the jewels. But then he could not bring himself to give them. He feared his dear one would ask how he came by them and he could not tell her a lie. So the exquisite gems lay hidden in a castle cupboard—a terrible reminder of the increasingly awful consequence that was now flowing from his offense. He was more sorry than he could say.

Finally, in despair, he returned the gems to FahhZu who took them with a laugh and called the counselor foolish, saying no one would believe him; and that perhaps even the counselor

would lose his place if he confessed; and that his confession, believed or not, would make no difference in the outcome. Besides, FahhZu had said, with the gems returned, the foolish counselor had no proof of his story.

The counselor did not know what to do. He feared greatly for his wife and children. Now that it was too late, he knew he would never do such a foolish thing again—no matter how innocent it appeared. But he had been enticed.

Now, others were suffering because of his greedy action. Yet at the time, it had seemed neither foolish nor greedy. He had dismissed that niggling voice in his head. He was not doing anything for himself, he argued. It was for another—a well-deserving other who merited more than he could ever give. He knew how she loved beautiful things, though she never asked for them. His motives were above reproach, he had insisted. But now every reasoned self-defense had become distasteful.

At last, the counselor could bear it no more.

His dilemma was to find the princess alone to make his confession. But how to get rid of that ever-present FahhZu?

As fortune would have it, that very afternoon, the frustrated king, in answer to his daughter's pleadings, pried FahhZu from his hovering attendance. "There is no choice in this matter," the king announced. "We were going boar-hunting, like it or not."

RahhZu had been commandeered too, at the insistence of his brother, for FahhZu was beginning to get inkling that things were not as secure as he had first supposed. Tiahsa was not warming to him as he had every right to expect. He was going to have to give thought to moving matters along in some dramatic fashion.

Maybe, just maybe, he should conjure a way to rescue the princess from a mortal danger—a rescue that would be safe, certain, and dignified. That should do the trick with this inexplicably, hesitant lass, he decided. The bonus would be

to bond the parents eternally to his side. And so, he trailed the boar hunt. "An inexplicably lethargic horse!" he explained and complained, as his mind churned upon plots for a heroic rescue.

Thus, for the first time in days, Tiahsa was free. Meanwhile, the contrite counselor had worked himself into a state of anxiety as the opportunity for confession approached. As he rehearsed his words, fretting over their best delivery, he saw the princess stride past the castle window, in a brisk, almost running walk. He clasped his head in dismay. She was, without doubt, heading to her very own, beloved counselor—his very own pendant-less wife.

Over the years, his good wife had probably come to know more about Ohahdi's princess than even the good queen mother. To his wife's endless credit, she had never spilled a confidence, not even to him. But now, this good wife was going to be embroiled in a dilemma that should not have been a dilemma at all, except for him. Chief counselor! and he had messed up royally.

Brought untold distress to Tiahsa and inevitable shame to his family.

He had planned to make as much recompense as possible before telling his loved ones, but the complication of confessing to Tiahsa in the presence of his wife was more than he was yet able to bear.

These were his coursing thoughts as he dashed from the castle, in frantic, hot pursuit of his redemption. It was too late to consider what observers might think of their sedate and once somber wise man.

When the gasping, staggering counselor caught up with Tiahsa—and then with his own breath—he confessed it all: his wrongs, his fears, his deepest regrets. His rehearsed words were forgotten in a tumble of tears and anguish.

At his confession, every doubt vanished from Tiahsa's mind. She was beyond ecstatic. Together they cried and cried, and even more so when it came to Tiahsa that she still had a dilemma. How was she going to correct the awful mess without

causing this repentant, courageous counselor excessive harm?

"I am prepared," he said, "to confess openly and to bear the shame, for I well deserve it." But Tiahsa was sure there was a better way. A way to save this counselor who had suffered an excruciating lesson. A way that would reveal FahhZu's true character.

Together, they pondered and pondered and pondered, till suddenly, a clever plan came to the princess in a burst of inspiration.

In the kingdom of Ohahdi, there was a marvelous secret that a wizard had gifted to the kings many years before—it was a fire that did not burn. No king had found its best use, for the soot and choking smoke of its display made it impractical for much, but it looked alarmingly real. It could send billows of black and terrifying smoke high into the air. It could flash and flicker and roar and feel hot, but it did not burn. The princess decided she had found a use at last.

