

Adventures in Logic and Virtue
**The Fat Lazy Dragons
Chronicles**

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The Fat Lazy Dragons
Book I Quiver – the Brown Dragon

Chapter 1 The Magic Key

It was a rainy Sunday afternoon. Jay sat at the desk in his sister's room looking glum. The chair was turned away from the desk facing the bed. He was pitching an old brass door key up in the air and catching it. "It's not fair," he complained.

Trudy looked sadly back at him from where she was lying on her bed and nodded her head saying, "That's true."

"It's raining and we can't go outside," continued Jay. "Our rooms are clean. Our homework is done. Why can't we watch any TV?"

Trudy shrugged. "Ask Mom," she said.

"I just did," said Jay. "She said we are grounded from TV until we get our grades up. No exceptions."

Jay pitched the key at Trudy's stomach gently while exaggerating his movements as if he was throwing it much harder. At the same time he said loudly, "Think fast!" Trudy gasped and clutched the key. Jay chuckled with satisfaction.

"Cut it out," said Trudy with annoyance as she sat up on the side of the bed. "This is serious. I would do anything to be done with this silly grounding." She pitched the key back to Jay.

"Me, too," said Jay catching the key.

There was no flash or sound to show that something astounding was happening. They were just suddenly in a different room. Instead of sitting on a bed and at a desk they were sitting in old wooden chairs at an old wooden table that was empty. An old man stood across from them dressed in a dark gray robe. He looked pleasantly surprised by his sudden visitors.

Trudy stood up at once but Jay just looked around. Both children were very frightened.

The old man's voice was soothing. "Don't be frightened."

There was something very calming about the strange old man. Perhaps it was his long white hair and beard. Trudy remained standing.

"Who are you?" asked Trudy. "Why have you brought us here? Where are we?"

"Send us back right now!" demanded Jay.

The old man's dark eyes looked kind. "I will do my best to help you and answer all your questions. Please be seated. Would you like something to eat or drink?"

Trudy looked around the room. The walls were covered from floor to ceiling with shelves. The shelves were full of old books, scrolls, stacks of yellowed paper, and strange knickknacks. There was no door to be seen anywhere.

"I guess I have no choice," said Trudy as she sat back down.

"I'd like something to eat," said Jay looking around.

The old man waved his hand in the air with a flourish. A large bowl of fruit, a plate with a variety of cookies, and a pan of ice with several kinds of soft drinks almost buried in it, suddenly appeared on the table. Both children gasped.

"Please, have some," offered the old man with his hands out palm up in an inviting gesture. "Enjoy."

Jay laid the key he was holding on the table and began with the cookies. Trudy reached for a drink. As the two children began to help themselves the old man sat down. Even sitting he still looked very tall.

"I'll try to answer your questions," agreed the old man. "I am the Magician Key. You may call me Key. I haven't brought you here exactly. I just provided a way for you to come, if that was your wish. You are in my humble house. I can not send you back." Key pointed at the old brass door key on the table in front of Jay. "That key is the only way you can get back."

"What do you mean, 'a way for us to come if that was our wish?'" asked Trudy.

"Didn't you hold onto the key and wish sincerely to be free of danger or difficult circumstances?" asked Key with a puzzled look on his face. He reached over and picked up the key. He looked at it closely and then shaking his head said, "At least, that's the way it's supposed to work."

"No, of course we didn't wish any such thing," objected Jay.

"Yeah, we did, Jay," remarked Trudy. "Think about it."

Jay put his cookie down and curled his fists up next to his chest and said, "Oh, my!"

Key's face brightened. "Oh, good. Then they are working properly."

"So, how do we get back home?" asked Jay. "Our parents will be worried about us."

Key looked puzzled again. "I don't understand, I thought you wanted to get away from where you were. You were safe at home?"

"We were grounded from TV," said Trudy. "We just wanted to get ungrounded."

Key cocked his head to one side. "I don't understand, 'grounded from TV?'"

"Our parents were punishing us and we didn't like it," explained Trudy.

"Oh, no," said Key with a worried look in his dark eyes. "I hadn't thought of that. The keys were only supposed to rescue small people in trouble. I'm afraid I have done you great harm. I am really sorry."

"What harm?" asked Jay. "Can't you just use the key to send us back home?"

"No," said Key shaking his head. "I am really sorry."

Trudy said, "A minute ago you said, 'That key is the only way we can get back.' What did you mean when you said that?"

Key looked at the children one at a time very seriously. "It can take you back home after it has unlocked a lock. Not before."

Jay stood up. "Where's the lock?"

"It is guarded by a dragon," explained Key.

Jay sat back down.

"How can we get home?" requested Trudy.

"You can stay here with us in the City of Reason. We will be glad to take care of you," offered Key.

Jay shook his head. "We would rather go home."

"When Truth and Justice come they will slay the dragons and use the key to send you home," said Key. "Or at least so it is said." Key looked worried.

Trudy and Jay looked at each other. They were suddenly very frightened again.

Key tried to comfort them. "Please don't worry. The prophecies are clear:

**By Truth and Justice it will be,
The Land of Low Check is set free;
Two warriors who are small,
Whose deeds do stand tall.
As for all the rest,
That's Wisdom's quest.**

"It is close to the time for Truth and Justice to come. I'm sure you will only be here a short time before they do. We will treat you very kindly."

Jay and Trudy looked at each other and then back at Key. Trudy said, "We are Truth and Justice."

Key looked very surprised and puzzled. His face thrust suddenly forward as if a closer look would reveal the mystery before him. "You are warriors?" asked Key.

"My name is Truth," said Trudy. "You may call me Trudy. This is my twin brother, Justice. We call him Jay. Our parents gave us weird names as sort of a first birthday present."

The old magician sat back in his chair and sighed deeply. "Oh, my," he finally said.

Trudy spoke up. "We don't know anything about hunting dragons."

Key shook his head. "Of course not. We can't send children to fight dragons. If we could, we would have long ago."

"Then how are we supposed to get home?" asked Jay.

"Let me explain everything," said Key. The two children nodded in agreement. Key continued, "The City of Reason guards the gates of the Land of Low Check. In ancient days the city guarded Low Check from invaders. Now, since those Fay Lacy dragons have taken over Low Check, our city serves to keep them in. Sadly the people who live in the land are slaves of that evil dragon clan. The prophecies say that two small warriors, Truth and Justice, will free Low Check from the dragons one-day. The stars say the time is now. I sent the magic keys to your world so that Truth and Justice would have a way to come here. Low Check needs to be set free from the lies that keeps it in chains."

"You mean there is more than one dragon?" asked Trudy.

Key nodded his head. "Oh, yes. Old Fay and his mate Lacy are dead, but their many offspring each have a part of Low Check that they keep in slavery. They are an evil clan of liars. Don't be fooled when I say offspring.' They are full grown dragons. They are just younger than old Fay and Lacy."

"What strange names," said Trudy. "Which dragon has the lock that goes with our key?"

Key looked uncomfortable. "I don't know, each one has a locked door. I sent all the keys over to your world after I took them from old Fay. I really can't say which key goes with which lock."

"Where are the other keys?" asked Trudy.

Key shrugged. "Yours is the first one to come back."

"How long ago did you send them?" asked Trudy.

"Twenty years or so," said Key.

Trudy looked at Jay and asked, "Where did you find that key?"

Jay shrugged, "It was laying on the floor of the attic when we moved into the new house."

Trudy looked back at Key and asked, "How did it get there?"

Key shrugged.

"We'll never get home," cried Trudy. She looked away from the other two and began to cry in earnest.

Key stood up and began to walk around the table to Trudy to comfort her.

Jay shook his head. "Better not. It'll just make her mad. She'll stop in a minute."

Key looked at Jay for a moment and returned to his chair.

"Why hasn't anyone fought the dragons?" asked Jay.

"No one is allowed to go in the land of Low Check unless they are small," said Key. "Those Fay Lacy dragons don't want any dragon hunters walking about you know."

Trudy stopped crying. "Aren't dragons really big?" she asked wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

Key nodded. "Fay Lacy dragons are twenty feet tall or so."

"So what difference does it make how big the dragon hunter is?" asked Trudy.

"Four feet tall and seven feet tall must look about the same to them."

"If you have the key," explained Key, "it really doesn't matter how big you are. But I see you have an ear for the exact truth, even when you are upset. That is very interesting."

Jay was replied, "If you mean she throws your words back in your face, yes, she hears the 'exact truth.' You have no idea how annoying that is. We have the key. How does it work?"

"The dragons can not harm anyone who has the key or anyone who is with them unless that person believes a dragon lie, or attacks the dragon," explained Key.

"If you can't attack them how do you slay them?" asked Trudy.

"Fay Lacy dragons are expert liars," continued Key. "It is how they weave their magic. Since they can not attack you as long as you have the magic key they will tell you lies. If you believe their lies you fall under their magic spell, key or no key. But if you don't believe their lies they will eventually become so frustrated they will attack you and the magic of the key will kill them. That is how I got old Fay, the King of Liars."

Jay was not satisfied with that answer. "Then why don't you get the others the same way?"

Key went on, "It was after his death that the Fay Lacy dragons made the rule about only short people can enter Low Check, that is where it got the name Low Check. It used to be something else. We people of the City of Reason are very tall."

Jay looked frightened. He stood up and with a cracking voice said, "I'm ready to hunt dragons. They can't fool me."

Trudy stood up as well. Her voice was also shaking. "Me, too."

Key sat looking at them. "But you . . ." His voice trailed off and then he continued. "It is true you are older than children your height would be among my people. Perhaps we can do it." He stood up as well.

"Aren't you too tall to enter Low Check?" objected Jay.

"I will transform myself with a magic spell and go with you," answered Key.

Trudy did not understand. "Why didn't you do that before?"

"Well, I have to break myself into parts to be short enough to enter Low Check," answered Key. "And each part is not as smart as I am. Also, I will not be able to do any other magic until we come back to the City of Reason. But my parts should be able to help you." Key raised both hands above his head and brought them down quickly.

Trudy was mystified. "Parts?"

The scene around them suddenly changed again. The two children found themselves facing an open gate. Walls extended on either side of the gate as far as the eye could see. Behind them was an elegant white city. Tall, graceful people, with skin and hair every color of the rainbow, went about in the city. Some were beginning to stop and gather to look at the children and their strange companions which had suddenly appeared in front of the gate. Standing with the children was a small gray donkey, a gray and white monkey and a gray & white bird. The old magician was no where to be seen.

Much to the surprise of the children the monkey said, "This way." And began to walk through the gate. The donkey and the bird followed him. The children were bewildered by all the sudden changes and followed along as well.

Jay noticed a sign that read, "If you are taller than this line you can not enter this gate." A red line was painted above the words on the sign about an inch above his head.



If You Are Taller Than This Line
You Can Not Enter This Gate

Many of the tall people gathered at the gate and waved. One called out, "Good hunting, Key!"

When Trudy looked back at the people at the gate she noticed a sign that said, "Not an Exit."

NOT AN EXIT

When she turned back around she saw the rest of the party walking up a hill on a narrow dirt path through the grass. She ran to catch up. In a moment they were on the other side of the grassy hill looking at a swamp.

"Well," said the monkey, "there is nothing for it but to plunge ahead. Come here, Lug, so I can ride you. I don't want to get wet or drown wading through this swamp." The donkey obediently walked over beside the monkey.

"Wait a minute!" objected Jay. "This isn't fair. What is going on here?"

From his perch on the donkey's back the monkey chattered, "We are on our way to hunt the Fay Lacy dragons. Didn't you just say you were ready to go?"

"We meant we were willing," said Trudy.

"I expected we would get some supplies and weapons and stuff before we left," objected Jay. "This is ridiculous."

"Well it is not my fault if you don't say what you mean," said the monkey impatiently.

"Ten minutes ago we were in our house," said Jay looking down at Trudy's feet. "She doesn't even have any shoes." Sure enough, socked feet peaked out from below Trudy's blue jeans.

"Perhaps, we should stop and make a plan," said the bird.

"All we need to do is march in the marsh and slay the dragon," said the monkey.

"What happened to Key?" asked Trudy.

"I'm Key," said the bird and the monkey together.

"I have it," said the donkey.

"Please allow me to make some introductions," offered the bird. "I am Pass Key," she said putting the tip of one wing on her chest. "This is High Key," she said pointing to the monkey. "This is Luggage Key," she said pointing to the donkey.

"Just call me Lug," said the donkey. "Pleased to meet you."

"All of us put together are the Magician Key," said the monkey, High. "I, we, have to break up into parts in order to fit under the line at the gate. Didn't I explain that already? I can't make myself less than I am so I have to make myself into parts. Locks can put us back together again, when we get home. I really don't see the point of all this. Let's get going."

Jay shook his head. "I want to go back to the city and get some weapons and some shoes for my sister. And what locks are you talking about now?"

"Banana peels and slippery limbs! Locks is Mrs. Key. She is not a 'what'." said High twitching his long monkey tail.

"There is no need to start cussing and swearing, High. There will be none of that in front of the children." said Pass flapping her wings. She looked at the children. "The

Fay Lacy dragons, old and new, have been here for well over fifty years. There is no sense getting in a hurry."

"Very well," said High jumping to the ground from Lug's back. "If you want to stop and discuss my plans that is fine. I would think that you would just trust me."

"We can't go back to the city," said Pass, fluttering her wings. "That gate is not an exit."

"That's true," said Trudy. "I saw the sign."

"It's just a sign," said Lug. If donkeys could shrug, he would have.

"Didn't I explain that we slay these dragons with our wits?" asked High. "We don't need any weapons." The children were still not used to the idea of a talking monkey.

Jay looked at the swamp. There was water a few inches to a few feet deep almost everywhere as far as you could see except for the hill where they stood. Sad looking mangrove and cypress trees draped with moss grew in little clumps or hammocks here and there. Sedge grass grew out of the water in most places. In a few places it was so thick that you had to look closely to see the water between the blades. No one noticed the large black crow that took flight from a nearby tree top.

There was an old sign at the edge of the swamp next to a growth of cattails. The wood that it was painted on had mostly rotted away. What was left read, "Am Big You Es Marsh."

AM BIG
YOU ES

 MARSH

"What an odd sign," exclaimed Trudy.

The bird, Pass, explained, "When it was new it read, 'I am biggest. You are smallest. On you, I will be harsh, if you come in my marsh. E. Quiver Kay Shun, Fay Lacy Dragon' Most of it has rotted away."

I AM BIGGEST.
YOU ARE SMALLEST.
ON YOU, I WILL BE HARSH,
IF YOU COME IN MY MARSH.
E. QUIVER KAY SHUN
FAY LACY DRAGON

"E. Quiver Kay Shun is the dragon we are hunting," said High.

"What an odd name," said Trudy

"We just call her Quiver," said High, tilting his monkey head.

"Why?" asked Jay

"It's easier to say," said the donkey, Lug.

"Shouldn't we have some weapons?" objected Jay.

"It would not do us any good if we did have weapons. Her hide is too tough for that," explained the monkey, High, impatiently.

"Perhaps we don't need weapons for the dragon," agreed Jay. He went on, "Looks like to me there might be something else in this Am Big You Es Marsh that is dangerous."

"Nonsense," said High. "We can always scamper up a tree."

"What will we do for food?" asked Trudy.

"We won't be gone that long," said High.

"What about shoes for Trudy?" asked Jay.

"I suggest instead of getting shoes for Trudy that you take off yours to wade in the swamp," said High pointing with his long monkey tail at Jay's feet.

Jay shrugged, sat down, took off his shoes and rolled up his pants legs. He tied his shoes together with their laces and hung them around his neck. Trudy rolled up her pants legs as well. High climbed onto Lug's back.

High and Lug led the way. Lug stepped carefully feeling for the shallow places in the water. Most of the time it was simply a matter of stepping where the sedge grass grew out of the water. As they went they would sometimes disturb a frog on a lily pad who would jump into the water with a splash. Under the water Trudy could see tadpoles, crappie and sunfish scurrying out of their way. She hoped there were no lizards or snakes hidden in the water or sedge grass.

* * *

A little more than a mile away a fat brown dragon lay wallowing lazily in the mud. It was difficult to see the dark brown scales that showed through the mud caked on her hide in a few places. A black crow fluttered to a landing on a limb of a tupelo tree above the dragon's head.

"I have news, Quiver," announced the crow.

"What is it, Rook?" asked Quiver.

"Dragon hunters have entered the marsh," replied Rook.

Quiver stood on all fours and looked down at the crow. "How do you know they are dragon hunters, Rook?"

"As they went through the gate I heard the people of the city yell, 'Good hunting, Key!'" said Rook.

The dragon snorted. "At last my father's murderer will fall into my hands! But wait. Key is too tall to pass through the gate. Do not lie to me, Rook." A little puff of smoke escaped the dragon's nostrils. The crow flew to a higher branch. "He must have transformed himself."

"He can transform himself," admitted the dragon, "but he can't change his size."

"I guess you would know about magic, being a dragon and all. Everyone in this group is small enough to pass the gate into Low Check."

Quiver sat back on her hind legs and fluttering her wings nervously. "Describe them to me."

"There are five of them. A donkey, a monkey, a dovekie, and two children, a girl and a boy," answered Rook.

"What is a dove key?" asked Quiver letting her wings lay quietly along her back.

"A dovekie is part of the little auk family. They are birds about eight inches long that look like tiny penguins or puffins, but they can fly and swim. This one, she is dark gray with a white chest."

"Oh, I guess you would know about birds, being one and all."

"The children are not as tall and slender as the city children. They must be of a different race. They are dressed funny as well. They both are wearing long blue trousers, just like everyone does, but their shirts are different colors. The boy has blonde hair and blue eyes. The girl has brown hair and green eyes," said Rook.

Quiver scratched her chin. "They still don't sound like anything much to worry about even if Key has figured out a way to transform himself into something smaller."

"The donkey has a brass key on a chain around his neck."

Quiver dropped back to all fours. Her wings started fluttering nervously again. "You don't mean one of The Keys?"

"I believe so, Quiver," replied the crow.

"This is very serious," admitted Quiver. "I must give this some thought. Well, let's see how well they can find their way in the fog." With that she began to breath fire over the surface of the water. The water boiled and churned as vast clouds of steam spurted into the air. Rook took flight in alarm. The steam settled into a mist that floated away on the surface of the swamp in all directions. In a short time a dense fog would cover the entire marsh.

Quiver said, "That should give me some time to think."

* * *

Chapter 2 Fog Horns

The mud at the bottom of the water felt all squishy and yukky. Trudy did not like it at all but neither Jay nor Lug seemed to mind. Pass alternated between flying and swimming beside the others as they trudged through the swamp. Mostly she flew because when she swam she was slower.

Occasionally they would see herons or ducks. Once they disturbed a flock of geese who took flight from behind some feathery papyrus plants so suddenly that all the travelers were startled. Dragonflies and mayflies filled the air.

"Here comes trouble," said High with his tail twitching.

Trudy and Jay looked up from picking their way through the swamp grass to see a cloud coming towards them swiftly over the surface of the water. In a moment they found themselves in a thick fog.

The donkey, Lug, kept walking forward as Jay and Trudy stopped.

"We better stop and wait until the fog lifts so we can see where we are going," objected Pass.

Lug stopped.

"Nonsense," replied High. "If we keep going forward we will reach Quiver's lair in no time." The little monkey seemed determined.

Lug started forward again. The others followed along.

"I can't see where the water is deep enough to swim," said Pass as she landed on Lug's back just behind High. "I can't fly all the time."

They could see each other well enough. But they could only see a few feet into the fog. Several times Lug came to places where the grass jutted out into a wide area of deeper water and they all had to turn back the way they came. It was not long before Jay and Trudy were completely turned around. Neither would have been able to point back in the direction of the city.

Pass flapped her wings forlornly. "I think we are lost."

"I know where we are," said High. "Just another few minutes and we will be at the dragon's lair."

It seemed to Jay that an hour had passed when Trudy spoke up. "I'm tired. I need to sit down and rest." They were passing a small clump of trees at the time. Trudy sat down on the tangle of roots between two of them with her legs dangling in the water.

Everyone else stopped. Jay sat down between two other trees.

"We must keep going," objected High.

Lug started forward again.

Pass flew from Lug's back and joined the two children in the trees. "Everyone needs to rest," she said.

Lug stopped.

"I'm hungry," complained Jay.

"We must keep going," insisted High again.

Lug started forward. In a few steps Lug and High could no longer be seen although their splashing could be heard.

"You can't beat the dragon without Truth and Justice at our side, High," called Pass.

"Turn around and go back," said High. More splashing could be heard. "Call out again," shouted High, "so we can find you."

"Over here," called Trudy.

Jay made noises imitating a police siren.

Pass whistled and moaned.

"We are in this clump of trees," called Trudy over the noises of the others. And so they all continued until Lug and High once again appeared from out of the fog.

Lug came to a stop standing in the water in front of the other three. High stood on his back looking angry and impatient. "We must go on!" High's tail waved angrily.

"That is not fair. You have been riding the whole way. Just because you are not tired doesn't mean the rest of us aren't," replied Jay matching his impatience with the monkey's.

"He is right, High," we must let the children rest, said Pass.

"I am really hungry," added Trudy.

"So am I," said Jay.

Lug started eating sedge grass.

"I have been eating fish off and on all day, so I'm not hungry at all," said Pass. "There is some marsh parsley growing right next to this hammock for you to eat if you will just pick it. Let me show you." She fluttered a few feet over to a group of plants growing in the shallow water next to the grove. The water was only a couple of inches deep so she was able to stand in it next to the plants.

Jay and Trudy sloshed over and began looking at the plants.

Trudy was disappointed. "There is no fruit on them or anything."

"You eat the stalks. They are like celery," explained Pass.

Jay pulled up a plant and started eating the stalk. It was tougher than celery and tasted a little sour. "Are you sure they are good to eat?" he asked.

"It doesn't taste very good, but it is food," said Pass. "It won't hurt you."

Trudy pulled up a stalk and began to eat it. She wrinkled up her nose at the first bite, but said nothing.

"Well, don't be so selfish," said High. "Give me some of it."

Trudy pulled up another stalk and walked over toward Lug to give it to the monkey.

"Make him say, 'Please,'" suggested Jay.

"I don't mind," replied Trudy. "He's cute."

"I am not cute," said High snatching the marsh parsley from her hand. He turned his back on the others and sitting on Lug's back ate his parsley.

For the first time in some time all were quiet.

"What is that sound?" asked Trudy.

The others listened intently. Just as they were about to give up, and say they could not hear it, somewhere in the distance they heard a deep tone followed immediately by an even deeper one.

Pass cocked her head to one side. "It sounds like a fog horn."

"Let's go see," said Trudy.

Jay dropped what was left of his stalk in the water. "Maybe they have some real food."

Pass flew once again to Lug's back.

"No, it will take us away from the dragon's lair," objected High.

"You have no idea where Quiver's lair is, High," said Pass. "You are just as lost as the rest of us. Lug, see if you can find that fog horn."

Lug started off and the children followed. Every now and then Lug would have to stop and listen intently to hear the sound again, but it was only a few minutes before they could hear it quite clearly. In another few minutes they found themselves looking at a sign on the edge of an island that said, "New Zealand Sea Snails."

**New Zealand
Sea Snails**

Clearly the sound was coming from the island. It was more of an island than the hammocks they had been seeing in the marsh. The hammocks they had seen were just clusters of twenty to thirty trees in the midst of the waters. Sometimes they had quickbeam or elderberry bushes growing in them as well. This island was made mostly of dark green glassy rock. It had trees growing around its edge that made it difficult to get on to the island.

"I don't think this is such a good idea," said High as they finished climbing onto the rocky island. "That sign said that there are dangerous snails here."

"It said nothing about danger," said Trudy.

Jay looked down at his feet. "It feels good to not have my feet in the water."

From somewhere further inland the deep tones sounded again.

Lug started walking towards it.

High scampered off Lug's back and began walking behind the children. "Feels good to stretch my legs."

The dragon hunters passed shapes in the fog. Some of the shapes were too far away to see what they were. Others were just as mysterious even though everyone knew what they were. What they saw seemed like nonsense. After all, what were an old rusted car, a couch in good condition, and a child's toy wagon doing on this island in this marsh?

Just as the travelers saw the two giant snails, the snails blew on their horns. First one blew a deep note and then the other blew an even deeper note. The snails were each about three feet high. They had four tentacles coming from the top of their head with

which they held the horns. They had a mouth but no eyes. The travelers came to a stop. High stood behind Jay and peeked at the snails.

"We have visitors," said one of the snails.

"I can see that," replied the other.

"You can not see anything, Bowl E., you are as blind as a bat," answered the first.

"Why must you always be starting arguments, M. Fee," asked the second.

"Let's blend the sound of our horns," said the first. "Perhaps then we can get along better." With that he blew the little brass horn with the deep voice. The other snail followed with an even deeper note.

Trudy spoke up. "Hello, I hope you don't mind us coming on your island."

"Not at all," replied the snail called M. Fee.

"Our island is bigger than any island in the marsh," said the snail called Bowl E. "We are proud to have visitors."

"It is not," answered M. Fee.

"Which island is larger?" asked Bowl E.

"None are bigger," admitted M. Fee.

"Then it is just as I said, 'Our island is bigger than any island in the marsh.'" said Bowl E. triumphantly.

"It is not bigger than itself, is it?" asked M. Fee.

"Of course not," replied Bowl E.

"Then it can't be bigger than any island in the marsh because it is one of the islands in the marsh. What you should have said was, 'It is bigger than any other island in the marsh,'" said M. Fee.

"You are going to cause us to not be in harmony with your small arguments to fog things," said Bowl E.

"Let's blend our horns again," said M. Fee.

The horns were sounded once more.

"Perhaps we should introduce ourselves," said Pass. "I am Pass Key. This donkey is called Luggage Key."

"Just call me Lug," said Lug. "Pleased to meet you."

"This young lady is Trudy and this young man is Jay," continued Pass pointing to each in turn as if the snails could see her. "That monkey hiding behind Jay is High Key."

"I am not hiding," chattered High.

"We are M. Fee and Bowl E." said M. Fee.

Jay thought about asking them what the M. and E. stood for but was afraid they would just argue about that as well.

"We have been walking in the water for hours," explained Trudy. "Would you mind if we stayed here for a little while and dried our feet?"

"Not at all," said Bowl E. "I am concerned that people who heard the ducks have been quacking."

"Have you been quacking?" asked M. Fee.

"No," said Trudy.

"That is silly," said Bowl E. "Obviously she has not been quacking. I was talking about the ducks."

"It is horn blend time again," said M. Fee.

"Of course," agreed Bowl E.

The deep tones were blown once more.

"I hate to be rude," said Pass, "but these children have been walking for hours with no food. Do you have a little food you can share?"

"I'm sorry," said M. Fee. "We should have offered already. There is a refrigerator full of food right over there." The snail pointed with his tentacles. "The microwave is right next to it. Dishes are in the cabinet on the other side. Please help yourself to as much as you like."

"Our food is better than anyone in the marsh," claimed Bowl E.

"How do you know?" asked M. Fee. "Have you eaten a bite of everyone in the marsh?"

The travelers began moving in the direction M. Fee had pointed.

"Of course not," answered Bowl E. "You know I meant that our food was better than any others in the marsh."

"Perhaps you meant that our food was better than anyone else's food," clarified M. Fee.

As the kitchen came into view the dragon hunters heard the horns moan behind them in the fog. It was an odd kitchen indeed. A refrigerator was wedged between two trees. The microwave sat on a branch next to it. One of the trees had a cabinet door and a drawer built right in the trunk. A table and chairs were on the tree roots. A basket of fruit was on the table. Nothing seemed to be level.

The refrigerator was well stocked with food. Plenty of dishes were in the cabinet and silverware in the drawer.

High and Lug helped themselves to the fruit. Jay and Trudy warmed hot dogs and baked beans in the microwave. They found good cold milk in the refrigerator to drink. Pass said she was still full of fish and ate nothing. They could hear the snails talking a few yards away but could not make out what they were saying. Every few minutes the horns would be sounded again.

Trudy shook her head. "Those snails certainly argue about nothing at all, don't they?"

"I guess it is important to them," said Jay.

"If they were clear about what they said to start with, they wouldn't get in arguments," added Lug.

"It was clear what the one that said about their food was better." offered High. "That other one was silly to argue about it. In fact, pretty much everything they said was clear except the one about the quacking ducks."

"That was clear, too," replied Pass. "Everyone knows dovebies don't quack, and neither do donkeys, monkeys or children."

"Quack, quack," said Jay.

Everyone laughed.

Trudy said, "Where we come from; birds, donkeys and monkeys don't talk."

High looked at his hands. "That must be very troublesome for the animals with no hands. At least the monkeys can write it down."

"They don't write either," explained Trudy.

All three of the animals shook their heads in wonder.

As the travelers finished their meal it began to become darker.

"I think we will have to spend the night on this island," said Pass.

"I don't think that is a good idea," objected High. "Those snails may attack us at night. They are blind. The dark will be an advantage for them." With that he climbed on Lug's back and said, "Let's press on."

Lug began walking back towards the snails.

"Not that way," said High. "The other way."

Lug turned around and walked the other way.

"Perhaps the kind snails won't mind if we sleep here tonight," said Pass to the children.

Jay stood up. "Let's ask them."

Pass flew up and perched on Trudy's shoulder. "Do you mind?" asked Pass.

"Not at all," replied Trudy.

The children took a few steps towards the sound of the latest horn tones.

"Clark told Bill that his friends were planning to trick him," said M. Fee as the children approached.

"I don't believe that," said Bowl E. "Bill's friends would never do such a thing."

"Of course not," replied M. Fee with disgust. "But Clark's friends would."

Trudy spoke for them all. "Excuse me, may I ask you a question, please?"

"Yes," replied both snails together.

"It is beginning to get dark and we were wondering if you would mind if we camped here for the night?" asked Trudy.

Lug and High joined the group.

"Certainly," said Bowl E. "There are soft places all about you can use. I wouldn't try sleeping on this rock. This hornblende is very hard."

"I went camping with my cousins' outdoor club once," said M. Fee. "They were kind enough to let me come along."

"I have met your cousins," answered Bowl E. "They are not kind at all."

"Yes, but the people in their outdoor club are kind," retorted M. Fee.

"You would argue with a tree," said Bowl E.

"I think we might become better friends if we will blend our tunes on these horns."

Yet again the horns were sounded.

Jay slept on a couch and Lug on the ground. Trudy found a car in fairly good condition except for a tree growing up through where the engine should have been. She slept in the back seat. High and Pass slept in the front seat. Pass slept with her head under her wing so she wouldn't hear High's snoring.

* * *

Jay awoke with sunshine in his face. He walked a short distance to the kitchen where the others were already gathering. Trudy heated cinnamon rolls in the microwave, which she shared with the others.

Pass was grateful. "These are very good. Thank you."

Just as they were finishing their breakfast M. Fee came sliding into the kitchen. "Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," replied several voices.

"Will you be with us long," asked the snail.

"We are leaving now," said High.

"Do you know the way to Quiver's lair?" asked Pass.

"Don't ask him that!" said High with his tail twitching angrily.

"It doesn't matter," said M. Fee. "I'm really not sure where it is. I just wanted to let you know that you are welcome to stay. If you must go, take some food with you if you like."

"We don't have anything to carry it with," said Jay.

"I'm afraid we are not very good housekeepers," replied M. Fee. "I don't know where you might find something to carry your food. We can't see to keep things tidy so there are lots of things here. You are welcome to look around and take what you need."

It was the first time that Jay had really looked around the island in the daylight. It was about the size of a football field. The island was covered with junk - old cars, broken shipping crates, furniture, rags, cans, crumpled paper, and much, much more.

Pass thanked the snails for their kindness.

The travelers searched the island for useful items. When they set off once again they had many more supplies.

Jay repaired a backpack's broken strap with some old rope. He filled it with food and wore it on his back. Trudy filled an old pillowcase with food and slung it over her shoulder. They tied a canvas bag Pass discovered to Lug's back with another old rope. In the bag on Lug's back they put three blankets, an extra length of rope, a rusty kitchen knife, two candles, some matches, a writing pad and a pencil. The canvas bag had holes in it so they had to be careful to put the blankets in those parts of the bag so the smaller items would not fall out.

Once they were all packed High said, "Well, lets be off." He climbed on Lug's back just in front of the canvas bag.

"We need to thank our hosts," objected Pass.

The horns soon sounded and they located the snails in the midst of yet another argument.

"Thank you for all your help," said Trudy.

"Think nothing of it," said M. Fee.

"Our friends help us as much as you," said Bowl E.

"That makes no sense at all, Bowl E.," objected M. Fee.

"Good bye," said High. "Let's go, Lug."

The children followed along with the little dovekie perched on Trudy's shoulder. As they stepped into the water they heard the sound of the horns behind them.

Jay announced, "They should call that place Nonsense Island. Nothing there made any sense."

"How do you know which way to go, Lug?" asked Trudy.

"When you don't know where you are going it doesn't matter which way you go," replied Lug.

"High, why don't you want Pass asking how to find Quiver's lair?" asked Jay.

"Because I don't want her to know we are coming," replied High.

Pass laughed a whistling little bird laugh. "We are marching around the swamp with a doveKEY, a donKEY, a monKEY, and two small people named Truth and Justice," said Pass. "The donkey is wearing a magic key around his neck. Do you really believe that Quiver does not know we are here?"

"She might not," said High doubtfully.

"You may be right," said Pass thoughtfully. "But how are we going to find her lair without asking directions?"

"Let's pretend we are taking her a surprise gift," said High. "That way when we asked directions folks wouldn't tell her about it."

"But that wouldn't be true," said Trudy. "How did you plan to find her lair in the first place?"

"I remember what it looks like," explained High. "It is a giant platform built in the tops of tall trees in a large hammock. She has dug deep in the marsh mud all around making a kind of broad moat. The moat has alligators or crocodiles or something like that swimming in it. There are several places nearby where she likes to wallow in the mud like some fat lazy pig."

"We can find it because it is only a mile or so from the gate. We can't be too far away. All we have to do is walk straight north west from the entry gate and we'll come right to it. If we can surprise her we might be able to find her in one of her wallows. That way we don't have to deal with the alligators, crocodiles or moat."

"Then it is simple," said Trudy. "We will just ask directions back to the gate and start again from there."

"Exactly what I was saying," said High.

Pass whistled a little laugh.

* * *

Quiver, the Fay Lacy dragon, lay stretched out on her platform high in the trees, being both fat and lazy. She turned her head this way and that as if trying to get a kink out of her neck. Rook sat on a tree branch nearby.

"You haven't been able to find them since the fog lifted?" asked Quiver.

"No," replied Rook.

"Perhaps they drowned. It doesn't matter anyway. I have a plan for dealing with them. Go back and watch the gate."

The crow flew back toward the gate. The dragon fell asleep.

* * *

Chapter 3 Hot Dogs and Rolls

It seemed to Jay that they had been slogging through the sedge grass and water for hours. The others were all in front of him so he was surprised when a voice from behind him said, "Hello!"

Everyone turned around. High jumped from Lug's back onto an overhanging tree branch and scurried higher in the tree.

A few yards behind them a flat bottomed boat was catching up quickly. The lone little man standing up in the boat used a long pole to push it forward in the water. His light blue skin contrasted with his dark blue tunic and short knee length trousers. Stenciled on the side of the green boat white letters proclaimed, "Property of E. Quiver Kay Shun"

The little swamp man stopped pushing and let the boat drift slowly to the travelers deftly using his pole to bring it to a complete stop.

"I'm Brown," said the man. "You may call me Red, if you like me, or Mr. Yellow, if you don't like."

"How do you do, Red," said Pass from her perch on Trudy's shoulder.

"Are you the dragon hunters everyone is talking about?" asked Red. Trudy noticed his eyes were large and very dark.

"What is everyone saying?" asked Trudy.

"That the Wizard Key has come with Truth and Justice to unlock our chains of slavery," said Red. "That you have one of The Magic Keys and that you are going to slay the brown dragon, E. Quiver Kay Shun."

Pass spoke up. "I am Pass Key. This donkey is called Luggage Key."

"Just call me Lug," said Lug. "Pleased to meet you."

"This young lady is Trudy and this young man is Jay," continued Pass pointing to each in turn as usual. "That monkey hiding in the tree is High Key."

"I am not hiding," objected High, "I'm being a lookout. And I don't know why you have to tell everyone our business, Pass."

"He already knew," replied Pass. "He was looking right at the key on Lug's collar when he said, ' . . . one of The Magic Keys . . .'"

Red held up a light blue hand. "No need to fear," he said, "None of us will bother you."

"How do we know you are telling the truth?" asked High as if in doubt but he jumped back to Lug's back nevertheless.

"What do you mean, 'us?'" asked Trudy. "Aren't you alone?" She looked in the boat as if she expected someone else to appear.

"The Council has sent me to find you if I could," said Red. "We have been planning a rebellion against the dragon for years. We believe your coming here is the sign that the time has come. Will you help us?"

"No," said High.

"Why not?" objected Jay. "These people may be able to help us." Jay was looking at the sword tucked in Red's belt.

"They can not help us," chattered High. "If we join them and they attack the dragon or one of the dragon's soldiers the Magic Key will no longer protect us or them."

"That is not what you said when you were a Magician," replied Trudy. "You didn't say anything about the dragon's soldiers."

"Nevertheless, it is true," said High. "Tell them, Pass."

Pass fluttered her wings. "It may be true. I'm not certain."

"Even if it is true, it may be possible to help them without joining with them," suggested Jay.

"We are together because we agreed that we are together. As long as we don't make such a treaty with these folks, we won't be in danger of losing the Magic Key's protection whatever we do," said Pass.

"All I am asking you to do is come with me to town and talk with us," said Red.

"The Magic Key only protects us from the dragons and their sworn soldiers," said High. "The people may not have that kind of agreement with the dragons in which case they can attack us without warning. On the other hand if they do have such an agreement and we attack them we have lost all protection. It is very complicated and dangerous. That is why it is so important that we go directly to the dragon and not get mixed up in all this other stuff."

"What harm would it do to listen to what they have to say?" asked Jay.

High's long monkey tail was twitching. "It will delay and endanger us for no good reason."

"We are in a hurry to get home," said Jay. "But I like the idea of having more help. Seems to me there will be a better chance of getting home eventually if we have more help. Besides we are completely lost. For all we know this place is on the way to Quiver's lair."

Trudy nodded. "I think so, too," she said.

"Me, too," agreed Pass. "Let's go talk with them, whoever they are. Perhaps they can tell us the way to Quiver's lair."

"Show us the way to town," said Jay.

"No, no, no," said High. "I thought we agreed we would ask the way back to the gate and find our own way from there."

Red used his pole to move his boat against the little hammock next to where they were standing. "Climb in the boat," he offered. "No sense walking in there with the snakes and water scorpions. If after talking with us you still can not help us, I will gladly tell you the way to the lair of the brown dragon, or anywhere else in the marsh you wish to go. I have explored it for so long that I know it perhaps better than anyone."

"It will save us time to go with him, High," said Pass as she fluttered from Trudy's shoulder and landed in the boat.

Jay and Trudy climbed onto the tree roots and then into the boat being careful to step just as Red told them so the flat boat would not be tipped over.

Lug watched them carefully and then looked doubtfully at the flat boat. "I would rather walk than ride," said Lug. "I don't think water scorpions have much of a taste for donkey hoof. If you will unload my back I will be glad to pull the boat."

"Some of the water is deep," said Red.

"I'll swim and you use your pole," offered Lug.

Jay and Trudy took the bag off Lug's back, took the extra length of rope out of it and tied it to Lug and then to the boat. High jumped unhappily into the boat with the others.

They continued in the direction they had been going. Now and again Red would say something like, "Go to the right of that hammock with the swamp roses." or "Head for that log with the turtles sunning on it. You'll see some thick sedge off to the left when you get there. Go that way."

Trudy picked a couple of colorful swamp buttercups as they passed and put them in her hair. High sat in the stern looking less than pleased. Pass stood on the bow looking for fish. Every now and then she would dive below the surface and come up looking satisfied. Jay noticed that Red was about the same size as the himself.

Jay pointed at Red's sword. "That is a nice sword."

"Thank you," said Red. "Not much good against dragon soldiers if there is more than one."

"Why is that?" asked Jay.

"If you cut a dragon soldier in two pieces you just get two dragon-soldiers," explained Red, "doesn't hurt them much. Well, it hurts pretty bad, but not for very long. Pretty soon you have two against you instead of one."

"Can't you just stab them or something," asked Jay.

"Sure, if you can catch one by himself, which is almost never," said Red shrugging. "But if there is another one and you try something like that the other one just slices him in two and now you have three."

"How can you win against that?" asked Jay.

"You have to outnumber them," said Red, "Everybody has to strike at the same time."

Trudy was puzzled. "I have no idea what you are talking about. But don't try to explain. My head is spinning. How did you find us?"

"I figured you would find M. Fee and Bowl E. in the fog with them blowing their horns. They told me you headed this way," said Red with a smile.

"You have blue skin, you say you are brown, and then you say call you Red or Mr. Yellow. Why?" asked Jay.

Red looked at him blankly and shrugged. He answered, "You are pale skinned, wear blue pants, call yourself Jay, and ask odd questions. Why?"

Jay looked confused. "I don't understand."

"Me neither," said Red.

"Tell us about the council we are going to, please" asked Trudy.

"Not everyone is against the dragons. The council is the leaders of those of us that are against them." explained Red. "The dragons provide us with the best of the food and with light for the night, so many people accept them."

"Them?" asked Trudy. "I thought it was just Quiver, the brown dragon."

Red shrugged, "In E. Quiver Kay Shun Town is the meat processing plant that prepares some of the food for some of the other dragons. They all have the same parents – Fay and Lacy. Quiver is the ruler here, but all the dragons allow us to have the best of the meat since we work in the plant for them."

Trudy asked, "So, all the other dragons' food comes from here?"

Red shook his head, "Just some. Some of them have their own food supply. We ship it down river and across the lake to E. Rail. There is a road there that goes to the rest of Low Check."

"What about the dragon soldiers. Where do they fit in?" asked Jay.

Red looked at him like he was surprised at the question. "I thought you were dragon hunters. Don't you know?"

Now it was Jay who shrugged.

Red went on. "Dragons grow new teeth all the time. When their teeth fall out they become soldiers for the dragon."

"What do they look like?" asked Jay.

Red began to look a little worried. "They look like teeth, except they have arms and legs and a face. They are about our size."

Jay and Trudy looked at each other. They were both wondering what they had gotten themselves into.

* * *

It was close to noon when they finally saw the town. It was more than a hundred small one or two story wooden buildings clustered together with one large shed in the middle. Some were built on the many islands with interconnecting bridges. Others were built on stilts in the water between the islands, or next to a bridge. There were many little swamp people in flat boats moving about in the water between the islands. They did not get to really study it because soon they were among them. It seemed cluttered and unplanned.

They noticed two strange things right away. A few of the people were very odd. They looked like white cones with little short legs on the bottom and long arms coming out the side. At the point of the cone was a small ugly face. Each of these carried a sword. It was easy to guess that these were the dragon soldiers. The soldiers and everyone else were staring back at the dragon hunters.

The other thing was the strings in the trees and between the houses about a dozen feet up in the air. They formed a sort of net or web over the whole town. Tied on the strings every few inches were feathers of all kinds, ping pong balls, half deflated

balloons, pieces of toy glider planes, and those white plastic peanuts used to pack things for shipping.

As they began to approach the large building in the center a dragon soldier a little larger than the rest and wearing a brown cap on the tip of his cone approached them. He said, "Welcome to E. Quiver Kay Shun Town. You are invited to a feast of hot dogs and rolls."

At the same time High said, "No, thank you" and Pass said, "Yes, thank you."

That is when they realized that they had no plan.

Other dragon soldiers were beginning to gather nearby. The little swamp people were beginning to back away and pushing their little children behind them as if to protect them.

Pass said, "We can go. As long as we have the magic key and stick together we have nothing to worry about. The dragon soldiers are afraid of it."

Red said, "We are going on the other side of the meat packing plant, Lug." He pointed to the large building in the middle of the town. "Go to the right of it."

Every one in the town seemed to be invited, because they all started going in the same direction. As they went Jay saw a strange thing. One of the dragon soldiers dug into the bank on the side of an island and pulled out a coin.

In spite of everything that was going on, Jay could not keep from asking, "Red, what are they doing?"

"Collecting taxes. They just take it directly out of the bank," answered Red.

"You keep your money in the banks on the side of the swamp?"

"Where else would you keep money except in a bank?"

Before Jay could reply they had arrived. On the other side of the meat packing plant, was a large grassy area with several dozen picnic style tables. Some of them already had people sitting at them. The dragon hunters and Red were soon at one of the tables near the center. Pass and High did not eat, Pass because she was full, and High because he assumed the food was poisoned. Lug ate grass. A swamp lady dressed in blue brought the other three in their group hot dogs on a platter.

"Nothing but the best for our visitors," she said.

"Where are the rolls?" asked Jay.

"They come after," explained Red.

Just then one of the people who had been there before them got up from his table, and began rolling on the ground. Soon others were joining him doing the same thing.

"See," said Red nodding towards them, "Rolls."

Trudy frowned. "I don't think I want any rolls."

"Didn't I see some steaks on a cart coming out of that plant?" asked Jay.

Red nodded.

"Then how can these hot dogs be the best?" asked Jay.

Red looked at him like he was crazy. "Hot dogs are better than nothing."

Jay nodded.

"Nothing is better than steaks."

Jay nodded again.

"Well, then hot dogs are better than steaks," said Red triumphantly.

Jay looked puzzled. "How is that?"