"I have a plan," she said to the counselor, "if you will get me some of that powder that burns without burning. I only need a little, and I need your help."

"I think it best, I just confess and suffer the penalty," the counselor said again. "I do not wish to compound my wrong by exposing the secret of our special fire. We may need it someday."

"Oh, we won't expose it," the princess said. "If we plan just right, only father will know. And if all goes as I hope, he and mother will come to see what I know to be. And besides," she said, holding her hand up against the counselor's protestations, "besides, we have two defenses. First, we've had this gift hundreds of years, without finding any use for it; and second, it's not really such a secret. Not since my little brothers got in all that trouble last season—twice, mind you, as most everyone around, well remembers. I will use those facts in our defense, if need be."

And so they planned it just right.

The next afternoon, to the distress of FahhZu, the princess pled weariness and the need to take a nap. It was the truth, for she was profoundly weary of his fawning attention. She said nothing about where she intended to take such a nap, so let them assume what they would.

As for FahhZu, his distress and irritation were barely containable. His daring rescue would now have to be delayed. It was vastly upsetting because once he set his mind to something, it was nigh impossible to tolerate delay. And he had been tolerating way too much delay in recent days. He could feel the jittering stresses swell in both his mind and body.

At a back door of the castle, Tiahsa spied the leather pouch, just as the counselor had described. Secreting it beneath her cloak, she sped into the forest and down the path to the glade. There, surrounded by slender birches on a verdant knoll that dipped to a refreshing pond, she set her plan in motion.

At the top of the knoll, she poured the strange powder in a jagged ring upon the grass and stepped inside. There she arranged her cloak into a little pillow and lay down with the tiny vial of igniting fluid in her hand. She could almost see in her mind's eye, the unfolding scene at the castle.

"I'm not in a walking mood at this moment," FahhZu would probably, politely, say in refusal of the counselor's invitation; though moments before he had been insistently inviting *his* princess to walk with him, in search of some lovely birds he has spied while boar-hunting.

But the counselor would persist—as he had assured the princess—till an effective persuasion was found. If he could get the king and RahhZu to accept an invite to inspect the truffle harvest, FahhZu would be sure to follow.

The counselor proved speedily persuasive, for it was hardly any time at all before Tiahsa heard the counselor's booming laugh that was her signal to ignite the fire that did not burn.

Hurriedly she poured the liquid out, and curled back upon the warm earth with her head tucked into the cushioning cloak. She seemed asleep, but through her lashes, she saw the flames and billowing smoke surge upward in an explosive display that surprised—almost panicked—even her. Maybe she had used too much, she thought. Maybe she should have pretested this plan. Except, it was too late.

Immediately, she heard shouts of alarm and then watched through the wind-twisted billows as the counselor came bursting into the glade at full tilt with the raven prince right behind. Further behind was the puffing king and behind him, the golden prince. The way the golden one darted and leapt about, it seemed almost as if he were using the king as a shield from whatever unknown dangers might lie ahead.

The raven prince was already in the pond up to his knees, soaking the shirt he had stripped from his body as he ran.

When the counselor pointed into the circling

flames and bellowed, "The princess!" she arose, almost sure now, at the seeming terror in the counselor's voice, that she had misjudged a few things.

For one split moment, everything stopped—the king, staring confused and puzzled at this strange fire he recognized; the wide-eyed, dancing FahhZu, clutching the king's summer tunic with white-knuckled hands; the counselor, open-mouthed and still pointing as he awaited heroic action; and RahhZu, with horror written in every muscle upon discovering that this was infinitely more than a nasty grass fire to be extinguished.

Then everything happened at once. RahhZu dove into the pond with an enormous splash to reappear before even the splash had reached its zenith. Splitting the air-borne droplets, he leapt the bank in running stride toward the flames. The counselor began his mock beating at the flames with his cloak while the king surged forward—only to stop at the sound of an ear-splitting rip. The king turned to see a sizeable portion of his

goodly tunic in the still clutching white-knuckles of FahhZu. For a brief moment, they stared at one another in uncomprehending surprise at the sudden ventilation about the king's ribs, and then FahhZu turned and rushed down the path waving the king's garment and shouting, "Help, help," at the top of his lungs.