Red shook his head. "Hot dogs are better than nothing, which is better than steak, so hot dogs have to be better than steak."

Jay looked thoughtful.

"Two different kinds of nothing," said Lug.

"How can there be two different kinds of nothing?" asked Red.

The people rolling around on the ground stopped to listen. All conversation at the other table stopped as people listened.

"Oh, I know! I know!" said Trudy waving one hand in the air like she expected a teacher to call on her for the answer. "Hot dogs are better than having nothing to eat at all. The nothing that is better than steak is every other kind of food that there is. Two different kinds of nothing!"

All the dragon soldiers began to moan. The little swamp people began to stir. Red exclaimed, "That is true."

The swamp lady who had served them said, "Well, maybe so, but Quiver still gives us lights."

"What lights?" asked Jay.

She pointed up at the web of strings. "All of those things are light." They looked up at the ping pong balls, feathers, and other things tied to the strings.

Trudy said, "But those are light because they are not heavy. You can't see by them can you?"

The swamp lady looked puzzled. "Well, no."

The moaning of the dragon soldiers grew louder. Many of them were rolling on the ground.

"There are some rolls I like," said High.

"They are shrinking!" called out Jay.

It was true. The cones were barely waste high and growing smaller.

The brown cap of the one who wore it slipped down and covered his face. "Say, no more," he cried out, but his voice was squeaky. He tried to draw his sword but it was too heavy for him.

Trudy looked thoughtful for a minute. Then she said, "A bank you keep money in is a building with a safe, not the mud on the side of a river or swamp channel." The moaning of the dragon soldiers was beginning to fade as they shrunk even more in size, they just could not be as loud.

The swamp people gathered around and started asking Trudy questions. It soon came out that a pen to write with could not also be used to hold animals

The bark on the side of a tree is different than the sound a dog makes

A fair could be a place with rides and food, but it also means being treated right.

To lie down on the ground is different than saying something that is not true
A bat that flies around catching insects could not be used very well to hit a
baseball

Down is both a direction and the soft feathers of a bird

A rock was something hard and rocking was moving back and forth.

The long legged bird called crane is different from the machines used to construct
buildings.

Browning the meat means to cook it until it is brown, not paint it with brown
paint.

Stamping your foot and putting postage on a letter is two different things.

It was after this last thing became known that Red got an idea. The dragon
soldiers had become the size of little ants. He began stomping on them. Soon all the little
swamp people were doing the same.

* * *

Chapter 4

Fire in the Swamp

There was another better feast that evening. The dragon hunters met the people of the council. They had steak with all the fixin's, instead of hot dogs. They hung real lanterns in the trees so they could see to dance and celebrate. Red and the other council members made speeches thanking the dragon hunters for their freedom. High strutted around, and made the final speech of the night telling everyone it was a difficult battle, and only won with great sacrifice, but that he was happy to have been of service.

That night they were given a very nice place to stay that the previous night had been the barracks of the dragon soldiers. They were relaxing and drifting off to sleep.

Jay announced, "That was easier than I thought. As soon as we figured out the lies they all shrunk away to nothing."

Lug replied, "We haven't done anything yet."

High objected, "What are you talking about? The town is free!"

Pass said, "Yes, but no thanks to you. You did nothing."

Trudy suddenly realized something. "Oh, my! What about the dragon? We haven't done anything about the brown dragon - Quiver."

It was harder to fall asleep after that.

* * *

The next morning they asked Red to show them the way to the lair of the brown dragon. They were soon being pulled through the swap by Lug in the little flat boat. The "Property of E. Quiver Kay Shun" had been painted over and it now said, "Property of Red Yellow no longer Brown." Jay started to ask a question about that, but changed his mind.

They reached the lair without incident. There was a clump of trees with a large wooden platform on top. Around it was a swamp channel. On the nearby islands were mud pits, the wallows of the brown dragon. They could see a large black crow on the platform, but no dragon. It was Rook.

"Come on up," called the crow. "I'm Rook, and I want to thank you for getting rid of the brown dragon."

"It's a trick," objected High.

"He seems friendly," replied Pass.

"Where are the alligators and crocodiles?" asked Jay.

"I gave them the day off," laughed the crow. Well it was more of a caw than a laugh, but everyone knew he meant it to be a laugh. Then he said, "With no dragon to make them stay, they went elsewhere."

"Looks like he might be telling the truth," said Red after looking carefully around.

Lug pulled the boat next to the trees holding up the platform. They took the rope off of him and threw it up to the crow. Pass flew up to assist and the two working together soon had it tied securely. The two children climbed up the rope. Lug stayed on the ground. High and Red stayed in the boat.

Everyone was soon introduced.

Pass started looking around the platform. "These two children are trying to get home. There should be a locked magic door around here somewhere."

Rook cawed a laugh again. "Oh, that! You should have stayed on the ground. It is below the platform. Quiver would not like to have that opened."

"Why?" asked Jay.

Rook answered, "I don't know. Each dragon guards one door. They call it their Door of Doom."

"We hope it leads to our home," explained Trudy.

Pass snapped up and swallowed a little fat brown lizard crawling on the platform.

The crow looked thoughtful. "So, if it opens, you will leave. What about all the other dragons? Low Check is still infested with Fay Lacy dragons."

Trudy looked confused. "Well ... "

No one said anything for a few moments and then Pass said, "Wait! You said, 'Quiver would not like to have the door opened.' I thought she was gone?"

Rook cocked his head to one side, which is shrugging for a crow, "Well, she wasn't when I said that, but now she is."

Jay said, "What happened to her?"

"Yesterday around noon she started moaning and shrinking," said the crow.

Trudy said, "Yes, that was when we were discovering her lies. Every time we found out the truth about one of her lies, the dragon soldiers shrank, too."

Rook cawed. "That explains it. Every time one of her spells was broken, she and her teeth shrank. Now I understand how it all works. Let's see if that door works for you."

Trudy and Jay began climbing down the rope. Rook flew down below. Pass followed him saying, "Wait a minute you have not explained about Quiver and what you said about her."

The crow ignored her. In their excitement the two children did not notice. They leapt off the rope and ran in between the trees holding up the platform. In the dim interior between the trees and under the platform they found a tree trunk with a locked door. Trudy called out, "Lug, come here, please!" Lug could be heard coming.

Pass objected, "Wait a minute everything is not right here. This crow is not telling us everything."

Trudy was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Pass pointed one of her wings at the crow. "He has not explained about the dragon."

Rook said, "Here is the key, why don't you try it?"

Lug walked up and stopped.

Pass was thoughtful. "I think High might be right. This crow is trying to trick us. He slipped up and admitted that Quiver is still alive."

Trudy said, "No he did not. He said Quiver was alive a few minutes ago, but now she is not."

Lug began studying the door and lock carefully.

Rook said, "Try the lock and I'll tell all."

Lug said, "The lock is not a fake and this really is a magic door. Since we have the key, even if there are ten dragons behind the door, they can not hurt us unless we believe their lies."

Jay looked at Lug. It was the longest speech he had made that Jay had heard.

Trudy asked, "Rook, you promise to tell us everything after we have tried the lock?"

Rook said, "Yes."

Trudy studied the crow for a minute, shrugged, took the key from Lug's neck and tried the lock. It did not work. Jay and Trudy both sighed loudly.

Pass said, "Ok. Rook. What happened to Quiver."

Rook started flying away. He cawed over his shoulder. "She became very small and then got eaten by a bird a little while ago. After I tell the other dragons everything I know, your next dragon will not be so easy." He disappeared through the trees to the west. Our band of dragon slayers did not know it then, but they would see Rook again, and at the worst possible moment.

High came running into the dimness shaking with rage. "I heard all that. You have got to quit telling everyone all our business!"

Pass said, "I thought that little brown lizard tasted a bit like charcoal."

Red, delayed by tying his boat up, came running in. "Is it true? Is it true?" he asked excitedly. "Is that fat lazy brown dragon dead?"

"Yes, and I hope I don't get a tummy ache," said the little dovekie matter-of-factly.

But there was no containing Red's excitement at the great victory over the dragon.

As Red danced about and yelled over and over, "Quiver is dead!" the children began to recover a little from their disappointment that the key did not take them back home. Even though they were not going home, at least a great evil dragon had been destroyed by the unraveling of her own lies.

"We have to let everyone know," said Red. "I'm burning this platform!" He began gathering dead wood and stacking it against one of the trees holding up the platform.

The others retreated to the boat. The dovekie and the monkey rescued the rope from where it was still tied to the platform, and Lug pulled them away quickly. They went to an island across the channel. Soon they saw smoke coming out from under the platform. A moment later Red came running out, threw himself in the water, and swam across to them.

They got out the food left in their bags from their visit to Nonsense Island the morning before and sat down to a little celebratory feast, watching the great platform burn.

Jay was puzzled about something. "What do you suppose Rook meant about telling the other dragons?"

Pass replied, "To get home you are going to have to try your key in the doors guarded by the other Fay Lacy dragons.

Red corrected, "You mean Fat Lazy dragons."

Pass whistled a little laugh and went on. "That key will open one of them, but you have to unravel the lies of more dragons to get to the doors. Rook was just pretending to be friendly to get information. Now that they understand better how this all works, it may not be so easy with the next dragon."

High said, "If all of you would not tell everyone our business, we would not have that problem."

By this time the flames were eating at the platform, and a pillar of smoke and steam was rising a thousand feet into the air. Little swamp people and other strange creatures were gathering from everywhere to see it. As they did they learned of the end of Quiver. The great celebration lasted into the night. Before it was over even M. Fee and Bowl E. arrived. Everyone seemed very pleased and happy except Trudy and Jay. They were glad for the little swamp people, of course, but they just wanted to go home. Now, it looked like they might have many more dragons to face before that could happen.

* * *

The Fat Lazy Dragons

Book II Track – the Blue Dragon

Chapter 5 - Lake Lynn

Late in the night most of the people began to leave. Quiver's platform and its supporting trees had been reduced to a pile of glowing embers. Some, like the dragon slayers, set up campsites. They had three blankets, which they had gotten on Nonsense Island the day before. Trudy used one, Jay another, and Pass and High shared the third. Red had a sleeping bag in his boat. Lug just bedded down in the grass.

In the morning for breakfast they ate the last of food from Nonsense Island. As they finished their breakfast, Jay announced, "I think we need a plan."

Trudy, Lug, and Pass all nodded in agreement.

Red just watched.

High seemed surprised. "I have a plan and if all of you would quit going off on your own it would be much simpler."

Pass tried to smooth things over. "Perhaps if you would tell us what your plan is, we could do that."

High looked impatient. "You don't have to know it all. Just follow me."

Jay exclaimed, "That's not fair."

High asked, "Why not?"

Pass was trying to keep it from turning into an argument. "What if something happens to you, High? What would we do then?"

That was not what Jay had meant, but he just shook his head and shrugged.

High looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well, OK. We go to whichever dragon is closest and deal with his lies. If his door, 'Door of Doom,' as they call it, opens, fine. We have gotten Trudy and Jay home. If not, we go to whichever dragon is next closest, and so on. From here, Track is closest. We should go there as quickly as possible so he will not have time to make plans. I think that crow, Rook, flew straight to him. If we leave now, we can be there by nightfall."

Lug shook his head. "Track is too lazy to make any plans. Rook knows that. He flew in a different direction. He flew west, not north."

High gave Lug an angry look.

Jay asked High, "Tell us about Track."

High replied, "Dis Track Shun. He is called Track. He is a blue dragon. He has the fishermen of Lake Lynn under his spell."

Jay continued, "Where can he be found?"

High responded, "His lair is in a cave on the shores of the lake not far on the other side of E. Rail Town."

Jay looked worried and curious. "How will we fight him?"

Trudy seemed to feel the same way. "What kind of lies does he tell?"

High looked uncertain. "We can talk about all that on the way," he responded. High turned to Red. "If you will just hook up your boat to the donkey, you can take us to Track's lair."

Red looked surprised. "I can give you a ride as far as the lake, but I don't know how you can go beyond that."

High's tail twitched angrily. "Why not? Yesterday, you were a slave to the Brown dragon. Who do you have to thank for that?"

Pass said, "Now, High. We did what we did, for us, not him. He does not owe us a thing."

Jay added, "That's right, High. Red did not become our slave, just because Pass killed Quiver."

High's tail continued to twitch but he said nothing.

Red shook his head. "That's not it at all. I am grateful I'm no longer Brown. I'd be happy to give you a ride. It's just this old flat boat would capsize on Lake Lynn in about two minutes. As far as going with you beyond that, I'm no dragon slayer, and I know nothing of that country or their ways. I think I better stay here."

Trudy smiled at Red and put her hand on his arm. "Of course, Red. We will be glad for a ride that far."

High seemed to give up. "Once we get there, we can walk along the shore to Track's cave."

Red started the process of attaching the boat to the donkey.

Jay suddenly had a thought. "What about supplies? We'll need food and stuff."

Red replied, "We have to pass through Trudy Town on the way. I'll fix you up with supplies there."

Trudy was very surprised. "Trudy Town?"

Red chuckled. "Some of the folks told me about it last night. They renamed E. Quiver Kay Shun Town to Trudy Town."

Trudy just looked embarrassed and could think of nothing to say.

Jay raised his voice. "But it was Pass that ate Quiver, the Brown Dragon, not Trudy."

Pass said, "I would rather not talk about that."

Red said, "It was Trudy that first showed us the truth."

Jay looked thoughtful. "Was it Trudy?" he asked. In the bustle of breaking camp no one answered him. He shrugged and began to help.

* * *

Once they were making their way through the swamp, Jay and Trudy asked High again about the Blue Dragon, Track.

"How will we fight this blue dragon?" asked Jay.

High did not turn towards him. "Same way we do all of them. Figure out their lies."

Trudy asked, "What kind of lies does he tell?"

High replied still not turning, "Same kind they all do. He says stuff that is not true."

Trudy was flustered by High's seeming reluctance to give them the information they needed. "Of course, but will it be like Quiver's lies? Will there be a bunch of words with two meanings being used like they have only one meaning."

High shrugged, "Perhaps." His tail was beginning to twitch with anger.

Pass fluttered her wings. "He has no idea."

High yelled, "That is not true!"

Just then they heard some horns playing a lively tune.

Trudy was puzzled. "Is that M. Fee and Bowl E.? Those can't be the same horns. All they could play were those mournful two notes all the time. That music sounds good."

Jay offered, "Maybe they only play the two note one when there is a fog."

Trudy shook her head. "They played the same two notes the next morning when there was no fog."

Red added, "They always played those two notes as long as I can remember. This is the first time I've heard them play this. But we are almost next to their island. I has to be them."

Just then the M. Fee and Bowl E. themselves came into view on the banks of their island. They stopped playing their horns.

The dragon slayers called out greetings. "M. Fee! Bowl E! We like your new music."

"We haven't had an argument since yesterday, right before the fire party. We had to start doing something else. You can call me Merry Fee," replied M. Fee.

"Call me Bowl of Excitement," added Bowl E.

The travelers passed close and then started getting further away.

There were calls of "Good bye" and "So long" all around.

Soon the music of the horns blended again. It was very pleasant.

"They must have been under Quiver's spell, too," suggested Trudy.

"That could be why half of what they said made no sense," said Jay.

Trudy shook her head. "I think it was more than half."

* * *

True to his word, Red arranged supplies for them. The people of Trudy Town were generous with what they had. The children each got a backpack containing food, a change of clothes, and other gear and a sleeping bag that rolled up small and fit right below the sack. Lug got saddle bags that balanced off each side, with supplies and gear

for the three parts of the Magician Key, and a small three person tent just the right size for the two children, the monkey and the dovekie. Lug wanted no tent. Trudy got a new pair of boots.

They stopped long enough to have an early lunch and listen to some more gratitude and thanks from the town folk. They left on Red's flatboat to a chorus of well wishes in both directions. They were not an hour beyond the town when they reached the lake.

Jay and Trudy had not expected such a big lake. The "lake" was so large you could not see to the other side. The swamp they had been in was the bottom part, or delta, of a river that drained into the lake. Red took them unerringly to the edge of the delta. The swamp was behind them, a forest on their left, the lake on their right, and a narrow sandy beach straight ahead. The donkey climbed up onto the sand and the boat came to a halt at the edge. They all climbed out of the boat. Red started unhitching the donkey.

Jay was amazed. "That looks more like an ocean than a lake."

Red looked at the blue lake. "Lake Ignore A. She O. ... L. Lynn Key" There was an extra little pause between the O. and the L. when he said it. "It's only about twenty miles across, but that is big enough to have waves too big for this boat. Some people say, 'L. Lynn Chee,' instead of, 'L. Lynn Key.' Everyone just calls it Lake Lynn."

Trudy asked, "What do all those words mean?"

Red shrugged. "I have no idea," and started unbuckling his sword belt.

Jay had an idea. "'Lynn Key?'" Maybe it has something to do with the magic keys."

High said, "It might."

Lug said, "It doesn't."

Red held out his sword, scabbard, and belt towards Jay saying, "You'll have more need of this now than me."

Jay in something of a daze of disbelief automatically reached out for what was being handed to him. "Wow! Thank you."

High's tail began to quiver. "Give it back. This is a war of words. That sword will do no good against dragons. It will just get you in trouble."

Red looked at High and shook his head.

Pass and Trudy looked uncertain.

Before anyone else could do or say anything Red was in his boat and shoving off. For the third time that day there was a chorus of "Good byes" and "So longs." No one noticed the black gull that took off from the shallow lake water nearby and flew along the shore of the lake until he was out of sight.

High said, "You should throw that sword in the lake. It is not part of my plans."

Jay buckled the belt around his waist and adjusted the scabbard. "It just became part of my plans," he replied.

High's tail was still twitching angrily as he jumped on Lug's back. High said, "We better get going if we are going to make it by tonight. We spent too much time in Quiver Town." Lug started walking up the beach.

Jay corrected High. "It's called 'Trudy Town', High."

Pass objected, "Lug has been walking and swimming all day. Shouldn't he rest?"

Lug stopped.

High asked, "Are you tired, Lug?"

Lug answered, "No."

High said, "Then let's get going."

Lug started walking again. The rest followed along.

* * *

A black gull flew into a cave on the shore of the lake several miles from the dragon slayers. A fat blue dragon lay sleeping in the cave.

"Sir!" squawked the gull.

The dragon continued to snore.

The gull hopped up to one of the dragon's ears, stuck his beak right in the opening, and squawked even louder, "Sir!" As soon as he said it, he flew quickly out of the cave and down the beach barely escaping being cooked alive from a flame fifteen feet long that came from the dragon's mouth towards him.

The dragon shook his head and groaned, "What is it?"

The gull flew back in the cave and said, "Track, sir. The dragon slayers have arrived."

The blue dragon shook himself. "Well, they won't have such an easy time with me as they did that fool Quiver. Keep an eye on them. I want regular reports. Now leave me alone and let me go back to sleep."

"Yes, sir." The gull flew back the way he had come.

* * *

It was a pleasant afternoon for a walk on the beach. They were walking North which put the forest on their left to the West, and the Lake to their right. The sky was clear blue. It was just enough past noon for the trees to give them shade from the sun. There was only a slight breeze and the air was fresh and just the right temperature.

The trees of the forest were mostly trees that shed their leaves in winter – oaks, hackberrys, ash, even an occasional maple. They did see a few evergreen trees. There were many birds both in the forest and hunting for food along the beach. Every now and then they saw squirrels or chipmunks in the forest. Once they frightened a small group of deer. Another time they saw something large and furry back in the woods but it moved away before they could see what it was.

Pass fluttered between joining the lake birds in fishing, catching insects in the forest, and perching on one of the children's backpacks or on Lug with High.

Pass asked, "How are your new boots, Trudy? Are they hurting your feet?"

Trudy smiled, "They are perfect. These boots were made for walking."

Jay would occasionally take out his new sword and swing it around like he was fighting an imaginary enemy.

High would get impatient any time they stopped to rest.

Lug seemed perfectly content trudging along or resting. It was all the same to him.

As the shadows began to lengthen and the afternoon became late, they noticed that they were gradually turning more and more east. The sun was behind them and to their left, but because it was lower in the sky, the trees still shaded them. They were beginning to wonder if they would ever get anywhere, and Jay was beginning to think about supper, when they saw the fishing boats out on the lake. They were about twenty-five or thirty feet long with a center-mounted mast. The wind was evidently not going the right direction because they had the sails wrapped up. The boats each had five or six pairs of oars driving them in roughly the same direction. There were perhaps a dozen of them.

High explained, "They'll be pulling for E. Rail town. That means we're getting close. We need to go inland here, so we can go around the town."

Lug turned into the forest.

The children started to turn to follow when Pass called out, "Wait!"

Lug stopped. So did Trudy and Jay.

High was shaking with anger. "Here we go again. This is what I'm talking about. You will just not follow the plan! This is the same thing that happened last time."

Pass said, "Last time there was fog and you were lost."

Jumping up and down High yelled, "I was not lost!"

Pass replied, "Well, that is neither here, nor there. What is your plan this time?"

High screeched, "The same thing you agreed to this morning! We are going to Track's cave and deal with his lies! Going through the town will just slow us down!"

Pass was determined. "I'm not going anywhere at all, until you calm down."

Trudy said, "Me neither. She sat down in the sand."

Jay didn't say anything, but he also sat down.

High looked at each of them in turn and sat down on Lug's back and stared at the fishing boats.

Lug began to munch on leaves growing on a bush at the edge of the forest.

After a few minutes of silence Jay said, "We beat the brown dragon by lifting the spell of her lies from the people in the town. Wouldn't that be a better strategy than facing a fire breathing dragon?"

High said, "No."

Trudy asked, "Why not?"

High was getting angry again. "Because it is not the plan. We need to stick to the plan."

Trudy shrugged. "I like Jay's plan better."

Pass spoke up. "Me, too."

High sighed deeply. "You agreed to my plan this morning."

Jay was thoughtful. "Well, that is true. Maybe we are not being fair."

Trudy said, "This is not about being fair. This about figuring out what is best."

Jay looked even more thoughtful.

Pass turned to High. "You will get us lost in that forest, High. Maybe you know where things are, but your sense of direction is terrible."

High's tail twitched, but he did not reply.

Trudy asked, "If we keep to the lake shore, town or no town, we will find the Blue Dragon's cave right?"

High nodded.

Trudy went on, "If we go into the forest how will you know when we have gotten past the town and can go back to the shore?"

High brightened. "There is a road from the town to the east that leads to Low Check City. After we cross it we will know to cut back to the lake."

Trudy asked, "How far past the road can we 'cut back'?"

High just stared at her without answering.

Trudy asked again, "Is there some kind of land mark or something that will let us know when we get to the right place? Once we are in the forest how can we tell whether we are going East or West?"

High shook his head. "Ok. We'll go through the town, but do not tell everyone our business."

Trudy nodded. "OK. We will be very private. Right everyone?" She looked at the other two.

Pass chirped, "Yes."

Jay nodded, "Sure."

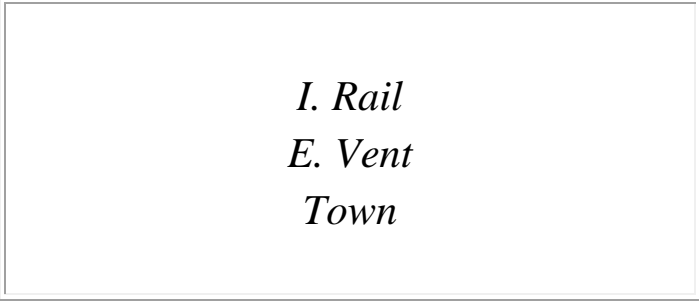
Everyone got back up and the continued the trek up the beach.

* * *

Chapter 6 – E. Rail Town

Up until then the land had been basically flat and the shore unwavering in its gradual turn to the east. As they continued the land to their left started having larger and larger hills. Rocks and little islands began to be visible on the lakes surface. They saw another little fleet of fishing boats in the distance pulling for the shore. The beach came to an end where a big rock the size of a two story house sat partway on the land and partway in the water. They could see a little path leading up the hill behind it and turning towards east. They climbed up the path and found themselves looking down on a fishing village another few hundred feet ahead. They came to a stop. There was a road coming out of the forest a few yards from where they stood and running along the edge of the forest to the town. There were several dozen fishing boats clustered around a harbor with a couple dozen more just coming in.

There was a sign on the road just after it came out of the forest, which they could read from where they stood saying, "I. Rail E. Vent Town."



*I. Rail
E. Vent
Town*

Trudy was puzzled. "I thought it was E. Rail Town? That is not what the sign says."

Jay was also puzzled. "Where is the railroad? I do not see any rail road."

High chattered, "We do not have time for nonsense. We need to get going."

Lug started walking again.

Jay was angry. "What nonsense? Why wouldn't there be a railroad? Even if there is not a railroad, it is not nonsense to think there would be. The dragon's name is Track and the town is named Rail."

Pass said, "It is almost sunset. We can't go on in the dark."

Lug stopped.

Trudy was frustrated. "Why does everything in Low Check have more than one name?"

High's tail was twitching as he said angrily, "We have to hurry so we can catch Track napping!"

Lug started walking again.

Pass called after them, "Go ahead. Just leave the tent and supplies here."

Lug stopped.

High said nothing, but his tail was waving around like a flag in a windstorm.

Jay said, "We ought to camp on the other side of the big rock out of site of the town."

They went back around to the beach and set up their tent. Jay and Trudy gathered wood from the edge of the forest and they built a camp fire to cook their supper. While they were eating the children brought up their questions again.

"Where is the rail road?" asked Jay.

High answered, "The Blue Dragon is named Dis Track Shun, not Track. Track is just a sort of nick name. Same thing with the town. E. Rail is just short for I. Rail. E. Vent." He said it like it was E. Rail. E. Vent instead of I. Rail E. Vent. "They fish for red herrings in Lynn Lake for a living. There are no rail roads in Low Check."

Trudy asked again, "Why so many weird long names?"

Pass asked Trudy, "What is your name?"

Trudy looked puzzled. "Trudy"

Pass asked again, "What is your whole name?"

Trudy replied, "Melody Truth Whitaker."

Pass asked, "So, Dis Track Shun is not the only one who has a long name, but is called a short one?"

Trudy smiled and shrugged.

High said, "A railroad would not do them any good anyway. Track eats so many of the fish the fishermen bring in that the people of the town are kept very poor. They have barely enough to eat. There is not enough fish left over to sell or trade." Soon they were all sound asleep.

* * *

When the black gull approached the cave Track was on his hind legs rubbing his back against the rocks around the entrance.

"They have camped just outside of town, sir," reported the black gull.

The dragon seemed satisfied. "Good. I'm going to town to eat some fish. I'll be there in the morning to greet them."

With that he began to waddle down the shore of Lake Lynn in the direction of E. Rail Town.

* * *

The dragon slayer's breakfast the next morning was eaten in a hurry. High would let nothing slow them down. In no time at all they were packed up and on the road leading to the little town.

As they got closer Jay said, "I wonder why the fishing boats aren't going out."

They all looked and sure enough the harbor was crowded with boats, and there was no activity around them at all.

Lug said, "They know we are coming."

High's tail began to twitch, but he said nothing.

A dozen dragon soldiers led by one with a blue cap on his point came out of the town towards them.

High chattered excitedly, "We should go around the town. Everyone turn around."

Everyone stopped and Lug started turning around.

Jay said, "I think it is too late." The dragon soldiers had started running. In a moment the odd cone shaped creatures with faces, long arms and short legs surrounded them.

Trudy was surprised. "Those little short legs don't slow them down much, do they?"

The one with the blue cap said, "Welcome to E. Rail. I'm Captain Cuspidor. Track, the Blue Dragon is waiting to talk to you. Please come with us."

Jay asked, "What if we don't come with you?" He hoped his voice did not show his fear.

Trudy said, "Jay, it is what we are here for."

Lug turned again and began walking towards the town. Everyone moved along with him. Captain Cuspidor led the way with a soldier on each side of him. The dragon slayers came next with three soldiers on both sides, and three behind them.

A crowd of people waited for them at the edge of the town. Except for one thing they could have been people from Trudy Town. The adults were same size as the Trudy and Jay, and wore the same blue clothing. However, instead of having a blue skin, they had green skin. The people did not call out anything to them, but murmured a good bit among themselves as they looked at them curiously. A few dragon soldiers were among them.

As the dragon slayers and their captors moved towards the center of the town the crowd fell in behind. The houses of the town were clustered close together, usually touching each other or with only two or three feet between them. Little patches of grass not six feet across separated them from the gravel road on which the dragon slayers and dragon soldiers walked. The only thing remarkable that Trudy and Jay noticed was that many of the houses had scarecrows in their front yard. They could imagine no reason to have so many straw men standing about.

They soon found themselves in an open square beside the harbor. A much larger crowd of people waited for them there. Instead of the homes they had been passing little shops surrounded the square, all built right next to each other. There was a large raised platform in the middle of the square that might have been used for plays or public speaking. It was surrounded by dragon soldiers, and on it sat a fat blue dragon.

They were taken to stand directly in front of him. Everyone crowded close to hear what was said, men, women and children.

* * *

Chapter 7 – Everyone Gets Wet

The dragon just stared down at them. Gradually the crowd became quiet. Then he said, "So, what did you do to my sister, Quiver? Which of you killed her?"

High pointed at Pass. "She did!" He was shaking with fear.

"No fair. You said we weren't going to tell people our business!" yelled Jay. He hoped no one could hear the fear he felt.

"Dragons aren't people," replied High, still shaking.

Trudy said trembling, "We said 'everyone,' not 'people.' But anyway it wasn't Pass, it was me. I'm the one who shrunk her down to size." There was a definite quiver in her voice that showed how frightened she was.

The blue dragon looked at each one as they talked as if taken by surprise that they spoke at all. Clearly it was not what he expected to hear.

Track looked at Trudy and asked, "And exactly how did you 'shrink her down to size'?"

High started jumping up and down on Lug's back and screamed, "Don't tell him that! Don't tell him that!"

Lug said, "He knows already." His voice was calm.

Trudy looked confused.

Track fluttered his wings, which is shrugging for a dragon. "Well, I'm willing to let by gones be by gones, if you'll just turn around and go the way you came. We can just put this whole unpleasant episode behind us."

Pass replied, "That will be fine with us, if you will let us try our key out on the door in the back of your cave before we go." She seemed a bit nervous, but not as much as the children.

"That," answered Track shaking his dark blue head, "I can not allow."

"Nor can I" added Lug.

Pass ignored Lug. "Then neither will we go."

High chattered, "We can go and come back another time."

"It won't be any better the next time," said Trudy.

"She is right," chimed in Jay looking at High. Then he turned to the dragon, "What right have you got to rule this town? Who put you in charge?"

"The people did," replied the Dragon. "I protect them from the Valkries, make sure the fish are plentiful, and keep away small dragons and other pests."

"So there was an election?" asked Trudy.

"There was no election, but neither was there any objection," said the dragon. Little puffs of blue smoke came out of his nostrils. He looked out over the crowd and called out, "No one objects, do they?" No one said anything. "See," he said.

Jay also called out, "Who wants this dragon to rule him?" He still sounded nervous.

The dragon soldiers all started yelling, "We do! We do!"

Track said matter of factly, "All those voices can not be wrong."

Trudy spoke up. "You have forced yourself on these people. None of them answered Jay's question at all. Only your own dragon soldiers." The tremble could still be heard in her voice, too.

"Ok," said the dragon. "Captain Cuspidor, bring me the mayor."

A lake man, smaller than most, was thrust forward by the soldiers. He was shaking as much as High. Track addressed him, "Mayor White, how many Valkrie attacks have we had since I have been ruling here?"

Trudy asked, "What is a Valkrie?"

High answered, "Bird people."

Lug said, "There are no bird people in Low Check."

It took a minute for the poor little lake man to find his voice, "None. No Valkries have attacked us. The straw men keep them away and the straw men were your idea."

Pass objected, "You are frightening this poor man to death, Track." She seemed frightened herself.

Track replied, "That has nothing to do with it. His answer was correct."

Lug said, "Because he is so frightened we have no way of knowing if his answer is correct or not. He seems too afraid of you not to agree with you. Besides if there are no Valkries, nothing you are doing is keeping them away. Jay, is this dragon being fair?"

Jay noticed a little drop of sweat on the dragon's forehead. The air still had the morning chill. It was not warm at all. Suddenly Jay realized the dragon was as afraid of them as they were of him. Jay was not so afraid anymore. "No, it is not fair to frighten people into agreeing with you, and it is not fair to change the subject."

Track turned and stared at Jay. "You are just a little boy, what do you know about anything?"

Jay answered the dragon, "That is not fair. Maybe I don't know as much as a grown up, but what I know, I know. It is not fair to frighten people into agreeing with you."

Track was becoming a lighter shade of blue. The children both wondered if that is what happened when blue dragons were embarrassed, or afraid, or something like that.

Trudy noticed that something was happening to the dragon soldiers, too. They were still white, but it was like the sunlight was beginning to shine through them, as if they were made of frosted glass.

Track had a sarcastic tone when he said, "It looks like to me you try to frighten people, too. Isn't that a sword you are wearing? I have to expect that from someone who hangs around with those who shrink and then eat dragons."

High squeaked, "I knew that sword would cause us trouble."

Jay defended himself. "I haven't tried to use it to frighten anyone. Track, you are just trying to change the subject. You are not fair to the people here. You eat their fish. What do they get for their work?"

Track was fading even more. He was becoming a very light blue and sweating a lot. He said, "I already told you. I protect them from the Valkries, make sure the fish are

plentiful, and keep away small dragons and other pests. If you will not believe the authority of the mayor, you are just showing that you a stubborn child."

Jay asked, "How do you make sure the fish are plentiful?"

Track waved his front claw over the crowd. "Do you see any starving people here?"

They all looked around, and Trudy said wonderingly, "He's right. They do not look like they are starving."

Jay wanted his question answered. "You are changing the subject again. These people being well fed just means they fish are plentiful -- plentiful enough for you to eat, and them to eat. But the question was, 'How do you make sure the fish are plentiful?'"

Trudy noticed that the dragon soldiers were now almost transparent.

Track replied, "My sister died only yesterday, and her killers are here today attacking me. Don't you know how blue I must feel?"

Pass was sympathetic. "That is true. It must be terrible for you. I'm so sorry, I ate her. I didn't know it was your sister."

Lug said, "He doesn't care anything about his sister. These dragons hate each other almost as much as they hate everyone else."

Jay accused Track once again. "You are just changing the subject again."

The dragon opened his mouth and spewed steam instead of fire. The cloud of hot steam did not quite reach the children. He began to swing his tail at Jay, but before it struck him, there was a loud sound like a popping balloon. The blue dragon and all the dragon soldiers vanished, as they each became an explosion of water. The dragon slayers and the towns' people were left standing in the square drenched with water, but with neither dragon nor dragon's teeth remaining.

Nothing was said for a few minutes as people were shaking off the water and looking around in a bewildered way.

Jay said, "I guess Track was all wet."

Trudy added, "And now we are."

The crowd erupted into cheers.

Before they could gather their thoughts the dragon slayers found themselves lifted up and carried about in the middle of a crowd yelling their praises. All except Pass and Lug, that is. Pass fluttered up out of reach and Lug was too heavy for the little lake people to lift. That is why it was only Pass who noticed the black gull, which had been sitting nearby on the gunwale of a fishing boat, fly up and into the forest.

Finally they were put back on their feet again. When things died down enough for a conversation the mayor began to suggest they stay a few days, so that a real celebration could be arranged. Said, he, "Without the blue dragon to eat up most of the fish, in a few days we can have a real feast. We might even be able to trade for some of the meat processed in the swamp in Quiver Town.

Jay asked, "Haven't you heard? It is Trudy Town now."

High was pleased. "A celebration sounds wonderful. We would love to stay for it."

Pass spoke softly to High. "High we need to talk about this."

High asked loudly, "Why?"

Pass said, "A black gull just flew into the forest and I have a very bad feeling about him."

High retorted again, "So?"

Pass was impatient. "Look at all those gulls."

They looked and there were gulls everywhere, sitting on the boats, sitting on the harbor, diving in the water to catch a fish, or flying about.

High asked again, "So?"

Pass replied, "None of those flew into the forest. I think the black gull was a messenger. We need to get to the Blue Dragon's lair and try out that key before something happens."

High was still shaking his head.

The mayor said, "That old black gull has been a pet of Track's for years. What can he do?"

High looked at the mayor in surprise, and then said, "Ok. Let's get to the lair."

They began to prepare to go. The mayor was upset. "Don't go yet. Please. Let us at least help you with supplies or something."

High said, "We'll be back this way this evening."

Pass added, "But just to pass through into the forest by way of the Low Check Highway."

"But, but ..." spluttered the Mayor.

Pass added soothingly, "We could use some supper and a place to spend the night before we push on in the morning, if it is not too much to ask."

High looked at Pass with his tail twitching but said nothing.

The mayor brightened. "Not at all. Not at all. This evening then."

Soon they were once again walking on the beach traveling East. The forest was thinner on the other side of the town. Before they reached the lair of the Blue Dragon the forest had given entirely away to grassland. On the way they talked little. Jay was beginning to wonder about lunch when they saw a cave up ahead in the side of a rocky hill next to the water.

Without any delay at all they all just walked in, found the door at the back of the cave, and tried the key. It did not work. Everyone was disappointed.

They decided to have lunch before heading back to town but it was a somber, sad, and silent lunch punctuated with only an occasional, "Will you please pass the ..."

Finally as they were finishing their lunch Jay announced, "We need to make better plans."

Trudy nodded her head. "I agree."

High's tail started to twitch. "Why? What is wrong with my plans? They are working aren't they?"

Jay went on. "I want to know more about what is going on here."

High replied, "Next we attack Cuz, the Green Dragon. Her lair is in the forest."

Lug asked, "Isn't Mal closer?"

High looked at Lug. High said, "Mal has no Door of Doom."

Pass asked, "How do you know that?"

High replied, "Mal wanders all the time. He is a Fay Lacy Dragon, but he is not a fat lazy dragon. He can actually still fly."

Lug said, "He has a lair somewhere. We just don't know where. It has a door, I'm sure."

Trudy asked, "You mean none of the others can't fly?"

High said, "That's right. Only Mal, the Orange Dragon, can still fly."

Lug objected, "Perf, the Black Dragon can still fly."

With his tail twitching High looked at Lug and said, "Yes, but she is only a Fay Lacy dragon because her mate is one. This would go so much better if you would quit interrupting." Turning to the children he said, "There are seven dragons left. Mal, the Orange Dragon, is to the East of us, somewhere on the Great Plains of Low Check, which he likes to call The Plains for Mal." He looked to the east as he said this.

Then they all looked. That was the first time they noticed the river emptying into the lake. Nothing was visible beyond it but flat grassland.

High continued, "We would have to find a way to cross the river, and then Mal would be very difficult to find. The other six are to our West, and will be easier to find. They will be easier to travel to, as well, because there is a highway straight to Low Check City that is close to all of their lairs. I know where all their lairs are located. The Orange and the Black dragons are the smartest and most dangerous of them all. We should save them until last, in case we find an unlocked door in one of the other lairs, and don't have to face the most dangerous ones at all."

Pass added, "That black gull did fly west."

Jay, Trudy and Pass agreed that it did seem to be a sensible plan. Soon they were on their way again.

After they had been walking a few minutes Jay said, "I have no problem with going for the Green Dragon next, but that is not exactly what I mean by a better plan. I think we need to plan out who is going to do the talking, and what we are going to say. Can't we find out more about what kind of lies they tell before we get there?"

No one replied.

Jay looked at each of the Magician Key's parts in turn. Lug, High and Pass all seemed like they did not want to talk. He looked at Trudy. She shrugged. Jay shrugged, too. They trudged on in silence. They were tired out by both their victory and their disappointment.

They were beginning to see the forest thickening to their right when Trudy asked, "What did you mean when you said, 'The Black Dragon, is only a Fay Lacy Dragon because she is the mate of one of them?'"

High replied, "The Black Dragon's name is Perfidy. We call her Perf. She is not a child of Fay and Lacy. She is the mate of one of the clan -- the oldest male offspring, Mal, but now they live at opposite ends of Low Check."

Trudy asked, "Are they divorced?"

Pass chirped, "I'm not sure that is the right word for dragons who have mated, but I do not know a better one. It sure looks like they have gone their own ways. Nobody knows why."

Jay asked, "The magic key protects us from her too, doesn't it?"

High replied uncertainly, "Yes."

E. Rail Town came into view. They could hear the sound of music, perhaps from the square.

Pass spoke to High saying, "Now, High, don't you try and take all the credit again. You know it was Jay who defeated Track."

High replied loudly, "I had something to do with it, too!"

Jay said, "I did not do it by my self."

High was satisfied. "See?" he said to Pass.

* * *

The Fat Lazy Dragons

Book III Cuz – the Green Dragon

Chapter 8 The Mailman

As they walked through streets of the town, little lake people greeted them, waved at them, or clapped for them as they passed. As they got closer to the square the music became louder. They were right in guessing that it came from the square. There were colored balloons and streamers strung up on all the shops. Several rows of tables were set up in the square. A band played on the platform where they had met and defeated Track. The smell of fried fish was strong enough to be appetizing, but not so strong as to smell too fishy. As pleasant and nice as all this was, none of it was surprising. But there was one thing that was surprising.

Parked in the square was a car. It looked like a cross between a model T Ford and an old time locomotive. It had a tank for water over a fire box for making steam, and cylinders on the sides to drive the back wheels. Where you would expect to see the trunk was an open compartment filled with wood for the firebox. It was light blue in color. Leaning next to it was a little man dressed in a blue uniform trimmed in white and a little blue billed cap on his head. His skin was black. It was not black like the neighbors that Jay and Trudy played with. Their playmates from across the street were really colored like dark brown chocolate. This man was colored black like the pupil of your eye or like a crow's feathers. In sharp contrast his eyes were light blue. A sign on the side of the car said, "Low Check Mail Service. No Riders."

LOW CHECK
MAIL SERVICE
NO RIDERS

The Low Check man spoke first. "Hello! You must be the dragon slayers."

Pass replied, "Yes, that's right. I'm Pass. Who are you?"

High was disgusted. "Here we go again. Telling everyone our business."

Pass said, "He already knows."

The man introduced himself. "I'm Lucas Light, the mailman."

Pass made the dragon slayer's introductions. "This monkey is High Key, the donkey is Luggage Key, the two children are Trudy and Jay. Indicating each one in turn."

Lug said, "Just call me Lug."

Lucas nodded to each one of them in turn and then said, "Wow, big children. I hear you are headed west in the morning."

High was suspicious. "Maybe."

Lucas smiled, "Well, if you are, I can give you a lift as far as Prop Tour Hock."

Pass was pleased, "That would very nice."

High shook his head, "No, thank you."

Jay exclaimed, "No fair. You are not the one who has to walk everywhere we go."

Trudy pointed out, "The sign says, 'No Riders'"

Lug said, "It is just a sign."

Lucas shrugged. "That is for when I'm in the city. Nobody pays any attention to that out here in the boonies."

Pass fluttered her wings. "Can we let you know in the morning?"

Lucas laughed. "Sure."

The people of the town gathered for the celebration. They sat at a table close to the front with Mayor White and his wife'. Lucas sat with the towns' folk and seemed to be well liked by them. The meal was fried fish and potatoes. It was well seasoned and cooked perfectly. Everyone enjoyed all of it except Lug who ate only the potatoes, but he did enjoy those. After they ate, Mayor White got up and thanked all the dragon slayers one at a time, but praised Jay the most.

Jay was embarrassed and said again, "It wasn't just me."

Trudy said, "Yes, but you are the one who stayed after him and would not believe his lies."

When the Mayor finished speaking everyone clapped and cheered. Then High stood up and made a speech taking most of the credit for himself. When he was finished there was a little polite clapping.

The band began to play some lively tunes and many of the people started dancing. Several different people came up to them and thanked them personally. Among these people was the mailman, Lucas.

Lucas seemed to be in a good mood. "This is certainly a much happier town with that old blue dragon gone. Where are you from?"

"The City of Reason," offered Pass.

Trudy asked, "Where are you from?"

Lucas replied, "I'm one of the people of the White Mountains. I'm from Fort Glacier originally, but now I live in Low Check City, except when I make this mail run every month."

Jay was excited, "So you know all about Low Check? What can you tell us?"

Lucas chuckled. "I don't know all about Low Check, just my route, the city and the White Mountains, and may be a bit more."

Jay was a little subdued but went on, "Tell us about your route."

Lucas shook his head a little and looked down. "Not much to tell really. I carry the mail from Low Check City to E. Rail Town and back again. I stop at all the towns in between. I know I have a load to pick up tomorrow at Prop Tour Hock, or I would let you ride all the way to the city with me."

Jay repeated, "Prop Tour Hock?"

High answered, "It is the biggest town in the forest. It is right on the highway. We can walk to it in a day."

Lucas snickered. "I can get you there well before lunch."

Trudy was suspicious. "Why do you want us to ride with you?"

Lucas shrugged. "I'm just curious about the dragon slayers. How do you know how to break the dragons spells?"

Pass offered, "We just tell the truth."

High was angry. "Why must you always tell our business?"

Lucas turned to High. "Oh, if it is none of my business, that is just fine. I was just hoping that a wise monkey like you could maybe help me out. Somehow I'm immune to their spells, and I do not understand why. I see everyone else just going along with whatever they say, and I do not understand it."

Jay was suspicious now. "If you are not under their spell, who are you working for?"

Lucas turned to Jay. "Well, I guess I do work for them, but I get paid. How else am I supposed to earn a living? But I don't admire them, and believe them like everyone else seems to."