Meanwhile, RahhZu didn't even pause. In full racing stride, he rushed through the raging flames, snatched Tiahsa up in his arms, as he somehow managed, at the same time, to slap his sopping shirt about her head. King and gaping counselor froze in wonder at the whirlwind of motion as the now soot-blackened prince rushed once more through the roaring flames.

The counselor had time only to raise a hand and cry, "Uh, uh—," before the energized prince roared down the knoll and into an enormous, frog-sprawling splash as he cast his burden ahead of him into the relative safety of deeper waters.

King and counselor were still wide-eyed and slack-jawed as Tiahsa surfaced, sputtering at the

cold shock and pawing to see beyond her curtain of dripping, auburn hair. RahhZu surfaced too, flinging his blue-black hair back in a shower of droplets as he lunged through the water toward the princess. When he reached her, he tenderly parted her hair to inspect her face. Then he inspected her arms and his amazement grew. He looked about his own unscathed body.

Then, he remembered the fire. Seizing his floating shirt, he whirled to the forest's rescue, only to see an incomprehensible sight.

The counselor, believing the raven prince to be in a preoccupied state, had turned to the fire and cast his extinguishing powder into the flames. At that very spot, the fire seemed to cough and then proceeded to gobble itself up—like an invisible tongue licking in a circle till there was nothing but a jagged line of black residue where the roaring flames had been. RahhZu blinked and stared and then blinked again.

"Nice timing!" the king drawled in an undertone for the hearing of his red-faced counselor.

"And this, I suppose will have good explanation, will it not?" the king continued.

"I b-believe so, my lord," the counselor stammered. "Th-though it didn't all g-go ex-exactly as we pl-planned."

"Nothing much does, my man," the king drawled again as he fingered the torn edges of his once immaculate tunic.

"I'm sorry about that, my lord," the counselor said, "but in truth, maybe this went even better than planned, if you see my drift."

The king was beginning to. He had also seen the face of his daughter and wondered how long she could hold the suppressed mirth that was nigh exploding her. Indeed, she was making valiant effort to contain it, but as the stunning swiftness of unanticipated events began to replay in her mind, and as she saw the confusion of her raven prince, bursts of sounds began to escape her tightly pressed lips.

The startled concern of RahhZu over her emerging hysterics did not help. Before even

they had reached the pond's edge, Tiahsa was in collapse. The eyes of RahhZu, framed by dripping lashes, took on a helpless, desperate look. He patted her heaving shoulders and said, "There, there, it's over. It's all over."

Tiahsa thought then that she was going to die. Her whole body ached at the ripping laughter and hiccups. She had envisioned a rescue of splendour and awe-inspiring majesty. And here they were: the counselor with soot in an unholy pattern upon his face; her father, clutching his regal tunic about his exposed undergarment; and herself and RahhZu, sodden and without a speck of outward splendour.

RahhZu continued to pat his comfort as he turned with pleading eyes to the king. That was the last straw for the king. And the king proved the last straw for his counselor as the king bent double with streaming eyes and gasping croaks—with his tunic flapping wide.

RahhZu, whose surge of energy had suddenly drained to a loss at his knees, felt himself drawn

into the absurdity of it all, till the glade rocked with their laughter.

That was how FahhZu and his oddly lackluster bucket-brigade from the castle found them—sprawled upon the grass, clutching their sides, with tears streaming down their faces.

It was such a shocking sight that FahhZu about-faced his trotting rescuers with wild threatening gestures—to save them from witnessing the indignity of their royal house. But FahhZu had seen, and the vision of their commonness was branded in his mind.

As he hustled the pathetic rescuers back to their chores, he thought he heard murmurings of “Not again!” and something about “Lock and key”; and “Boys will be boys—king’s son or not!” but his overriding thoughts were that someone should do something about these lollygag servants who seemed to view a massive fire as more a pleasure stroll than a calamity. He would have a word with the queen.

When he returned to the fire scene, the once hysterical group was reduced to sputterings, but FahhZu was incensed. He wasn't sure why. He wondered if they had been laughing at him. But he had done the only reasonable thing—he had been the only one with enough presence to go for help.

Now, in their laughter, he felt a niggling suspicion of trickery, perhaps even black sorcery. There was no way they could have put out such a blaze with one wet shirt and one combustible cloak.

He strolled toward the spot and saw blackened daisies waving in the breeze. He saw bunches of black grass standing as straight and tall as though they had grown that way. There was not a thing destroyed. That strange fire had burned furiously in a small jagged, circle, yet it had burned nothing. He touched his toe to a daisy and the soot shifted to reveal whiteness beneath. He felt them watching him and he did not care. But he felt himself seethe even more.

This must have been the first of the tests, he thought. Well, he had done the right thing, though his brother had appeared the better and only—only because he had known there was nothing to fear. That was why they were laughing. That he had been tricked. But they were not laughing now, for they knew that he knew what they had done.

“He didn’t know,” the counselor said as if he knew what FahhZu was thinking. It wasn’t that astute a guess for the countenance of the golden prince was quite readable. FahhZu snorted a puff of air from his nose, to let them know what he thought of that.

“My young prince,” the king said, in a stern voice, “I want a word with you, if you would be so good as to accompany me. The others may follow as they decide, but as my daughter has now decided betwixt you, I should like to tell you why.”

The princess interrupted. “You don’t know the half of it, father, but what you have witnessed

should be enough," she said. She would not go to tattle on the counselor, but she spoke so her father would know this was just a small—a very small—portion of FahhZu's offences. But the king surprised her.

"I know most of it, my child," the king said, "for our counselor's confession to you merely preceded the one to me and your mother short hours ago. He said you had a little matter you wished to conclude before I took action; and since, I presume this concludes your *little* matter, I think I shall proceed. Though I, also, think," the king said turning to his counselor, "I think you might have confessed the full nature of this little matter, for why you didn't is beyond me."

"Because you might have scotched it, my lord, and it had become necessary to make things unmistakably clear," the counselor said.

The king raised an eyebrow as he pondered his counselor's words. "Perhaps true," the king said with a begrudging grunt. "But these recent lapses of yours do not go unnoticed."

"I know, my king," the counselor said. "As I said, I am ready to suffer whatever you say."

"Well, my first say must come with this young prince, so let us be off, my lad," the king said.

"I can save you the trouble, *sir*," FahhZu said as he vainly sought to contain his annoyance at being called, "my lad." With a swift glance at the bedraggled princess, he continued, "For though in trickery, I have been bested, yet I withdraw my suit. I have seen my way clear to improved options, if you get my meaning."

"Well, this is most remarkable," the king said, "how improved this makes our options, if you get my meaning."

FahhZu stood stiffly silent so the king continued. "Nonetheless, my lad, we shall have that talk, so let us be off."

With a brusque gesture to "the lad," the king strode from the forest glade with FahhZu in crimson-faced trail. His mortification was as much for the king's flapping tunic as for the king's words. In all the fuss of flagging unhurried servants and

then driving them back, FahhZu had forgotten the origin of that royal rag that was still clenched in his fist.

By the time Tiahsa and the counselor had told RahhZu the entire story, he was beginning to comprehend what it all meant and his heart took to beating as though that strange fire had licked into his bones. He had not dared to hope for such as this, but here the princess was, telling how she had done it all to prove to her father and mother that her choice of him was the right and proper choice. He hadn't even known he was a choice. He had always believed he was tolerated on account of his brother.

It was almost enough to make a prince cry. But he held his tears of joy and dared to take Tiahsa by the hand.

When they got back to the castle, the word was already spreading of pending royal nuptials though the news of a sudden switch in bridegroom had Ohahdi abuzz with curiosity, which

the king sought to satisfy as best he could without putting anyone to shame or embarrassment.

The queen had even dispatched a pigeon off to Gebble to tell the joyous news and to invite the whole of Gebble to the coming festivities set for a fortnight away.