No one could think of a reply.

Lucas put his hand to the bill of his cap. "Well, it was nice meeting you folks. If you want a ride, I'll be leaving right after breakfast. Just let me know."

After Lucas left, Mayor White came over and offered to show them their sleeping quarters for the night.

As they followed the mayor, Jay had questions. "Please, tell us about the mailman."

The mayor was surprised by the question. "Lucas? Not much to tell. He delivers and takes the mail once a month. He is one of those mountain people. Seems nice enough."

Trudy asked, "Do all the mountain people look like him?"

The mayor shook his head. "No. Only the ones from the White Mountains look like him, except for the uniform of course. They have to dress warm up in the mountains, even with that black skin to soak up the sunlight. I saw some of them one time when I went to the big city."

They were given the barracks of the dragon soldiers for their quarters for the night, just as they had been in Trudy Town. It was a little nicer than the one in the swamp. It had electric lights and indoor plumbing. As they settled in they talked about Lucas' offer.

Pass started, "I think we should take the ride."

High objected, "He is too, nosy."

Jay suggested, "Maybe we can just tell him stuff he already knows and learn some things from him."

Trudy was concerned, "The sign says, 'No Riders'"

Lug said, "It's just a sign."

Jay argued, "He said the sign was just for in the city."

High gave in. "If you promise to let me do the talking, I'll agree."

Jay asked, "Can we ask questions as long as we do not tell him anything?"

They talked longer but in the end, that is what they agreed to.

Later after they had settled in their beds and turned off the lights, Trudy asked, "Did you notice that both of the dragons used a lie the same color as they were?"

Jay replied, "What are you talking about?"

Trudy explained, "One of the Brown Dragon's lies was that browning the meat, meant painting it with brown paint, when it really means cooking it until it is brown."

Jay was interested. "What about the Blue Dragon?"

Trudy went on. "The Blue Dragon talked about how blue he felt, when that had nothing to do with anything that was being said."

Jay chuckled.

High said, "Go to sleep."

* * *

The mailman was in a hurry so breakfast was short. Mayor White made sure their backpacks had plenty. He also convinced them to take some money for their journey. Soon they were loading into the mail vehicle.

Trudy sat with Lucas in the front holding High in her lap and Pass on her shoulder. Lug took up most of the back seat but Jay was able to squeeze in next to him. It seemed like the whole town turned out to wave good-bye to them as they left. The crowds lined the road out of town and as they passed people ran after them trying to keep up. The people stopped at the sign outside of town. They were still waving and cheering as the mailman drove his vehicle into the forest and out of their sight.

Very quickly they found themselves chugging through the forest in the blue mail car/truck/locomotive on the gravel road. From time to time Lucas would stop the car, get out, and move some wood from the box in back to the firebox under the water tank in front.

Once they were on their way, they remained silent for some time. Jay asked some questions about how the vehicle worked and Lucas explained in some detail. Finally, it was Lucas that started the conversation they all wanted to have. "I know you do not want to tell me your business, but maybe I can help you. I do not know much, but what I know I will be glad to say, if it will help you."

Jay asked, "What do you know about the Green Dragon and the forest?"

High looked at Jay angrily.

Jay said, "It's was a question."

Lucas snickered at them. "I know a bit about both. Prop Tour Hock is the biggest town and is in about the center of the forest. Several logging roads meet there from where they cut the forest. It also has the sawmill where they cut the trees into lumber. Prop Tour Hock is where the main highway crosses the Ergo River. They use the river to power the saw mill and some of the logs are floated down on it as well.

"Non Cuza Pro Cuza, or Cuz for short, is a green dragon of the Fay Lacy clan. Her lair is on the logging road that goes south from Prop Tour Hock. It is in a hollowed out log. She seldom leaves it. She is too fat to fly. Every day the green people of Prop Tour Hock carry Cuz a wagon load of food. They are convinced it is the right thing to do."

"How can a dragon fit in a log?" asked Jay.

"She is in a grove of very big trees. It is big enough I could drive this mail car right up in it."

"What kind of lies does she tell?" asked Trudy.

Lucas' eyes narrowed and he looked at Trudy with a puzzled look. "Now, that is a very interesting question."

Lucas pulled the car to the side and threw a couple of logs in the fire box. While he was outside, High looked angrily at Trudy and Jay. "The questions you ask show too much about us. I thought we agreed, I was going to do the talking."

Jay replied, "You agreed we could ask questions."

High's tail twitched but he said no more.

When Lucas got back in he did not say anything for awhile. Jay was about to ask him Trudy's question again when Lucas began to answer. "Cuz mixes you up about the reasons for things."

Trudy looked puzzled. "What does that mean?"

Lucas shrugged. "Well, there are people in the Forest that believe the rooster crowing makes the sun come up. They believe that the stars are caused by lightning bugs flying too high and getting stuck on the ceiling way above us somewhere. They think that the trees turning green in the spring is what makes the weather turn warm."

Trudy spoke up, "There it is! The Green Dragon tells a green lie."

Everyone laughed except Lucas who stared at them in wonder.

Jay asked, "Why do they think they should feed the Green Dragon every day? That does not seem fair."

Lucas replied, "Cuz thinks it is fair, and they are under her spell."

High spoke up, "Tell us more about the saw mill."

Jay and Trudy looked at each other and both rolled their eyes.

They did not find out much more. They learned there was a low waterfall which drove a water wheel which powered the mill. They were told the highway crossed the Ergo River on a high wooden bridge, and that there were several trucks, which were steam driven like the mail car and carried the lumber from the mill to the west. They learned that Low Check City had some gasoline powered cars. They learned that in the grove of trees around the Green dragon's lair, the trees were as tall as a football field is long.

"That is as tall as a 30 story building," said Jay, "Like the redwoods in California."

Lucas looked puzzled. "I don't know anything about that."

Jay laughed. "I did a report on them for school. It takes them hundreds of years to grow. You can tell how old they are by counting the rings."

Lucas nodded. "These trees have been there for hundreds of years, I believe."

Suddenly they came out of the forest into a clearing about two miles across. Ahead of them they could see everything just as Lucas had described it. There was a town of mostly one or two story wooden buildings, not unlike E. Rail Town. At the south end was a large saw mill next to a waterfall. At the north end was a tall wooden bridge across the river. Several dirt roads came into the town from different directions. Between the town and the forest were mostly stumps of felled trees with an occasional patch of ground converted into a vegetable garden.

"Wait," called out Jay. "We haven't found out about the other dragons."

Lucas laughed. "I've been thinking about that, too. I've got it all figured out."

They all looked at him in surprise.

Lucas went on, "I have an overnight stay in the next town, called Single Side. Now that I know what you want to know, I'll write it down for you, and leave it with the postmaster in Single Side. I'll address it to High for you to pick up."

High agreed, "That is a good plan."

No one else knew what to say.

They were already close enough to the town to see little people moving about. They had purple skin, but Lucas called them green people, because of the dragon controlling them. A wagon pulled by two enormous horses driven by a forest man in the standard Low Check blue clothing came down one of the roads from the North. The wagon was loaded with freshly cut logs. No one noticed the black wolf on the south side of the clearing that turned and ran into the forest.

In a moment they found themselves in a town square, similar to the one in E. Rail Town, except it was next to the river instead of the lake. Instead of a raised platform it had a small park with grass. There was a group of dragon soldiers lounging on some benches in the center of the park. One of them wore a green cap. Lucas stopped in front of a shop with a sign that said, "Acme Hardware." In the corner of one of the front windows with axes and saws on display was a very small sign that said, "Ergo Post Office."

They all got out. Lucas said, "Well, it was nice meeting you folks. Look for that letter. You can count on me." With that he walked into the hardware store.

Pass fluttered her wings. "Well, that was kind of rude."

Jay replied, "He's working. Maybe he doesn't have time for long good-byes."

They were still standing there looking around wondering what to do next when Lucas came out with some packages and put them in the back seat. He went back in the store.

Jay said, "Why don't we find someplace to eat."

* * *

Chapter 9 Into the Forest

They looked around the square. The dragon soldiers in the center of the square were watching them. A little Low Check woman was walking near them with a young girl walking by her side.

Trudy said to her, "Excuse me. Is there a restaurant or something around here?"

The woman and girl put fingers in their ears, started walking faster and sang, "La. La. La," over and over again until they were too far away to be heard.

The dragon soldiers laughed.

Trudy tried a man with the exact same result. The dragon soldiers laughed again. Jay began walking towards the dragon soldiers.

High called out, "That's not the plan."

Pass chirped, "Wait, Jay!"

Jay kept walking.

High hid behind the mail car. The rest followed Jay. The soldiers just sat and watched the dragon slayers come. One of soldiers said something to the one with the cap, and they all laughed, but the dragon slayers could not hear what was said.

* * *

Not far to the south a fat green dragon laid on top of an enormous log in the shade of giant trees. A black wolf came running up and said breathlessly, "They have arrived."

Cuz, the Green Dragon replied, "So, soon? I thought it would be tonight."

"That mailman gave them a ride."

"Someday he will go too far, and annoy me."

The black wolf did not reply.

Cuz went on, "They'll be here after lunch."

The black wolf sat down.

* * *

When the dragon slayers were in front of the dragon soldiers, Jay asked in a very polite voice, "Is there a restaurant around here?"

They all laughed.

Pass said, "That is rude."

They all laughed again. Then the leader answered, "Sure. We have a nice place right over there. He pointed to a shop not too far from the hardware store. It had a sign that said, "Ergo Eats."

"Thank you," said Jay and headed for "Ergo Eats." The rest followed him. Even High came out from behind the mail car and joined up with them. Just as they arrived, someone on the inside opened the door, reached out, and hung a sign on the door that read, "No Dragon Slayers Allowed Here."

*No dragon slayers
allowed here*

Jay said, "I think they mean us."

Trudy shrugged. "I think they have been told to make us unwelcome, and those soldiers are here to make sure they do as they are told."

Lug said, "Time to go see Cuz."

Jay looked worried. "But I'm hungry."

Pass comforted him. "We'll stop and eat in the forest after we are away from the town. We know which road to take. There is only one going south."

They all turned and headed south. They had not been on the road long before they found a little patch of needle covered ground under some evergreen trees. They sat down and brought the food out of their packs. They decided to eat the smoked fish from E. Rail Town first. They were afraid if they tried to keep it for a later meal; it might go bad, and make everything else smell bad. Lug could not eat the tree's needles, and there being no other vegetation, he ate a few apples from the food packs. Pass flitted about in the trees catching insects. Suddenly she said, "Someone is coming."

"Someone is here," said a little Low Check man as he and four others stepped into the clearing from all different directions. The men were all dressed in green and brown clothing that was in a camouflage pattern. The one who spoke had a sparrow hawk sitting on his shoulder. The dragon slayers were too startled to say or do anything. All except Lug, who just kept munching his apple.

The same man went on, "I'm sorry to disturb your lunch, but naturally you will understand we are anxious to meet the dragon slayers. Please let us introduce ourselves."

Pass recovered first, "Of course. Yes, who are you."

"I'm Reg. This is Ress, Shawn, Tex, Sharp, and Shooter. He pointed to each of the others in turn, who nodded when pointed to, but six names for five people was too much for the dragon slayers to take in all at once. By the time it dawned on them that Reg meant the hawk on his shoulder was Res, it was too late to begin to remember the rest.

Pass did the same. "I'm Pass. This is Trudy, Jay, and Luggage. That is High who just scampered up the tree to hide."

"I'm not hiding!" yelled High, from a limb above them.

"Just call me Lug," said the donkey. "Pleased to meet you."

Jay asked, "Why are you talking to us. Didn't the Green Dragon say not to?"

Reg smiled and replied, "We are not green people. We do not do what that fat lazy dragon says to do. We are here to help you."

Trudy said, "Of course you are not green, you are purple. But so are the people in Prop Tour Hock and they are obeying the dragon."

The forest men all looked at each other. Suddenly Reg brightened and said, "Oh, you mean our skin! How odd. We are talking about being under the green dragon's spell. 'We are not green' people, means we are not under the control of Cuz."

Now it was Trudy's turn to come to understanding. "Oh," was all she could manage.

Jay started looking at them more closely. They all carried bows and quivers full of arrows. Each one had a sword, knife, or hatchet tucked in his belt.

High came back down the tree and resumed his lunch.

Pass said, "Why don't you sit down with us. You are welcome to some of our food."

Jay started to object but decided that would be impolite.

Reg smiled. "We'll sit but we have no need of your food."

High said, "We have no need of your help."

Pass chirped, "High!"

High went on, "Well, it is true. They'll just get a fight started and that will be the end of all of us."

Pass said, "Well, yes, that is true, but you could be nice about it."

High looked at her with his long tail twitching, but he said nothing and went back to eating his lunch.

Reg had watched the exchange with interest. "So, you are not here to fight Cuz?"

Trudy said, "We are, but if we use weapons we lose."

Reg nodded his head. "Oh, magic."

High said, "Are you never going to stop telling people our business. You have no way of knowing whose side they are really on."

Everyone was quiet for a few seconds, but it was such an uncomfortable silence that it seemed much longer. Finally Reg broke the silence. "Is there anything we can do to help you?"

Jay asked, "Where is the dragon's lair?"

Reg pointed south. "About two miles down this road. You can't miss it. It is in the middle of a bunch of giant trees. One of them was cut down a long time ago and she lives in the hollow of the log."

Trudy asked, "What kind of lies does she tell?"

High said angrily, "You are going to have to quit asking that question. It tells more than it asks."

Lug said, "Well, now it has."

Reg looked puzzled. "Lies?"

Trudy went on, "What does she say to deceive people?"

Reg scratched his head and looked at the other four men. They shrugged, shook their heads, or just looked blank. Finally one of them spoke up. It was Shooter but the children did not know that. "How about the archery contest?"

Reg said, "I don't think that is what she means, but I'll tell it. They held an archery contest, with a nice prize, so we dressed in blue like the green people do, so we would blend in, and went into town."

Trudy started to say they were purple people in town and then remembered when the forest man said "green people" he meant people under the Green Dragon's spell.

Reg continued, "The contest went on for quite some time, and finally it was down to Shooter and Drool, the Captain of the dragon soldiers. To settle it, they painted a target on the side of the sawmill some three hundred paces away. Shooter and Captain Drool both shot. Drool missed by several feet, and Shooter got his in the outer ring of the target. While we were walking over to get a closer look, Cuz had a couple of dragon soldiers paint a new target around Drool's arrow, so that it looked like he got a bull's eye on his target, and that Shooter had almost missed his. They declared Drool the winner. Is that the kind of thing you mean?"

Trudy looked down at her hands. "I'm not sure. Maybe."

Reg said, "We can go with you and just sort of hang back in the trees nearby in case you need us."

Jay asked, "Does she have any dragon soldiers with her?"

Ress, the hawk answered, "I was just over there about thirty minutes ago. It is just Cuz and that black wolf. There are no soldiers about at all."

Lug said, "She is expecting us."

Pass chirped, "Well, we can finish our lunch. She can just wait."

They did finish their lunch, which did not take long. As they started putting things back in their packs and burying their trash, Reg asked again, "Shall we follow along?"

Pass replied, "Yes."

High screeched, "No!"

Trudy asked, "What harm would it do?"

Jay said, "We are not in charge of them. They can do as they please."

Reg and his men looked in surprise at each one as they spoke. Reg asked, "Who is in command of this outfit? Who is the senior officer?"

High announced, "I am."

Pass disagreed, "No, you are not."

Trudy added, "Not, me."

Jay shrugged. "No one."

Again Reg and his men looked in surprise as each one spoke. "And you have been winning? You have been slaying dragons like this?"

High said, "I have."

Pass fluttered her wings. "You haven't done anything, High."

Trudy looked down. "I didn't do that much either."

Jay said proudly, "We have been winning."

Reg and his men looked at each other with surprise.

Lug looked at Reg and said, "Amazing, isn't it?"

Reg shook his head and smiled.

They walked south on the road with Reg and his men following at a distance. After they had gone about a mile High made an announcement. "I'm going to go back with Reg and his men to keep them from attacking and causing problems."

Everyone stopped and High jumped off Lug and motioned them to go on. "I'll wait here for them to catch up."

Everyone turned to go on. Pass chirped, "Nope." Lug stopped.

The others stopped.

Jay asked, "Why? We don't need him."

High's tail began to twitch angrily.

Pass ignored Jay and asked a question of her own. "High, why did we decide to split into these three parts?"

High was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Pass explained. "The three of us together were the Magician Key. He decided to split into three parts, you a monkey, Lug a donkey, and me a bird, a dovekie. Why?"

High replied, "To fit under the line by the gate."

Pass shook her head strongly. Her little beak swished all the way from pointing left to pointing right and back again several times. "No, no, no. We thought about just a donkey and a turkey, without the monkey. We thought about a slightly larger donkey and just a dovekie. We thought of some other combinations as well, but we decided on these three, because we thought it would give the children the best chance of safety and success."

High sighed. "You are right, but I do not remember why."

Lug spoke up. "Neither do I, but who is smarter? Us, now, as a donkey, monkey and bird; or us as the Magician Key when we were all together?"

High sighed. "You are right, Lug. We are smarter when we are all put together."

Trudy offered, "Yes, the Magician said that right before he broke into parts. But I don't understand why. Where do the memories go?"

Lug said, "They don't go anywhere. They are split up. But knowledge is more than memorization; it is also partly understanding the relationships between the pieces of information. When we split up we all get a portion of the memory, and in fact a lot of it is shared. By that I mean that some things we all remember, like the purpose of our quest to challenge the rule of the dragons over Low Check. But among those things that I remember which Pass does not, the relationship is lost, and so on."

Trudy looked puzzled. "I guess I understand."

Lug added, "Think about our conversation this morning with Lucas about people around here thinking trees turning green makes the weather turn warm in the spring time. Suppose Pass only knew about trees turning green and High only knew about weather

getting warm. Without knowing about both things they would not correctly understand what they had to do with each other."

Trudy nodded thoughtfully.

High jumped back on Lug's back with his tail no longer twitching. They were about to continue toward the lair of the Green Dragon when Reg and his men caught up to them.

Reg asked, "Is there something wrong?"

Pass fluttered her wings. "Not anymore."

Reg shook his head. "I can not help but think you are walking into too much danger. You should really let us help."

Jay replied, "What did you have in mind?"

High said, "They will just cause trouble."

Reg looked at Jay. "We are ready to fight."

Jay said, "Well, hide where you can see. If a fight starts, join in."

High objected, "I don't like it."

Reg announced, "I promise that no matter what happens we will stay hidden unless they attack you first."

Trudy nodded saying, "I think we can trust him."

Pass added, "Me, too."

They continued to walk down the dirt road. They began to notice the trees were larger and taller. They were as tall as 20 or 30 story skyscrapers. The dragon slayers were subdued by the majesty of the giant trees. They were caught up in admiring the beauty when they rounded a bend in the road and found themselves facing Cuz.

* * *

Chapter 10 Some Very Tall Trees

The green dragon was stretched out laying down on top of a large fallen tree at a spot where the sun found a way down through the trees. One end of the log was open showing the log was hollow. The stump where the tree was cut down made a sort of front porch to the entrance to the inside of the log. The black wolf they had been told about was no where to be seen.

Cuz did not get up. She turned her head slightly so she could view them. "You must be the dragon slayers. Come closer. You must know I can not harm you as long as the donkey you have with you is wearing that Magic Key around his neck."

Trudy realized they had all stopped without really noticing that they had stopped. They all walked slowly forward until they were about ten feet away.

Just moving her eyes from one to the other Cuz announced their names one by one. "Lug the donkey, High the monkey, Pass the bird, Trudy the little girl, and Jay the little boy. I am so afraid." Then she laughed.

Trudy replied nervously, "And you are Cuz."

Cuz did not reply.

A large black wolf came walking up from behind them and sat on the ground facing the children from just below the Green Dragon. The wolf spoke in a deep voice that sounded more like a growl than a voice. "They have been talking with Reg and that band of outlaws. The outlaws are hiding back there in the trees ready to attack. Just as you thought, the animals are really the parts of Magician Key. I heard them talking together down the road. They think it is important that they do not split up."

High asked, "Who is the dog?" His voice quivered in fear.

The black wolf growled. "I'm a wolf. My name is none of your business."

There was an awkward silence. It lasted for an uncomfortable amount of time. Finally Cuz said, "So slay me already, and get it over with." Then she laughed again.

The dragon slayers looked at each other in dismay.

Sounding more confident than he felt, Jay asked, "What right have you to rule over these forest people?"

The dragon looked at him steadily, but said nothing.

Jay said, "Are you going to answer me?" He sounded less confident.

Cuz chuckled, rolled over on her back and said, "These trees sure are nice. They are so tall because they grow near me."

High said, "That is a matter of opinion." His tail was shaking but whether in fear or anger, it was hard to say.

Cuz seemed genuinely surprised. "You mean you don't like them?"

High said, "That is none of your business." High laughed nervously, but he laughed alone.

Pass chirped, "Now, High, let's not start acting like them. We should be better than that."

High put his arms around his chest like he was hugging himself and looked down his nose at Pass, but did not reply.

Cuz turned on her stomach again. "Everything I heard about you is true. You are an annoying, obnoxious, rude, ugly, little monkey."

Jay spoke up. "That was a rude thing to say, Cuz."

High was shaking with anger and fear. His mouth opened and closed like he was trying to say something but nothing came out.

Pass said, "High, she is just trying to make us mad in hopes we will do something stupid."

High still shook, but he managed to shut his mouth.

Lug said, "Let's sit down and get comfortable. This is going to take a while. She kept the people in the town from listening to us, so we could not do what we did to Quiver. She is trying to avoid talking to us, so we can not do to her what we did to Track. If we are patient, she will talk to us eventually. She can not help herself." With that he sat on his rear haunches. High jumped off Lug's back. Trudy and Jay were very surprised. They had never seen Lug do that before, and did not even know he could. The rest of the dragon slayers all sat down.

Again there was a long awkward silence.

Finally Trudy asked, "Why did you make the people not welcome us in Prop Tour Hock?"

Cuz just laughed.

Jay said, "These trees were big long before you got here."

Cuz yawned.

Lug looked at the children and said quietly, "Just relax and let her come to us. She will, I promise."

For the first time Cuz raised her head. She glared at the little gray donkey and started to say something, and changed her mind. She laid her head back down. The wolf lay down on the ground.

The silence went on for an hour or so and Cuz finally said, "Go away. You annoy me."

High said, "No," and laughed.

The other dragon slayers chuckled.

Cuz raised her head and glared at the monkey.

Another hour or so passed. The shadows were beginning to get long, and it was getting cooler. Suddenly Cuz raised her head and turning to the wolf said, "Those outlaws brought these dragon slayers here. Remind me to have them hunted down and executed."

Jay spoke up. "That is not fair. We were already coming here when we met Reg. And I don't think they are outlaws either."

Cuz said, "How did you know where to find me? You said no one in Prop Tour Hock would speak with you?"

Now it was High's turn to speak up. "I knew where you were."

Lug added, "So did I."

Oddly a leaf suddenly sprouted full grown from the front of Cuz's left front leg. Cuz did not seem to notice it and said, "That may be, but they came with you, so I know you are outlaws, too. I may just arrest you and throw you in prison. I think the magic key would let me do that."

The dragon slayers looked at each other not knowing what to say.

Finally Trudy said, "We are not outlaws just because we walked on the road with outlaws. Besides, what makes them so bad. They seemed nice to me."

Cuz answered, "They carry weapons with them everywhere they go. Only bad people need to do that."

Jay said, "Maybe they need to protect themselves from bad people or dangerous animals."

Cuz nodded. "Yes, but they did not start doing that until they became outlaws."

Trudy said, "They are outlaws because they carry weapons, and they carry weapons because they are outlaws. That does not make sense."

Cuz whipped her tail around and looked at it. A leaf was growing out of the very tip of it. She laid it back behind her and looked at Trudy. "Yes, I told my people that you would put them under a magic spell, if they listened to you."

Trudy objected, "That is not true!"

Cuz replied, "Then how did you get the mailman to give you a ride. He has never given anyone a ride. He even has a sign that says, "No Riders. You must have put him under a spell."

Trudy said, "Just because he gave us a ride does not mean we used a magic spell on him. In fact, he offered."

The dragon stood up and towered over them. When she did another leaf suddenly grew out of her shoulder. Cuz looked at it and then turned towards Jay. "I do not have to explain myself to a little boy, but if you knew the history of this region you would know that the trees are tall because of me and I brought prosperity to the region."

Jay stood up and asked, "How did you make the trees grow?"

Cuz replied, "If you looked at a map you would see that all the big trees are clustered around my lair. Obviously they grew tall because I am here."

Jay asked, "So how old are you?"

Cuz laughed. "A lot older than you. I was a hundred years old before you were born. I can remember when the trees were saplings. What do you remember?"

Jay said, "I remember that trees grow one ring per year." Jay walked over to the where the stump was of the log Cuz used as a lair. "1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ..."

Cuz screamed. "Never mind that!"

Jay added, "There must be a thousand rings here and it is one ring per year. This tree is way older than you, Cuz."

A twig with three leaves popped out of her front left leg.

Trudy stood up and asked, "How did you make this area prosperous?"

Cuz answered. "The prosperity started the day I arrived. The orders for lumber just started pouring in."

Trudy asked another question. "How did the orders arrive?"

Cuz fluttered her wings. When she did so she winced in pain and another leaf suddenly grew out of the left side of her neck. "The mail man brought them."

Trudy said, "Well, then you could not have been the cause of the prosperity, because the letters were already on the way when you got here."

Cuz screamed. She opened her mouth and hissed at Trudy but instead of fire, out sprinkled saw dust, which settled harmlessly on the dragon slayers. Cuz raised up on her hind legs and tried to swipe at Jay with her right front claws. But she collapsed onto the log instead. As they watched she turned into a huge vine and wrapped herself around and up and down the log. Soon all was still.

Reg and his men came running out of the forest yelling and screaming in excitement. It was the first time they saw Ress, the Hawk flying. The dragon slayers stood up as they got there. The men and the hawk congratulated them and thanked them.

Jay was excited, but for a different reason. "Let's find the door!"

The dragon slayers crept into the gloom of the hollow trunk. Sure enough barely visible in the shadows about forty feet in, there was a door with a lock on it, but the key did not work.

They came out sad and disappointed. Jay looked around. "What happened to the black wolf?" No one knew.

The dragon slayers did not know it then, but they were not done with the black wolf. They would have to face him one more time.

Reg asked, "What is the plan for the dealing with the dragon soldiers?"

Trudy explained, "What ever happens to the dragon also happens to her teeth. There are no dragon soldiers."

Reg was surprised. "You mean they are vines now, too?"

High answered, "Yes."

Pass added, "Probably."

Lug added even more. "They could be vines, but more likely they turned into some other kind of plant."

Trudy asked, "Could the wolf have turned into a plant, too?"

Lug said, "Rook the crow and the black sea gull did not. I expect he has run off, like they did."

Reg and his men seemed very pleased. Reg said, "That is very good news! So what now?"

High said, "The Purple Dragon or the Red Dragon, is next. Either way we are headed for Single Side, the next town on the main highway."

Jay cocked his head and looked at the monkey. "What happened to not telling everyone our business?"

High's tail started twitching.

Reg looked from one to the other and then motioned to his men to follow him. They went a little ways down the road back towards Prop Tour Hock and began talking

with one another. They were still in the clearing but out of hearing. Apparently he just wanted to give the dragon slayers the privacy High seemed to want.

Pass offered, "We can not go on tonight. We need to get some food into us and camp here for the night." The shadows were long and the light was beginning to grow dim in the forest of giant trees. No one replied but they all began to follow their routine for setting up camp, getting a campfire started, and cooking their supper.

While they were working, Jay said, "What are we going to do next."

High said, "The Red Dragon, Begg, is south of the town Single Side, and Slant, the Purple Dragon, is north of it about the same distance, maybe a little less. Also Single Side is under the spell of Slant, so it makes sense to deal with him first."

Trudy asked, "Isn't that where Lucas said he would leave us a letter, in that town, Single Side, with the post master?"

Pass chirped, "Yes, that's right."

Just then Reg and his men came back. "I'm going to send a couple of men back to town tonight to give them the good news. I would send Ress, but I don't think they would believe a bird by himself. I'm sure they are going to want to plan a celebration, and you will be the honored guests. Jay and Trudy in particular really talked that dragon down. The rest of us will take turns standing guard tonight, so you won't have to do that."

High exclaimed, "That would be great!"

Trudy was not so enthusiastic. "You know, I think I have kind of ... had more ... I mean, I have had more than enough celebrations and speeches in the last few days. Would it hurt anyone's feelings if we just didn't? It is kind of embarrassing."

Jay nodded in agreement. "I don't feel much like a party, and I don't feel like a hero at all."

Pass and Lug said nothing even though Reg looked at them expectantly. High said nothing more either.

Reg looked thoughtful. "Well, anyway they need to know, so Sharp and Shooter will head into town. The rest of us will take turns guarding the camp here tonight. Ress is particularly good at that, you know. Bird's eye view and all that."

Trudy asked, "Why post a guard? The dragon and her soldiers are gone."

Reg looked surprised. "She and the soldiers are not the only dangerous things in this forest. Besides where is that black wolf with the blue eyes, who calls himself, 'None of your business'?"

Jay said, "You are right."

By then supper was ready and everyone must have been hungry, for it was a quiet supper. Again Reg and his men refused to take the dragon slayers' food. They ate some jerky out of their own backpacks as they had another quiet conference out of the hearing of the two children and the three parts of the Magician Key. The hawk and three of the men stayed to take turns guarding the dragon slayers as they slept. As Reg said, Sharp and Shooter headed down the road to the town.

After things settled down Jay asked Reg to show him how to use his sword. Reg showed him a few fighting moves and explained some strategy to Jay.

High muttered to no one in particular, "That sword is going to get us in trouble."

* * *

When the dragon slayers awoke they found that a number of forest people had quietly come into the camp sometime during the night. Two little forest women were cooking breakfast for the dragon slayers over the campfire. The smells of bacon and sausage may have been what stirred them. There was a large lumber wagon with two large horses ready to pull it. A little forest man was holding the reins. Several dozen more little forest men were climbing nearby trees.

The dazed dragon slayers found that they were not going to be allowed to take down their own tents. Several little forest people were going to do that task. Almost no words were spoken at all. They were soon sitting on the ground eating a wonderful breakfast. Bacon, sausage, pancakes, toast, and eggs for those that wished them. There was also berries, fruit, and potatoes for those that preferred those.

As they began to eat their breakfast the men in the trees began to sing a song. As they sang, they beat time to the song with sticks against the trees they were in. A mist was drifting among the trees but the morning sun was sending shafts of sunlight into the forest to slice up the mist. I was incredibly beautiful.

Reg bowed to the dragon slayers and said, "For you."

When breakfast was finished Reg explained, "The wagon is to give you a ride to Prop Tour Hock, if you wish. We have made arrangements for other transportation from there to Single Side. I trust that is OK?"

Soon the dragon slayers were in the wagon where they found that there were cushions for them to sit on. They also noticed that their backpacks had been refreshed with food and supplies. Ress, the hawk, glided above them as a sort of honor guard. As they rode through the forest they found that concerts had been planned for them all along the route. Sometimes it was all women singing, sometimes all men and sometimes both. Once it was a children's choir. Several times there were musical instruments played as well, sometimes with the singing, but often just the instruments.

When they got to Prop Tour Hock they transferred to the back of a steam powered truck. There was almost no one in the town, but as they looked back along the southern road they could see hundreds of little forest people walking back to the town. Many of them were carrying musical instruments. They also noticed several little juniper bushes growing around the benches in the square that had not been there the day before. One of them had a little green cap on top.

As the truck chugged across the high wooden bridge across the Ergo river Trudy said from her perch on a cushion, "Wasn't that beautiful?"

The others nodded in mute agreement.

Above their head Ress called out a final good bye and turned on the wind around back towards Prop Tour Hock.

* * *

The Fat Lazy Dragons

Book IV Slant – the Purple Dragon

Chapter 11 – Single Side

Not far on the other side of the Ergo river the hills began to become more numerous, higher and steeper. Before long they were winding along the sides of mountains. The bed of the truck was flat and high so they had a clear view of everything around them. The mountains were not tall enough for snow to cap their tops. They were covered with trees, but from time to time they would come around a bend where they could see for a long distance. The mountains had patches of morning fog still trapped in some of the valleys giving them a smoky look.

"The Amethyst Mountains" announced High.

Trudy said, "They look green to me, not amethyst or purple even."

Pass chirped, "They are named for what is inside, not their color."

High explained, "The amethysts they used to mine here is where the name came from, not the color."

Jay asked, "Used to mine?"

High went on. "They dug them all up. They still have iron mines up here. There is a copper mine far to the north. Slant has his lair where the amethyst mine used to be. There is a rock quarry right at Single Side, where we are going."

They met a couple of empty trucks heading for Prop Tour Hock. Once they passed a farmer on an ox pulled cart full of vegetables. Instead of purple skin, he had red skin. Not red skin like Native Americans, but red skin like a fire engine. Several times they saw little log houses nestled in a valley with a patch of cleared land planted in various vegetables or other food crops.

The morning was half gone when they arrived at Single Side. The road came out of the woods and a huge open rock pit could be seen a half-mile wide and hundred feet deep. A steam shovel and several trucks could be seen working the bottom along with several dozen Low Check men dressed in the blue work clothes that everyone in Low Check seemed to wear. The town of Single Side was on the other side of the valley from the rock quarry, on the same side where the road came out of the woods.

It consisted of several hundred one and two story buildings made of stone. It was the same grey color as the rock in the quarry. The houses had small yards and were crowded along several dozen side streets that criss-crossed the town. Instead of an open town square the businesses were all along the two main roads that crossed in the town. One road was the highway the dragon slayers traveled. The other one ran north and south. The south road wound past the quarry and disappeared in the mountains. The north road went through a tunnel to the north. There was not the only vehicle to be seen. They saw several trucks with rocks or big bars of iron come from the south and head to the west. They also saw several from the north with iron ore come from the north and go south.

As they drove into the town itself there were some town's people on horses, or walking, sharing the road with the trucks. The people smiled and waved in a friendly

way. Even the dragon soldiers were friendly. The dragon slayers looked at each other puzzled.

The truck came to a stop near the center of the town. The little forest man driving their truck looked out the back window of his cab. "Where to?"

Once again they realized they had no plan.

High answered, "Turn north to the old amethyst mines."

Jay disagreed. "No, the post office."

The driver replied, "This old truck won't make those steep mountain roads up north. I do not know where the post office is. Do you want me to ask?"

Pass replied, "Yes."

High exclaimed, "No!" but it was too late. The driver had already turned and waved over a passer-by.

High's tail twitched and he muttered, "Everybody's business."

They did not hear the conversation between the little Low Check men but in two minutes they were in front of a clothing store that had a little sign in the window that read, "Single Side Post Office."

They climbed down off the truck and thanked the driver. Soon he was chugging away as they entered the clothing store. The store had a lot of sizes, but everything was blue. Trudy thought about asking for something in yellow or green, just as a joke, but changed her mind. They found the business counter in the back. There was a little Low Check man wearing glasses sitting behind the counter reading what appeared to be a newspaper. It was an odd newspaper though. It only had print on one side of the page. The other side was blank.

High announced, "There is a letter here for me."

The man looked up at the group standing before him and smiled. "What is your name?"

"High."

The man looked under the counter and then laid a plain white envelope on the counter. "There you are, sir."

The envelope was addressed, "High the Wise Monkey, General Delivery, Single Side." The man went back to his reading.

High could not reach the letter from his perch on top of Lug, so Trudy picked it up and handed it to him. High started to open it and then changed his mind. "We need some privacy." Again they realized they had no plan.

Pass suggested, "We have been going like mad for six days. We need to find an inn and take stock of where we are and make some plans."

High looked at the man behind the counter. "Not everyone's business!"

Pass chirped, "They gave us money in E. Rail town. Let's use some of it on a place to stay and rest up. They seem friendly enough in this town."

Jay and Trudy both nodded.

High reluctantly agreed as well.

They went outside and stopped a passer by for directions to an inn. The woman smiled and pointed. There was one almost across the street from where they were. They went in and met a smiling innkeeper.

"Welcome, welcome," he said in a friendly way. "Any friend of Slant's is a friend of mine."

Trudy and Jay looked at each other in bewilderment.

Pass said, "We need two rooms for the next two nights."

High started to say something and changed his mind.

The innkeeper replied, "Sure," and quoted them a reasonable price. He added, "and that is two doubles and includes stabling for your donkey."

Trudy said, "He stays with us."

The innkeeper looked at the others as if he expected them to object. Finally he shrugged. "Keep the donkey where you like. Same price."

Jay asked, "So, what are people saying about us around here."

High's tail started to twitch.

The innkeeper seemed surprised at the question. "That you are helping Slant get control of the east country."

Trudy said, "What makes you think that?"

The innkeeper looked puzzled. "Well, you are the ones that destroyed three dragons over that way, right?"

Trudy nodded, "Yes."

The innkeeper went on, "The dragon soldiers aren't trying to stop you from coming here are they?"

Trudy shook her head, "No."

The innkeeper finished, "They would be, if you were not friends with Slant, and everyone knows Slant has wanted control of the East for a long time. Are you going to go back to the eastern grasslands after Mal, the Orange Dragon, soon?" He put two keys for their rooms on the desk, and pointed down the hall.

Trudy started to say, "But its not ..."

High stopped her with a squeaky screeching noise only a monkey can make.

Jay grabbed the keys. "I think it is time we oiled our monkey." With that he walked in the direction the innkeeper pointed. Lug followed him with High on his back.

Trudy shrugged which made Pass fly off her shoulder and join High on Lug. Trudy followed the rest. Soon they were safely in one of the rooms with two beds. The other room was right next door. They were glad to see the rooms had electricity and indoor plumbing.

Jay said, "Let's read that letter and make some plans."

High asked, "What's the idea of staying here two nights?"

Trudy had a question too. "Why did you stop me, High?"

High argued, "You were fixing to tell our business!"

Trudy replied, "I was just going to tell the truth. I thought that is how we dealt with these dragons, was by showing them up as liars."

High said doubtfully, "You were going to tell our business."

Trudy sighed and shrugged.

Pass said, "See. We all need some rest. Why don't we take one thing at a time?"

Jay agreed. "First the letter." Everyone seemed to agree with that.

As promised the letter was full of information about the dragons. It was four pages long. There was a page each for the purple, red, yellow, and white dragons, but only a note at the end for the black dragon. They all crowded around High to read it.

The letter read as follows:

Dear High,

I am sure Cuz gave you no real trouble. You are a wise monkey indeed. Here is the information I promised you. Slant, the Purple Dragon stays in the old amethyst mines far to the north of Single Side. Slant is short for some longer name, I guess, but I do not know what it is. The road to his lair is a steep climb in places. They had no cars and trucks when they were mining there, so the roads are not so good. He is too fat to fly and seldom leaves his lair. You can find it easy enough by following the food delivery that leaves from Single Side to the amethyst mine every day. Slant has a sneaky black lizard named Fibber that spies for him. Watch out for her.

Then there were some details about Single Side, its people, and the quarry, which you, my dear reader, already know about.

Slant lies by only telling one side of the story and pretending the other side of the story does not exist.

Then there were the details about the other dragons; red, yellow, and white; which will be shown to you, dear reader, later in this story.

I have run out of time. I will give you the details on Perf, the black dragon, when you get to Low Check City.

Your friend,

Lucas Light

Jay commented, "Those two dragons that tell more than one kind of lie are going to be hard. I don't think that is fair."

Trudy sighed. "Maybe this door, Slant's Door of Doom, will work and we won't have to deal with the Yellow and White dragons telling more than one kind of lie. That would be tricky. At least Slant, the Purple Dragon, only tells one kind of lie."

Jay replied, "It's more like a half a lie. Slant only tells half the story, so if you listen to him you believe the wrong thing."

Lug asked, "How do we know Lucas is telling us the truth."

Trudy replied, "Well, the innkeeper believing we are Slant's friends sure was only hearing one side of the story."

Jay added, "Lucas' description of this area matches, and we already knew Slant was in the amethyst mine, like he says."

Trudy went on, "and Lucas told us the truth about Cuz, the Green Dragon."

Lug said, "Well, that is one way of looking at it."

The dragon slayers read the letter again, concentrating most on the parts about the purple dragon.

They were thoughtfully silent for a few minutes while Trudy took the letter and read it to herself again for a third time.

Jay suggested. "Maybe, Trudy is right. Maybe we should go ahead and try to get his lies straightened out here, while these people are willing to talk to us. That would be easier than facing him in his lair."

High perked up. "Sure, I'm for that."

Pass objected, "We have this room for two nights. We all need to rest."

Trudy said enthusiastically, "That will mean when we are finished, we will have a nice place to stay instead of barracks or tents. We have two rooms here, and a girl needs some privacy now and then. But that doesn't mean we can't explore Single Side and maybe get this taken care of today. Sure would be nice to go to sleep tonight with this purple dragon already taken care of."

Jay added, "We can always go visit Slant later, if it does not work."

Pass said reluctantly, "Ok, but if we do not get it done today, then we rest tomorrow."

When they went back out the innkeeper smiled at them and looked like he expected some kind of request.

Trudy just plunged right in. "We are not trying to help Slant, you know."

The smile disappeared from the innkeeper's face and he looked puzzled instead. "Well, you sure are doing a good job at it for someone who is not trying."

Trudy went on, "We plan to visit Slant when we leave here."

The innkeeper's smile returned. "Best way to do that is go with his food delivery. It leaves first thing in the morning. Does that mean you are staying only one night?"

Jay chimed in. "We mean to do the same thing to Slant as we did to the first three."

The puzzled look returned to the innkeeper's face. "I can not imagine why you would say such a thing." Then he brightened. "Oh, it is a joke."

Trudy and Jay looked at each other. Trudy looked back at the little man behind the counter and said, "We are dragon slayers on our way to destroy Slant."

The innkeeper laughed. "Why would anyone want to do that? He is the best ruler we could possibly have. Without Slant's protection this town would soon be under the control of one of those other dragons. As the most important town in Low Check it is the one they all want."

Jay asked, "You like him ruling over you?"

The innkeeper held up his hand and started counting off on his fingers. "First, he only charges 50% tax. Second, he is trying to bring the other districts of Low Check under Single Side. Third, he could have made us build him a castle or something else, but he humbly stays in an old abandoned mine. Fourth, he protects us from the other dragons."

Jay said, "That is way too much tax."

The innkeeper rolled his eyes.

Trudy asked, "How do you know he is trying to bring the other districts under Single Side?"

The innkeeper laughed. "He sent you, didn't he?"

High argued, "Purple dragons prefer amethyst mines to anything else. That's why he's here."

The innkeeper chuckled. "Well, I'm glad we have something to offer he really enjoys."

Jay asked, "What makes you think he protects you from other dragons? Have you ever seen him fight with one of them?"

The innkeeper shook his head. "Why would he fight with them, when he has you for that?"

High asked, "What makes you think this little tiny village is the most important town in Low Check?"

The innkeeper looked down at the floor.

Pass chirped, "High, there is no reason to insult his town."

Trudy nodded, "She is right about that."

High exclaimed, "It is a lie. This town is not the most important."

Trudy nodded again, "He is right about that."

The little man looked up. "No, it is alright. I do not mind." Again he counted off on his fingers. "First, it is in the middle of Low Check. Second, it is the only town with a major road going East and West crossing a major road going North and South. Third, we provide all the iron and copper needed by the rest of Low Check. Fourth, it is the only town with all the houses built of stone." He looked at each one of them triumphantly.

High said, "Low Check City is much bigger."

Again the innkeeper rolled his eyes. "That donkey is bigger than you. Which of you is more important?"

High's tail began to twitch.

Pass fluttered her wings. "Iron and copper are important, but isn't food more important. Look how much food comes from E. Rail Town and Quiver Town."

Jay interrupted, "You mean Trudy Town."

Pass looked at Jay. "I have not forgotten, but this Single Side man would know it as Quiver Town."

Jay apologized. "You are right. Sorry."

Pass continued with the innkeeper. "The forest around Prop Tour Hock is really beautiful. I do not mean to be critical, but that quarry outside of town here, is ugly."

The innkeeper shrugged. "That is a matter of opinion."

Lug asked, "What is that in your ear?" For the first time everyone noticed there was something purple in one of the innkeeper's ears.

The innkeeper touched his ear. "That is dragon wax. All us purple people wear it in one ear. We get a new supply every time Slant scrapes his scales."

Trudy shuddered. "Ew. That's nasty."

Jay just laughed.

Neither of them noticed anymore how odd it was when people of one color called themselves another. Just a few days before and a red skinned man calling himself purple would have really surprised and puzzled them. Now Trudy and Jay understood that when the Low Check man said, "us purple people," he was talking about the color of the purple dragon under whose spell the people of Single Side and the Amethyst Mountains had fallen.

The innkeeper looked at Trudy. He was surprised. "Why? What's nasty about it?"

Lug said, "No one with that magic wax in one ear is going to be able to hear more than one side of the story."

The innkeeper brightened. "I told my wife it was magic, but she would not believe it."

Jay shrugged. "I know how you feel. It is hard when you tell someone the truth and they will not believe it."

Trudy laughed.

Jay said, "Why don't you take that wax out of your ear for a second and listen to what we have to say?"

The innkeeper looked horrified. "No purple person would ever do that!"