It seemed a whirlwind of preparation. And to everyone's amazement, even FahhZu joined in certain pre-festive rites after nigh three days of silence and self-confinement within his chamber suite.

In those three days, the golden prince had relived every offence against himself. He had also decided—*So what if he had failed one test.* Who was to know? And maybe, it had not been a test at all. And maybe he had *not* failed—for he wasn't the one to use trickery. In any event, his three day sulk ended in a most surprising, delightful way.

It happened during his third day of brooding near his open window. As he watched, in bored

curiosity, an elaborate, antique coach passed by, and suddenly, in that elegant coach, he saw the most splendid creature of imagination. He perked up in wide-eyed wonder as she enthusiastically waved to him—as though they had met before. He almost cried out to see his vision vanish around a corner for in the instant their eyes met, he had felt a tingling, rushing, consuming sense of incredible, inevitable destiny.

For several moments, he fought an almighty battle between morosity and destiny as he rushed in agonizing ellipses between window and chamber door. He was just set to rush down and out into the street in pursuit of his destiny, when the coach reappeared to stop below his very window. And lo, his vision descended as on air.

She retrieved a bristle-haired puppy from a pocket in the coach door and walked it about the courtyard as men bustled about her coach in repair of a wheel. But FahhZu paid no heed to them for the beautiful one strolled along to

sit upon a bench across the way in such perfect placement that he was able to gaze fixedly upon her for a mezzo-hour, though it seemed, but fleeting moments to him.

She had hair like his, and eyes as blue as his, and skin as clear and unblemished as his. In truth, the more he gazed, the more everything about her reminded him of him. He fell more deeply in love with every exquisite moment. When she looked up again and smiled he could not restrain himself. He called down, asking her name, but she merely giggled and waved, and said he should have spoken earlier for now the crack in her carriage wheel was repaired and she had to be off.

He begged her to come again and she said she would, and then sweetly added, that next time, he should come down and they could walk and talk.

He had not believed he could bear the hours till that moment, but somehow he had, mostly in ecstatic monologue since his little brother was

apparently too busy with other *pressing* matters. Besides, FahhZu wasn't sure he was, quite yet, ready to re-establish speaking terms.

He did not have to endure his solitude long. When the very next day his vision returned, they walked and talked, and he confessed he had never felt more blissful his whole life.

In his preoccupations—for she came every day—he nearly forgot the pending nuptials of his brother. What could he do anyway? So he whiled away the hours in walks and talks, and day-dreaming bedazzlement when his golden love was absent.

Ohahdi became even more abuzz with this new romance though none could discover who the charming, mysterious coach woman was or from whence she came, save she called herself, Blinda. Indeed, there had not been such excitement in Ohahdi for years.

At last, when FahhZu could bear it no more, he dropped to his velvet knees and pled for his love

to marry him. He had not known whom else to ask, he said, for she had said her parents were passed on and she was alone now.

Discovering his love to be an orphan was the moment FahhZu determined to offer her his all, without delay. She had coyly accepted, though she had said she couldn't be sure whether his all was much or little, for he had told her of the coming tests and how it all depended on those horrid tests over which he had no control—which was a thing he most hated. But he had assured her that his brother was too dull to know a test if he saw one, so it couldn't be that risky.

Thus did the king and queen of Gebble arrive in Ohahdi to find *both* their royal sons in states of bedazzlement and pending nuptials. It was an overwhelming surprise, mixed with a generous measure of relief.

They came too, bearing three letters that had proven the choice for king. They had been both elated and disappointed in those letters, but the

proofs had spoken, so there was little they could do but rejoice and mourn at the same time. They had meant to tell of their news right away, but in the bustle of festive preparations, they had decided, it was best to wait.

Besides, the queen of Ohahdi was dealing with more than she cared to and needed their help. In all honesty, the queen was almost overcome with the magnanimity of her daughter's suggestion that the nuptial day be a doubled festivity so the twin brothers could share this event as they had shared so much in life.

Of course, the eldest prince would be first, which more than satisfied FahhZu, though he didn't think to say thank you, for what was there to thank anyone for—to let him go first, when he was first! But the mysterious Blinda did thank the princess and most sweetly, too, for sharing her day and for funding it, as well.