* * *

The dragon slayers tried talking with a few more of the Single Side people, but they all turned out pretty much like talking with the innkeeper. They all had purple dragon wax in one ear, even the children, which they would not even consider removing. The dragon slayers explored the town all that day and the next but found nothing remarkable. They ate sometimes in one or the other of the two local restaurants. Trudy and Pass took one room and the other three the other. Each had his own bed, with Pass perched on the headboard of her bed, and Lug preferring a rug on the floor.

One interesting thing happened while they were there. Late in the afternoon of the first day there was a dragon sighting. They were walking on the south side of town looking across the valley at the rock quarry when they saw Single Side people pointing up and talking excitedly. When they looked up they saw an orange dragon flying east.

High announced, "Mal. He is flying towards his home in the grasslands. I wonder where he has been."

Jay said, "He's not fat like the others."

Lug said, "No, he is not like the others. He and Perf are the only ones who can still fly. The rest are fat and lazy."

Soon the dragon flew beyond their vision, disappearing in the haze of Amethyst Mountains. The dragon slayers continued their exploration. By the second morning they were rested and refreshed, ready to continue their adventure.

* * *

Chapter 12 – Fibber and Slobber

They had found out from the innkeeper the place and time of departure of those who would be going to the dragon's lair the next day. He assured them that given the dangers on the trip they would welcome the dragon slayer's company. The place to meet was at the entrance of the tunnel, which went north from the town. Having explored the town thoroughly the day before it was found easily. However, there was a surprise.

Gathering at the tunnel entrance was a larger caravan than had been described to them. There were eight pack mules loaded down with bags. There were four little men each leading two mules. Two steam trucks were also sitting there, each with a driver. This much was expected.

There were seven dragon soldiers led by one with a little purple cap on his point, right above his face. Trudy could not get used to their cone shaped bodies with the face scrunched up in the point. Their legs seemed much too short and their arms too long. At least the Low Check people looked "normal" except for being small and having skin the color of strawberries or cherries. They had expected only two dragon soldiers.

There was also a black lizard. It looked like an iguana about five feet long except instead of being colored some shade of green it was black with blue eyes.

The dragon soldier with the purple cap saw them and came over to meet them as they came walking up. "Hello, I'm Captain Slobber. I have brought extra troops along to make sure you get to the amethyst mine safely." He held out his hand. The dragon slayers looked at each other.

Trudy put out her hand, "Hello."

Jay reluctantly did the same.

Captain Slobber went on. "You are Trudy and Jay, I presume?"

Trudy and Jay nodded.

Captain Slobber looked at the three animals. "And High, Pass and Lug?"

High said, "I don't like this."

Captain Slobber pretended not to hear. "If you will just load up into the oar trucks with the rest of us, we'll be on our way."

Jay objected, "I thought trucks couldn't drive on the road to the amethyst mine." It was a question he had asked before, but without an answer.

"They only take us as far as Eva Dense. From there on we'll be on our own. The trucks will go to the iron mines and we'll go to the amethyst mine."

Trudy shrugged. "It is what we came for."

As they approached the group, the black lizard said, "I'm Fibber. Welcome to our caravan." Her voice had a whiney nasal quality to it that Jay found annoying and Trudy thought was cute.

The mule handlers were introduced as Card Stacker, Ig Nore, One Sider and his brother Mon O. Sider. The other dragon soldiers were not introduced.

Six of the mules, and their three keepers, got in one truck with two of the dragon soldiers and Fibber. The other five dragon soldiers including Slobber, two of the mules,

their keeper, and the dragon slayers got in the other truck. There were no cushions like they had with the logging truck from Prop Tour Hock. Slobber and Fibber each rode in the front with the driver of their truck.

The truck burned coal instead of wood so it smelled worse. Also it was not flat like the log truck. After the tail gate was closed, it and the sides of the oar truck were too high for seeing out. All they could see was the sky above. As soon as the truck started they went into the tunnel and everything turned black. The truck rattled too much as it moved along the gravel road for them to have any conversation. After they got through the tunnel all they could see besides the blue sky was the occasional tree covered top of a mountain.

There was a sort of pipe along the middle of the side that they could hold onto. Later that was about all the children remembered about that morning – holding on to the pipe, the rattling noise, the smell of burning coal, and wondering when the next time would be when the truck would hit a bump. They had to stand up the whole way. Sometimes the truck was going up steep hills and sometimes down.

It was hardest on the mules and Lug. They could not hold on to the pipe. It was easiest on Pass who road on top of the truck cab and simply flew off every time she saw a bump coming. High rode there with her, but he had to hold onto the horn housing and was pretty miserable. They had been on the road a little over an hour when Pass and High saw four little Low Check men, and two dragon soldiers, walking wearily back towards Single Side with eight empty mules. Several times they met oar trucks returning full from the iron or copper mines.

They stopped once about the middle of the morning so the drivers could load more coal in their fire boxes. The road ran through the middle of a valley between two mountains. The land was cleared and a little stream came down off one mountain and the meandered along the side of the road towards the way they had come. There was a farmer's house there with several out buildings. They stopped just long enough for everyone to stretch their legs and get a drink of water. Then it was back in the trucks to complete the trip.

The sun was shining directly from above when they finally got to Eva Dense. Eva Dense was a small village of perhaps two dozen buildings. One of them was an inn for travelers. As they were climbing off the back of the truck they saw two dragon soldiers, and four little Low Check men come out of the inn, and start leading eight mules back towards Single Side. Card Stacker and the rest of the little men with the dragon slayers exchanged greetings with the mule handlers, but Slobber and his men had nothing to say to the other two dragon soldiers.

Jay asked, "I wonder how they get back with no oar trucks."

Pass said, "I don't know but it is the second bunch I have seen headed back to Single Side since we left this morning."

Jay thought for a minute and then said, "One day to get there. Without the trucks, two to get back."

Trudy looked at him as if to say, "Who cares?" but she said nothing.

The people from the caravan filled up the restaurant in the inn. Everyone was too tired to do anything but eat, except for the truck drivers, Slobber, and Fibber, who rode in

the front seats of the trucks. The four of them talked loudly and cheerfully about the weather, the condition of the roads, one of the iron mines that was about to close, and the price of copper.

The children and High finished first and went outside to make sure Lug was being properly taken care of. He was munching feed contentedly with the pack mules. Pass was hunting insects. They looked around at the town. The road they traveled on continued straight to the north. Another road wound out of town to the west. All the buildings in the village were along one of these two roads. The inn was right where the two roads met.

Trudy said, "I wonder why they call this place Eva Dense?"

High answered, "They had an argument over whether to call it Igg Nore Ring the Counter Eva Dense or Sup Pressed Eva Dense. They finally just gave up and called it Eva Dense."

Trudy looked at High with surprise. She was surprised he knew an answer. She was surprised that he said that answer like it really explained anything. It just made her more confused. She shrugged. She was getting used to the odd long names in Low Check.

Trudy had another question. "Why is it Lug can talk and the mules can't."

High said, "Lug is just part of Magician Key, like me. He is not really an animal."

Trudy was not satisfied. "What about Fibber? He is a big lizard, but he talks."

High looked down and said nothing.

Lug swallowed a mouthful of feed and then said, "If an animal talks, it is under the influence of some kind of magic. Fibber may be something Slant did."

Trudy suggested, "So that black wolf with Cuz and Rook the crow were both magic as well?"

Lug answered, "Yes, and probably that black gull of Track's and Ress, the hawk."

Trudy added, "And the snails." She looked puzzled. She knew they had a conversation about all this before but she could not quite remember it.

The two drivers came out and fired up their trucks. In just a couple minutes they were chugging and rattling on to the north with their trucks empty. Soon the dragon slayers, dragon feeders, dragon soldiers, and dragon spy were walking along the other road. It soon became clear that the afternoon was going to be just as uncomfortable as the morning, but in a different way. The mule handlers and dragon soldiers walked along at a pretty fast pace.

Pass objected, "These children can not keep up this speed!" High, of course, was on Lug's back.

Card Stacker answered, "We need to make the mine before dark. There are lynx, cougar, and wolves in these mountains."

Lug said, "Why don't the children take turns riding on me?"

Jay said, "Trudy first."

Jay walked and the other three dragon slayers rode Lug. When Jay became tired Trudy walked and Jay joined Pass and High on Lug. They swapped back and forth several times in the course of the afternoon. The effort of keeping up was too much for any one in the caravan to make conversation.

Several times they found themselves walking single file on narrow paths. Sometimes these were just between boulders broken off a mountain. Sometimes they were on part of the trail where they had to climb up steep places on the side of a mountain. When they got to these, whoever was riding Lug would get off, so Lug could make the climb. Often these would turn into brief rests for them because Card Stacker and the rest would only be able to lead one mule at a time up the climb, so everyone else could rest while they were leading up the second mule. Sometimes the narrow parts of the road were along the side of a mountain with steep falling slopes below them or even cliffs, occasionally.

They were on one of these beside a cliff when it happened. Jay was on Lug with the High and Pass. Trudy was walking behind Lug. Behind her was Fibber. Trudy tripped on a stone and she found herself falling, grasping in every direction to find only air, and screaming. Suddenly she felt something like a rope wrap around her and stop her fall. But it was not a rope. Fibber was hanging on to Trudy with her tail and hanging on to the edge of the path with her front claws. Card Stacker, who had been walking right behind Fibber, and Jay were there in a moment, pulling them back to the safety of the path.

Trudy turned to Fibber and said, "Thank you. Thank you very much."

Fibber replied in her nasal whine, "It was nothing."

Trudy said, "You risked your life to save mine. That is something, and it is something I am grateful for."

Fibber did not reply.

Pass said, "I guess it is Trudy's turn to ride Lug."

Soon they were on their way again. Jay was right in front of Fibber.

"Thank you for what you did for my sister."

"She would have done the same for me."

Jay did not know how to answer, but all the dragon slayers found the incident puzzling. Why would the dragon spy help them?

At the next rest stop Pass overheard part of a conversation between Fibber and Slobber.

Slobber was saying, "... key's protecting magic would not have been stirred by a real accident. Think of the problems that would have solved."

Fibber replied, "It was just instinct. I did not have time to think about it."

The two noticed Pass had come closer and quit talking. Pass did not have a chance to tell the others about it that day.

Twilight was upon them when they reached the mine entrance. No one had spoken for an hour. They were simply too tired from the effort of keeping up. There were several buildings near the entrance to the mine. They had housed the miners, provided storage for the mining equipment, been where the amethysts had been cut and polished, and had headquarters operations in them. There was a faded sign on one of them that said, "Prop Ah Gand Ah Mine Company, Inc." The housing for the mineworkers had become instead a barracks for a dozen dragon soldiers.

Prop Ah Gand Ah Mine Company, Inc.

The mule leaders just stopped the mules and waited. Fibber went into the mine, and Slobber went into one of the buildings to talk to the local soldiers. The dragon slayers not knowing what else to do, and grateful for the rest, just waited with the pack mules, Card Stacker and the rest of the little men.

In a few minutes, Fibber came back out of the mine. She looked at the door where Slobber had gone and then said, "Good news, and good news."

Looking at the dragon slayers Fibber announced, "He will see you now."

Looking at the mule drivers Fibber said as if she was granting a great favor. "I have new dragon wax for you. Give me your old."

The four little Low Check men took the purple wax out of their ears and gave it to Fibber.

Fibber went on, "I'll have the new dragon wax in just a little while. Let's take Slant his supper; shall we?" With that she turned and headed into the mine. The mule leaders started leading the meals on mules after her. When the dragon slayers just stood there not sure what to do, Fibber motioned for them to follow. "You too. Come on. Come on."

Every few feet in the mine tunnel there were electric lights above them. The bulbs were all colored purple or lavender. The walls, floor, and ceiling sparkled everywhere like there was amethyst dust in the rock. It was eerily beautiful to walk through the passageway.

Trudy was impressed. "I had no idea a amethyst mine would be so pretty!"

Lug said, "Amethyst mines do not look this way. This has been dressed up, probably with magic." Indeed it certainly seemed magic to walk along with sparkles all around you in the purple light.

Jay shook his head, "I am really tired. We should have walked slower and just followed the trail. I can no more face a dragon right now, than I could run a mile."

Pass agreed. "We have let ourselves be rushed into this."

Trudy said, "It's what we are here for."

Just then the mine tunnel opened into a huge sparkling chamber with lavender and purple lights not only above, but on the walls as well. In the center was a fat purple dragon.

* * *

Chapter 13 – The Lost Door

Slant seemed to be as surprised see them as the dragon slayers were to see him. "Fibber!" he thundered, "You fool! Not at the same time."

The mule leaders got busy unloading their mules.

Lug nudged Jay and said in a soft voice, "Do you think it is fair that this dragon has everybody believing you are on his side?"

Jay replied, "No, I don't." Too tired to be afraid, he walked over and stood about ten feet in front of the dragon and said, "We are not on your side, you know."

Slant looked at him in surprise. The rest of the dragon slayers followed Jay and were soon standing beside him.

Slant replied, "I never said you were. I had nothing to do with it at all. How could I? I've been right here in the mine for months. You must be the one they call Jay for Justice. Plan on slaying me with that sword you are wearing?"

Jay said, "That's right. I'm Jay. You know I can't use this sword on you. Your dragon soldiers were sure telling everyone in Single Side that we were all good friends. The red ... I mean, purple people believed it."

Slant's wings fluttered. "What if they did?"

Trudy was also too tired to be afraid. Trudy joined in, "Then that means you were lying through your teeth."

Jay laughed.

Slant looked at Jay puzzled. "What is so funny?"

The children ignored the question.

Jay said, "It is not fair to just tell one side of the story like they were doing."

Trudy added, "If we were helping you get control of the east country, then why did we let the people in each town have control of their own country?"

Slant stood up on all fours. He scratched the side of his neck and a rusty spot appeared where he scratched. Slant replied, "I do not have to explain myself to you. Where is Captain Slobber? Fibber, why didn't you bring Captain Slobber?"

High was shaking with fear, but he managed to speak up, "And why did you try to use such an obvious lie about how important Single Side is. It is not the only town with more than one major road. Low Check City has five major roads that go into it."

Slant replied, "No one lied. The roads in Low Check City do not go due north, due south, nor is there any road at all to the west of Low Check City."

Jay argued, "Five roads is more than four roads."

Trudy added, "So you do know what your dragon soldiers were saying."

Slant scratched himself again and another rusty spot appeared on his hind leg. Card Stacker stopped his work, tapped the other mule handlers on the shoulder and pointed at the dragon slayers. The little men stopped their work to listen more carefully.

Trudy went on, "You are not the good ruler these people have been told that you are."

Jay accused, "There is no way 50% tax is fair."

Trudy added, "And how would it help Single Side for you to rule over all of Low Check? You seldom go to Single Side."

Slant scratched some rust off his left wing and for the first time noticed Card Stacker and the other little men had quit unpacking their mules and had started listening. Slant stared at the men carefully for a minute. He hissed, "What happened to their wax? Fibber you are a liar and a betrayer." Fibber barely got out of the way of the dragon's tail banging down where he had just been standing. Fibber scurried for the exit passage. A stream of fire twenty-five feet long spewed from Slant's mouth, singeing Fibber's tail as she disappeared in the direction they had come. Card Stacker and the other little men flattened themselves against the walls of the chamber in fear. Two of the mules ran out after Fibber and the rest bucked and snorted. The huge chamber became a little hazy, a layer of dense yellow smoke covered the floor, and they smelled a strong odor of sulfur.

Slant turned to the dragon slayers and spoke in conciliatory tones. "I really do want to be your ally. I spread those rumors that we are friends because I wanted it to become true. I could have refused to see you, or have hidden somewhere in this huge mine. Fibber told me you were coming, and this mine has many passage ways. Think of the many ways I could help you."

Trudy replied, "That is only one side of the story. Just a minute ago you said you had nothing to do with the story getting around about us being friends. Were you telling the truth then, or now?"

Jay said, "Fibber was your friend. If you treat your friends that unfairly, I do not want to be your friend. I guess we'll never see her again." But Jay was wrong about that. Fibber still had a part to play in their adventures.

Slant scratched his head and another rusty spot appeared. "Now, who is just looking at one side of the story? Fibber betrayed me."

Pass overcame her fear. She was shaking when she asked, "Betrayed you to who? Us? That means we are your enemies, not your friends, which is exactly opposite of what you are saying now."

Slant started to scratch his belly and decided not to. He said sarcastically, "Oh, another of the Magician Key's parts speaks. You know, children, the Magician key is not your friend. If he really killed the old dragon, Fay, by himself, why would he need someone's help to kill some more."

Trudy said, "You have a funny way of always just looking at things one way. He had to get smaller in order to come into Low Check."

Slant said, "Oh, no. I had a long talk with Rook the crow about your little group. When you first came into Low Check, do you remember a little conversation about going back into the City of Reason for shoes for Trudy and supplies and what not?"

Trudy and Jay looked at each other in surprise.

High said, "So what?" His tail was twitching nervously.

Slant said triumphantly, "Rook was there! He heard it all! You do remember Rook the blue eyed crow, don't you? As you were talking about it, Luggage Key himself said, 'It is just a sign'." He was talking about the sign that says you have to be short to come into Low Check. Key knew he did not really have to be short to get into Low

Check. He just wanted to be disguised when you assassinated the kind and gentle rulers of these lands, so that you would get all the blame."

Jay said, "I was really starting to wonder about that 'being short' rule, until you said, 'kind and gentle rulers', but now I will not believe anything you say. Enslaving people with lies is unkind and violent."

Trudy said, "Lug was talking about the, 'No Exit,' sign, not the, 'You have to be shorter ...' sign."

The Purple Dragon opened his mouth to breathe fire on the dragon slayers, but only a stream of dry rust flakes came out. Slant took a step in their direction and suddenly froze. The children took a step back. A film of rust formed all over Slant in just a few seconds. The dragon slayers were surprised. They were all very tired, and did not really think they had been doing their best against him.

Pass flew over and perched on what used to be Slant's head. Slant looked like a giant rusted statue of a dragon. Pass exclaimed, "He appears to have become some kind of stone or rock covered in rust dust."

Card Stacker came over and rubbed some rust off the stone statue and announced, "This is an excellent grade of iron ore."

Lug said, "How ironic."

Jay asked, "What does that mean?"

Lug answered, "He finally became good for something."

Trudy exclaimed, "Where is the magic door?"

They all looked around. There was no door. There were seven tunnels leading from the great chamber. Only two of them were lit with electric lights; the one they entered through and another almost directly across from it. They followed this second one down to a smaller chamber, whose floor was covered with so many old feed sacks that it was like walking on a mattress.

Pass said, "This must be where he slept."

The others nodded in agreement, but there was no door there either.

They went back to the main chamber where they found Card Stacker coming in from the other tunnel.

Card Stacker said, "The dragon soldiers have all turned to iron ore, too. I do not think we are purple anymore." Apparently he was too tired to be joyful about it.

High said, "You're welcome."

Card Stacker shook his head slightly.

Jay complained, "I'm hungry."

Trudy added, "I'm sleepy."

High objected, "We need to find that magic door and move on to the next dragon. We seem to have managed to get to this one before he was expecting us. We need to do that again if we can."

Pass chirped. "High, me and you have been riding all afternoon. These children have not. They are tired and hungry. We can find the door in the morning."

They went back out to the kitchen in the barracks and sat down with Card Stacker and the other three mule handlers to a delicious meal. Of course, it might not really have been delicious, because they were so hungry, almost anything would have been delicious.

Jay asked, "Do any of you have any idea where there is a locked door in the mine? Slant may have called it a Door of Doom."

All the Low Check men shook their heads. Card Stacker added, "There might still be some maps and drawings in the mine's office."

* * *

They were finishing breakfast the next morning when Card Stacker asked, "So you are going through all of Low Check freeing the people from dragon rule?"

Pass replied, "You do not sound pleased."

Card Stacker shrugged. "I guess I am, but this is a big change from what we expected. I guess we sort of believed we were going to become the capital city of Low Check and that would make us all rich."

Lug commented, "Wealth never made anyone free."

High added, "Seems to me you should be more grateful for your liberty."

Jay shook his head. "They did not ask us to set them free from the dragon."

Trudy suggested, "Even if you had become the capital city, I don't think it would have meant much of a change for you."

Card Stacker nodded his head. "I see that, now, but it is kind of hard to celebrate the death of a dream."

No one knew how to answer that. After a few minutes of awkward silence, Jay stood up and said, "I'm looking for those maps and diagrams."

Card Stacker said, "I guess we better get back to Single Side and let them know what happened."

Trudy shook her head. "The dragon soldiers there will be iron as well. They will have some idea what happened, I think."

Card Stacker raised one eyebrow. "Really?"

Trudy nodded.

Card Stacker was thoughtful for a moment. "Well, another food team will still be on their way. No sense them having to make that afternoon climb. We'll meet them in Eva Dense and stop them. It will be nice to be able to stay home with my family instead of coming up here once a week."

* * *

They found the maps and diagrams easily, but the door was another matter. They had to use torches to search miles of tunnels, but thanks to the maps, they were able to do it systematically without getting lost. After searching all day they had been through the entire mine. It was many tunnels and several chambers. They even looked under the feed sack mattress in the sleeping chamber. They found nothing resembling a door.

Discouraged they sat in the barracks kitchen eating supper at the end of their day of searching.

High complained, "I'm ready to give up. Maybe there is no door."

Lug suggested, "Maybe the door is invisible."

High answered, "If that is true, how will we ever find it?"

Lug continued, "We might be able to hear it or feel it."

They were silent thinking about what Lug had said.

Finally Jay said, "Tomorrow we will try again."

* * *

As they entered the mine tunnel the next day Trudy said, "It does not seem to be as sparkly today."

Lug said, "The magic is fading. Probably has been ever since Slant got ironed."

They walked slowly through the passageways feeling for drafts or cracks in the wall. They tapped (Pass pecked) on the walls and floors. It took much longer to search that way. At the end of four more days they had been all through the mine again. Still they had found nothing. It was clear by then though that Lug was right about the fading magic. The sparkle was almost gone.

After the five days of searching they were very discouraged.

At dinner High said again. "I'm ready to give up. If we clear all the other dragons out of Low Check the children can come back here with the Magician Key and he will, or we will, or I will ... however, you say it ... will know what to do."

Lug said, "The door does seem to be magically hidden."

Trudy agreed. "That might be the best thing to do. Maybe that is how the prophecy will be fulfilled, we will take care of getting rid of all the dragons, and then we can come back for this door."

Lug said, "It is up to the prophecies to take care of themselves. We just need to do what makes sense."

Pass added, "Yes, and what Trudy said makes sense to me."

Jay argued, "I think we should get better lights and try again. There is electricity run to that mine. We should be able to rig something up."

Lug said, "If the door is magically hidden more light won't help. As you noticed, the magic in the mine is fading."

Trudy and Jay both nodded.

High said, "So?"

Lug said, "I think there is a good chance that when the magic is completely faded we'll be able to see the door."

Everyone was quiet as they thought that over. Finally Jay said, "I wish we had thought of that a week ago."