At last, the great day came, and it was a day too splendid and exhausting to relate in any detail,

save that it passed in nigh perfect order—after an initial, anxious delay in waiting for Blinda to arrive. She was most apologetic, but it seemed her wheel had cracked again, very nearly causing an abort of her whole life, she merrily chirped. But thankfully, she had found a piece of sopping rawhide, just in time to save the day.

At the conclusion of that breathless, twittering explanation, RahhZu looked up with a start—out of his bedazzlement. However, his golden brother heard nothing unusual in his flooding relief that his bride had come and that she was not sitting in some forest somewhere waiting for some thankless stranger to assist her, which would have put him to no end of embarrassment. “That cracked coach,” he whispered to his love, “elaborate antique, notwithstanding, must be traded-off, first thing.”

As the twin nuptials began, euphoric celebrants immediately noticed how the raven-haired prince kept clearing his throat, as if he wished

to say something—something he couldn't seem to choke out. They soon noticed too, his blinking stares toward the coach lady—also observed by his loving, confused, concerned Tiahsa.

Some began to gravely question the condition of his attachment to their princess, for frankly this upstart coach lady did outshine their beautiful Tiahsa more than they cared to admit. But that was neither here-nor-there to them, and it had best be neither here-nor-there to this raven-haired prince, either.

A few began to fuss and fidget until RahhZu whispered into the ear of their anxious princess. After a brief, startled stare at the coach lady, their precious Tiahsa had whispered back. That seemed to give the raven prince new perspective—which was the truth, for when RahhZu had finally whispered in his love's ear those throat-scratching words, "Does *she* look like a witch to you?" the startled princess had a thought flash into her mind and had whispered back, "If so, perhaps it shall prove better than not."

Thus, the fussing and fretting settled into a radiant calm, and the entire day proceeded in order and splendour. None could remember a day as grand, nor believed they should ever witness such a resplendent one again.

The next day, the bedazzlement of the lovers did not seem one whit diminished, thus the king and queen of Gebble regretted even more what had to be done. But, in the trust that new love would ease the pain of a kingly failure, they announced the necessity of a short meeting with their sons in the council chambers of Ohahdi's castle right after lunch—if Ohahdi's king and queen would be so gracious as to lend them its use, which of course they were.

The brides, everyone agreed, could take well-deserved repose after lunch for all the stresses they had suffered in pre-nuptial preparation.

It's fair to say that neither prince was prepared for the shocking news that the tests had come and gone and that the proof had been made.

"What tests? What proofs?" FahhZu had cried in a rather high-pitched voice. "There has been no time for tests, except maybe that one with the fake fire, but that was trickery, and therefore it cannot count. So what do you mean tests?"

"Well, son," the king said, "we did tell you they would be coming. And it isn't like you are supposed to know you're at the beginning, middle, or end of one. We leave all that to the higher powers that be. That's what they're good at."

"So—they send a pigeon with the score or what?" FahhZu exploded.

"Now son, there's no need for mockery," the queen said. "You must have cause to fear, if you are so fearful."

"I fear nothing except my brother's trickeries," FahhZu said, "and I tell you, they are plentiful."

"Would you call these trickeries, if they did not favour you," the queen said as she held out the three letters.

"I most certainly would," FahhZu exclaimed, "for there have been no tests."

"Can you honestly not think of one test you might have passed or failed since you left us for Ohahdi?" the king asked with puzzlement.

"Well, if I had to name one, it would be the test of yesterday," FahhZu said, puffing out his chest. "Everyone knows—and not a soul will tell you otherwise—that I married the most beautiful one."

"Well, that is true," the queen said, sighing deeply at the new visions she was receiving of her golden son.

FahhZu continued. "So, if ... *if* there were two other tests, what were they? And is it all or nothing or what?" he asked.

"Pretty much," the king said rather sternly.

"Well, it seems we've both failed," FahhZu said, "unless I won the other two, for as you said, my brother failed the one yesterday, so—"

"So no one said that but you," the king said.

"Well, you didn't say it wasn't! What was I supposed to think—?" FahhZu began, only to be interrupted by his mother.

"I think you should let your brother say something, if he wishes," the queen said.

They all looked at RahhZu who had been standing quiet and pensive.

"Well, Mother, I don't know if I have anything to say. I think I could be a good king, but I confess, I have not been thinking much of tests. Too much has been happening. Too much that I never expected or anticipated. Too much that I never even dreamt of."

"Oh, sure," FahhZu scoffed, turning back to his parents. "Did he tell you about the witch's fire he was so brave as to run through?"

"Your brother hasn't mentioned that," the queen said. "But as you said, things do come by pigeon," and she held up the letters.

FahhZu stared at them for a moment and then held out his hand. "I should like to examine those. I should like to prove them forgeries. I should like to know what the tests were."

"Well son, we intended to let you both see the letters," the king said, "but I think your mother

will agree that you might learn more if you do not see what the tests were. That should give you hours of pondering and contemplation."

"I hate pondering. I detest contemplation," FahhZu snapped.

"We will give you this much," the queen said, and holding up the letters, she continued. "These are the words of people whose paths you both have crossed in recent days."

"Obviously, no one important," FahhZu said, "or you would have named them—if they named themselves."

"Son, I don't know what's come over you," the queen said. "I don't remember you being this way."

FahhZu sighed. "I'm sorry, Mother, but you know how tests stress me. I can't tell you how dreadful it's been since you and father put me through all this."

"Do you imagine kingship is without stresses!" the king said in surprise. "Where have you been?"

"I plan to have able counselors," FahhZu said.

"Well, my boy," the king said, "I suppose we should make it official then. Your brother will be the new king when your mother and I decide the time is right."

Even though FahhZu knew it was coming, his face still drained white at the words and he trembled with anger. "I shall not forget this," FahhZu said between tight lips.

"You have a wife, son," the queen said. "You must think of her, too."

"I do, Mother. I think of her as the supreme queen of Gebble. I shall not let this wrong pass so lightly." With that FahhZu stalked from the council chamber.

There was a long silence until the king turned to his raven-haired son, and said, "I fear your reign may be a troubled one, my boy. I wish I could do something about it, but for whatever reason, your mother and I were blinded—I suppose by our hopes for our firstborn—thus I

suspect things have not been as they sometimes seemed these many years."

"There is truth in that," RahhZu said. "But that is all passed."

"But there is future," the queen said with tears in her eyes. "And we have, perhaps, made it worse for you than it need have been."

"Yes, mother, I do have regrets about some things," RahhZu said, "but I have today more than I ever hoped or dared dream for, so I will have no complaints. And to tell the truth, I think that without my precise past, I wouldn't have this precise future."

It was then, with hope and joy, that the king and queen of Gebble embraced their raven-haired son.

When they entered the corridor off the grand entrance, it was to find all in running chaos. Blinda seemed the only one without haste. Her elegant antique was at the door with FahhZu already ensconced inside—his horse tethered behind.

The frazzled queen of Ohahdi was plying her departing guests with sweets and breads for their journey, and apologies for any offences that might have hastened their departure.

Blinda assured, there were absolutely, definitively no offences, merely a husband restless for the road. She kissed them all while FahhZu called to her from the depths of the coach, but she took her gracious time.

At last, after kissing Tiahsa's cheeks and brow, she squeezed RahhZu's hand, and said, "Don't believe all you hear of RooDun, my friend. Sometimes, through dark places, even golden boys can learn to be kings."

She released him and turned away, only to turn back with a twinkle in her eye, to say, "With him, it may take a thousand years, but as we always say, 'RooDun is no short-cut.'"

With a twinkling laugh, she sailed to her coach and they were off in a whirlwind of dust with a length of rawhide flapping from a rolling wheel.

"What was that?!" the queen of Ohahdi exclaimed as every watching brow wrinkled in deep puzzlement.

"That?" said the astonished raven prince as he put his arms about his trembling parents. "That, I believe, shall prove an unbelievably perfect match."

THE END

(& several beginnings)



**Much of life's journey may feel mundane and
uneventful, like much of my first journey
to Ohahdi. Yet, therein lay my tests;
& therein, my greatest joy.**

~ King RahhZu ~

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