* * *

The next day when they went in the mine they could still see a few sparkles in the tunnels. Lug suggested, "I think tomorrow or the next day it will be gone."

Pass said, "We need to rest anyway. Five days walking around in a dark mine by torchlight is enough."

Jay and Trudy spent most of the morning exploring the buildings of the Prop Ah Gand Ah mining camp. They found nothing remarkable. After lunch Jay practiced the sword fighting moves that Reg had shown him. Pass taught Trudy some Low Check songs. Lug took a walk with High riding on his back. In the evening everyone just laid around the barracks doing nothing and chatting about this and that.

After a conversation about how tired they were of sleeping in dragon soldier barracks, but how much better barracks were than tents, Jay asked, "I wonder why that black lizard, Fibber, helped us?"

Pass chirped. "Don't you remember? I told you. She just grabbed Trudy by instinct. She was not really trying to help."

Jay shook his head. "That is not what I meant. Remember? Fibber got the mule handlers to take the wax out of their ears. Then she brought us down together when Slant was not expecting it, and managed to do it while Captain Slobber wasn't looking. She was helping us on purpose, I'm sure of it"

Pass added, "And all that made Slant angry, so it was easier to get him frustrated enough to attack us. You are right Jay. I think she was helping us."

Trudy nodded. "Sure looks that way, and it makes me wonder, if she kept me from falling on purpose instead of because she wasn't thinking."

High chattered, "But she was a dragon spy. Why would she want Slant slain?"

Lug asked, "Yes, she is a dragon spy, but for which dragon?"

No one knew how to answer that.

After a moment Trudy said, "I'm sure glad we don't have dragons in our world. I hate their lies."

Pass fluttered her wings in surprise. "You have more liar dragons in your world than we do in ours. That is why we sent the magic keys to it. We thought people from your world would have more experience dealing with their lies."

Jay laughed. "Well, that was a big mistake. There are legends of dragons, but no one believes them. There is certainly none today."

High disagreed. "You have millions of them. They are all invisible."

Trudy leaned forward. "Really?"

Lug said, "We are telling the truth, only it is more like billions of them."

Trudy and Jay looked at each other in surprise.

They were quiet for a while and Trudy said, "There is something I don't understand. When we first met I told you animals in our world could not talk and you were surprised. Later at the inn at Eva Dense you said only magic animals could talk. Just now you said you know all about our world. How can all those things be true?"

Pass fluttered her wings. "What do mean?"

Trudy explained, "If you know about our world why were you surprised that animals could not talk there? If some animals here could not talk, why were you surprised that animals could not talk in our world?"

High's tail was twitching. "We are not dragons! Why are we being accused of being liars?"

Trudy looked surprised.

Jay spoke up. "That's not fair. She did not accuse anyone of being a liar."

Pass chirped, "High, Jay is right. Trudy is just careful with the truth. That is what makes her a good dragon slayer."

High said nothing, but his tail continued to twitch.

Lug explained. "Nobody knows everything. We know a few things about your world with regard to magic, because we share the magic universe in common, but very little else. When you said animals could not talk in your world, we naturally thought you meant magical animals. Why would anyone even begin to think non-magic animals could talk? We had no idea you did not have any magical animals."

Trudy nodded and smiled. Jay was looking at the floor beside his feet.

After another quiet few minutes Trudy spoke up again. "There is something else I do not understand."

Everyone looked at her.

Trudy continued, "When Pass offered to leave Tract, the Blue dragon, alone, if he would let us try the key on his Door of Doom, Tract said he could not allow it. Lug, you agreed with him, why?"

Lug answered, "If a dragon's Door of Doom is opened while he lives, he goes into your world as an invisible dragon. They find that very unpleasant."

Pass was surprised. "Are you sure?"

High added, "What difference does it make? They already have millions of them."

Lug answered, "Yes, I'm sure, and they have billions, not millions. But that is not the point. It would be unfair of us to send one more just to make it easy on ourselves."

Jay nodded. "Lug is right about that."

Trudy asked, "But what if Jay and I agreed to it?"

Lug asked a question in reply, "Do you speak for everyone in your world?"

Jay replied, "No. No, we do not. Why do they have doors to our world anyway?"

Lug replied, "I'm not sure I understand everything about all that, but as I understand it, dragons used to be good, not evil. They were born here and when they got big enough to fly the door appeared automatically so that they could go there and be of service. When they became evil all their power was taken from them and they were made invisible. Now all they can do is whisper lies."

Trudy asked, "Where do the keys come from?"

Lug answered, "The dragons make them. It used to be they could go back and forth between worlds freely, but now they are trapped once they go over there. So they put locks on the door and keep the key. Now they call them their Door of Doom."

Jay said, "How did you get the keys?"

High answered, "I took them from old Fay when he was destroyed. He kept all his children's keys to keep them under control. He had Perf's too."

After a few minutes of thoughtful silence their talk took a more colorful turn."

Trudy commented. "One thing that disappoints me is the Purple Dragon did not tell a purple lie."

Jay agreed. "Yeah, I did not hear one either."

High was curious. "What are you talking about? He told many lies."

Trudy reminded him, "You remember, the Brown Dragon had those people thinking that browning the meat meant painting it with brown paint, when it means cooking the meat until it is brown."

Jay added, "And the Blue Dragon tried to get us to forget what we were arguing about by talking about how blue he felt."

Pass chirped, "And the Green Dragon had her folks thinking trees turning green in the spring made it get warm."

High had started nodding when Trudy explained. "I know, I know. I remember now."

Lug said, "Maybe we can make up one that has something to do with purple and the kinds of lies Slant told."

There was a lot of head scratching, chin rubbing, and looking at the ceiling. Several suggestions were made, but no one liked them, even the one who suggested them.

Finally Jay said, "Well, you have heard of 'purple mountains majesty'? It doesn't matter how purple the mountain looks on this side, it has another side."

Trudy laughed and nodded.

Jay explained that "purple mountains majesty" was from a song from his world.

* * *

The next day the sparkles in the mine were completely gone and they found the door easily. It was in the east wall of the Purple Dragon's sleeping chamber, the first place they had looked. The magic key did not open the door. It was a very disappointed group that walked slowly out of the mine and went back to their favorite table in the

barracks kitchen. They liked that table because they could see out the window while they sat there. They sat around it for several minutes in silence.

Finally High said, "The Red Dragon is next."

There did not seem to be anything else to say.

It was still pretty early in the morning so they decided to go ahead and start the trip back to Single Side. There was plenty of food left from what had been brought to the dragon, so they were able to fill their food bags. The mine buildings had running water so they were able to fill their canteens. In less than hour they were on their way.

On the way back they went slower and rested more often. It was less difficult that way, but it was late in the afternoon before they got to Eva Dense. They went into the inn at Eva Dense and asked the Low Check man, who was no longer purple, for rooms for the night. He took their money and gave them their keys in a very business like manner, without any sign that he even knew who they were.

It was more than High could stand. "Don't you know who we are?"

The little man looked at High without emotion. "Sure. You are the dragon slayers."

High complained, "You do not seem very thankful for what we did."

Jay objected. "He does not owe us anything. We did what we did for us as much as anybody else."

Pass and Trudy both murmured agreement.

The little man watched their conversation with some amusement. He said, "I am grateful, but lately I have learned to look at both sides of things."

Trudy asked, "What do you mean?"

The little innkeeper shrugged. "I'm glad I'm no longer purple. I'm glad we are free, but without the dragon feeders bringing meals on mules, stopping in here to buy lunch coming and going every day, I may not be able to stay in business."

Jay replied, "I guess everything does have more than one side to it, doesn't it?"

Lug said, "Most things. Not everything."

* * *

The Fat Lazy Dragons

Book V Begg – the Red Dragon

Chapter 14 – Clouds in the Southern Sky

After a supper in the restaurant of the Eva Dense Inn, they went to one of the rooms and looked again at Lucas Light's letter, particularly at what the mailman said about the Red Dragon. Trudy read it aloud.

Begg, the Red Dragon, has her lair in the ruins of a castle in the Fire Mountains. Again, I have no idea what her long name is. Sorry. Finding the castle is easy, but the path to it is difficult. There is a road to Begg's iron works going south from Single Side. They use the lava from a volcano to melt the iron and form it into bars for shipment to the factories in Low Check City. There is a town there where most of the red people live ...

High interrupted, "He means the yellow skinned people under the Red Dragon's spell."

Trudy looked up and nodded. "I realize that, but I still find it confusing. All through his letter Lucas talks about different colored people. But he means the color of the dragon controlling them, not the color of their skin."

Pass interjected, "Well, isn't it more important what is going on inside a person than what they look like?"

Trudy nodded again. "Of course, it is more important, but it is confusing."

Jay argued, "Wouldn't it make more sense when you are describing people to talk about what they look like, instead of what they were thinking? You can not see what they are thinking."

Lug replied, "Doesn't that depend more on what you are used to?"

Pass added, "The people down there have yellow skin. They are under the red dragon's spell. Since that is more important, we call them red, what is so confusing about that?"

Trudy and Jay looked at each other and shrugged. Trudy continued reading the letter.

There is a town there where most of the red people live called Vicious Circle. It is named after the volcano there that they use to melt the iron. The town is actually not vicious at all. I can not say the same for Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon. They are a pair of black buzzards who spy for Begg. You will want to be careful of them. The road continues south from Vicious Circle to the castle, but it gets dangerous beyond the iron works. It goes right between two volcanoes that are not as predictable

as Vicious Circle. One of them is Petey Tee O. Prince Sip E. and the other Circle Us In Pro Band O.

High interrupted again, "They call them Mount Prince and Mount Band for short." Trudy looked up. "Why do they use words out of the middle of the name instead from the front?"

High cocked his head. "What difference does it make?"

Trudy explained. "Wouldn't it make more sense to call them Mount Petey and Mount Circle?"

High shook his head. "No. If you called them that, no one would know what you were talking about, because they call them Mount Prince and Mount Band."

Pass chirped, "Trudy, isn't Trudy your middle name, not your first?"

Trudy shrugged and went back to reading the letter.

Several times a day Mount Prince and Mount Band, as they are called, throw out rocks that might land on the road or cause an avalanche. You will want to be extra careful when you are close to them. Once or twice a year they spew out a lava stream, which crosses the road. When they do, you can not use the road for a week or two until it cools. The red people carry Begg his food in a hot air balloon, so she does not care about the road very much.

I have heard stories that there are bandits and mountain lions in the Fire Mountains, but I have never spoken to anyone who has seen them himself. Might be true. Might not.

The way south is called the road to Pre Sump Shun because that was the name of the deserted town ruins next to the falling down castle that is now Begg's lair. In places the way is more of a path than a road.

Begg tells lies by just starting off talking as if everyone already knows something is true, when they do not. This shows up in more ways than one. Sometimes it looks "circular" like when she is saying two things prove each other.

Trudy said thoughtfully, "I've been thinking about this ever since we read it before. One of the other dragons used a lie like that."

Jay exclaimed, "That wouldn't be fair! Are you sure?"

Lug said, "Each dragon has a kind of lie they like to use, and which they are skilled at using. There is no law that says they can not use other kinds of lies."

High objected, "I don't remember any of them using Begg's kind of lie."

Trudy replied. "Cuz, the Green Dragon tried to tell us that Reg and his men were criminals, because they had weapons, and that they had weapons because they were criminals."

Jay nodded. "You are right. She was trying to use two things to prove each other."

High argued, "No. Cuz was talking about them causing each other, not proving each other."

Pass chirped, "It is both kinds of lie. It is the Green Dragon's kind of lie because she was trying to say something caused something else when it did not. It was the Red Dragon's kind of lie because it was going in a circle."

Trudy said, "Oh, my! You are right. It is both kinds. We are going to have to be on our toes."

Lug replied, "I don't have any toes."

The children laughed. Trudy continued to read.

... Sometimes Begg tries to trick you into saying something is true, by asking a question that if you answer it, it will sound like you agree with her.

Jay interrupted. "Isn't that two different kinds of lies? Later Lucas says the Yellow and White dragons tell two different kinds of lies. Isn't this just the same thing? The Red Dragon tells two different kinds, too. One is a circle and the other is a trick question."

Pass answered. "I guess you could think of it that way, but they are the same, because both of them are based on the idea that something has been agreed to already, that has not been agreed to."

Jay wasn't sure he agreed but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Trudy read the rest of the Red Dragon section of the letter.

The leader of the dragon soldiers is named Captain Spit. He tries to tell the same kind of lies as Begg, but he is not very smart, and not even the red people believe most of the things he says.

* * *

The next morning they had not been on the road south for an hour when an empty oar truck came steaming up from the south. It was not the first one they had seen, but they were surprised, when this one stopped beside them. Card Stacker, the leader of the meals on mules team, was behind the wheel. He leaned out of the cab and said, "You need a lift. Let me turn around."

The truck chugged a hundred feet on and began turning around in a wide place they had just passed.

Trudy sighed. "I think I would rather walk than ride in the back of that thing."

High objected. "Riding would be faster."

Lug said, "I didn't mind it."

When Card Stacker pulled the truck back up to them, he reached over and opened the passenger side door. "Hop in."

Trudy perked up. "That might not be so bad."

Pass said, "Lug won't fit."

Card Stacker looked surprised. "You mean the donkey? Doesn't he ride in the back?"

Jay objected, "That's not fair."

Lug said, "I don't mind."

And so it was that in a few minutes Jay and Trudy were seated in the front of the truck. Pass was on Trudy's shoulder and High insisted on riding up on the dashboard. Lug was in the back of the truck. Jay and Trudy found the front was much more comfortable than the back.

Jay licked his lips. "It sure will be nice to have lunch in a restaurant today. They both have really good lunches. Which one shall we go to?"

Trudy started to answer but Card Stacker interjected. "I don't think that is a good idea."

High nodded his head knowingly. "You mean there is a celebration planned?"

Card Stacker looked at him in surprise. "Uh. Maybe I should tell you what has been going on."

The dragon slayers looked at each other.

Card Stacker continued. "You were right about the dragon soldiers all changing into iron. That made us able to talk the next meal team into turning around. However, the dragon wax in everyone's ears still worked. It has been gradually shrinking for the last week, until yesterday it finally disappeared. But there has been a lot of arguing in town all week, because different people came to understand at different times. There was even some fighting. I've been driving out to Eva Dense every other morning looking for you. I don't think you ought to come back to Double Side for awhile. Some people still feel pretty bad about everything and they blame you."

Pass chirped, "I hope no one was hurt in the fighting."

Card Stacker shrugged. "Nothing that won't heal up in time."

Trudy asked, "Double Side? Don't you mean Single Side?"

Card Stacker smiled. "We re-named the town. There was a fight about that, too."

High said, "We are on our way to Vicious Circle. We have to pass through Single ... I mean Double Side to get there."

Now it was Card Stacker's turn to nod knowingly. "Begg, the Red Dragon, is next I suppose."

High's tail twitched. "Everyone knows everything."

Trudy said, "We do need to get through to the other side of Double Side."

Card Stacker smiled triumphantly. "I have a plan." He looked at them expectantly, but no body asked him about his plan. He looked disappointed and went on. "We'll stop before we get to the tunnel. You can all get in the back where you can not be seen. I'll drive you all to the other side of the quarry on Pree Sump Shun road, and let you out. You can go on from there to Vicious Circle.

Jay sighed. "Trail rations for lunch."

Trudy looked at Jay with disapproval and then said, "Thank you, Card Stacker. You are being a good friend."

Card Stacker looked embarrassed, which is hard to see on a little red colored man. "Well, that is only one side of it."

Trudy asked, "What do you mean?"

Card Stacker shrugged off his embarrassment. "Since I was leader of the meal team which was there, when Slant became iron, some people are associating me with the whole business, so I do not want it brought up again."

Jay chuckled. "You have learned to look at both sides."

* * *

It was a short ride through the tunnel, the town, and around the rock quarry. Still, when Card Stacker let the back down so they could get out, they were more than ready to get out of the uncomfortable truck.

Card Stacker pointed south down the road. "Just follow the main road and it will take you right into Vicious Circle. My hopes go with you." He got back into the truck and they waved and said their good-byes.

As soon after being let out on the southern road as they could find a flat grassy place they stopped and had some lunch.

High complained, "The whole bunch of them were pretty ungrateful if you ask me."

Jay argued, "I think it was nice of Card Stacker to give us a ride."

Pass chirped, "We have company."

Everyone looked at her and then looked up where she was looking. On the branch of a nearby tree were two black buzzards.

Trudy said, "Must be Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon."

Lug added, "Yep."

Trudy called out to them, "Would you like some lunch?"

High screeched, "No!"

Pass flew up to a branch near them and said, "Never mind him. We would be glad to share our lunch."

One of the buzzards turned towards her, and the other kept watching the group on the ground. Neither of them said anything.

Pass tried again. "Really, we do not mind. We know what you are here for, but it doesn't matter. We might as well talk with each other on the way."

Still the buzzards were silent. Not a feather stirred.

Pass asked, "Which of you is Low Dead and which of you is Bogus D. Lemon?"

They continued to stare as they had before.

Pass returned to the group. "I don't think it's them. They act like plain old buzzards or they are deaf."

Lug asked. "What color are their eyes?"

Pass replied, "Blue."

Lug said, "It's them."

Trudy asked, "How do you know?"

Lug replied, "Because regular buzzards don't have blue eyes."

High's tail twitched. "Well, we will have to watch what we say very carefully with spies about."

When they finished lunch they began to walk south. The two buzzards flew above them in a circle as they walked.

Trudy complained, "I do not like that. I wish they would stop that. It's very scary somehow."

The road wound through the mountains but there were no steep hills or narrow paths. It had been built for the trucks. Four times trucks chugged past them carrying iron ore south or iron bars north. The geography surrounding them gradually changed as they went south. The trees thinned considerably. Between the little groves of trees was gray bare rock. In some places the road had been chiseled out of the rock and so needed no paving. Every now and then they would get a view of the southern sky. Even though the day was clear and sunny it looked cloudy in the south. Still the buzzards circled above, so they talked but little.

It was late afternoon when they rounded a bend and saw the town of Vicious Circle. It was a hodge podge of rock, brick and wooden buildings. They were able to look down on it from above. On their left, to the east of the town was a large, warehouse looking, building next to an almost perfectly circular lake of glowing molten lava. To the west of town was a mountain with a good sized stream flowing down its side, past the town, and then to the northeast. The road they were on crossed the stream on a small bridge. To the south of the town the road continued. There did not seem to be a business area of town. If there were shops and inns etc., they were mixed among the houses. There were no trees or grass visible in the town.

High announced. "Vicious Circle."

Jay suggested, "I've been thinking. I think Trudy had the right idea last time. We need to make it a point to talk to the locals. If we can break the spell there, we can avoid that whole thing about volcanoes throwing rocks and fire at us, while we walk among bandits and mountain lions."

High pointed up and said angrily. "Her spies are still up there!"

Trudy replied. "It does not matter they will soon see. Let's do it that way, Jay. You are right."

Jay shrugged. "It was your idea."

Pass added. "It is a good idea."

As they approached the town a dozen dragon soldiers came out to meet them. One of them wore a red cap.

Jay sighed. "I hope they are not going to take us to the Red Dragon. I'm tired."

Trudy replied, "It is what we are here for."

As they met, both groups stopped. The cone shaped creature with the red cap on his point said, "Hello. I'm Captain Spit. We are here to make sure you get safely through Vicious Circle."

Trudy held out her hand. "I'm Trudy. We plan to stop in town for the night."

Captain Spit did not take her hand. He shook his cone shaped head from side to side. "I'm sorry, that will not be allowed."

Jay spoke up. "That is not fair."

Captain Spit smiled. "Please come along with me."

Jay shrugged. "We are stopping in town." They followed the dragon soldiers towards the town. A little closer to town they passed a sign that said, "Vicious Circle City and Iron Works"

Vicious Circle City And Iron Works

When they reached the town there were a good many little people walking about near them. Jay was surprised. He had expected them to look like Chinese or Japanese people. They just looked like all the other little people in Low Check except their skin was yellow like lemon skins or banana peels.

When they started to pass an inn, the dragon slayers stopped.

Trudy announced loudly, "We are here to release you from the Red Dragon."

Several Vicious Circle townspeople stopped to listen but Captain Spit and the other dragon soldiers waved them on. Spit said, "Move along here. Nothing to see. Move along."

Jay objected, "Why are you making them move on? It isn't fair."

Spit pointed to his hat, "I'm the captain here; don't you see my red cap?"

Jay replied, "Why do you get the red cap?"

"Because I'm the captain."

"Well, maybe you stole the red cap."

"I didn't steal it. I'm no thief!"

"You would be if you stole the cap."

"I'm the Captain, why would I need to steal the cap."

High spoke up, "Who made you the captain?"

Spit replied, "I'm the captain because I tell everyone what to do."
"That does not mean you are the captain."
"Sure it does. Why would I tell everyone what to do, if I wasn't the captain?"
Trudy took a turn. "Why are you telling them to move along? You have no reason to tell them to move along."
Spit answered, "Of course I have a reason, or I would not be doing it."
"That is just your opinion. What is the reason?"
"It is hard enough remembering all my opinions without also remembering my reasons for them."
"That may be, but it does not show that you are telling the truth."
"Since I'm not lying, I must be telling the truth."
Pass chirped, "Why must they move along? What if they want to stop?"
Spit, motioning a passerby to continue walking, said, "No one is allowed to stop and listen to you."
"Why is no one allowed to stop and listen to us?"
"Because they must keep moving along."
Jay tried again, "Just because you say so? That's not fair."
Spit smiled. "I wouldn't be telling them to move along, if it wasn't good for them."
"What is good about them not stopping to listen?"
"It is always good to do what the Captain says."
Pass took another turn, "What if a captain is wrong?"
Spit puffed out his chest. "A captain is never wrong."
"How do you know that?"
"I wouldn't be captain, if I was wrong."
Trudy was getting frustrated. "What is good about what you are telling them to do?"
"It is good to do what the Captain says because I am saying it for their own good."
"Why is it good for them?"
"I wouldn't be telling them to do it, if it wasn't good for them."
"What if you are wrong?"
"The captain is never wrong."
Jay joined in again. "Why are you the captain?"
Spit pointed to his cap. "Don't you see my red cap?"
"Why do you have the red cap?"
"Because I'm the captain."
"Maybe you just found the cap somewhere."
"I wouldn't need to do that, since I'm the captain."
Trudy felt like stamping her feet but was too polite. Instead she said, "How do we know you are telling the truth about being captain?"

"I'm no liar. I always tell the truth."

"How do we know you are not a liar?"

"Because I'm telling you the truth."

Jay turned to the other dragon slayers. "Why isn't this working? We are showing these townspeople over and over again that Captain Spit is just talking in circles."

Lug explained. "Because none of the red people, (who have yellow skin), are able to hear a complete circle, except for one toddler they overlooked, who is too young to understand. The folks are just hearing little pieces as they go by, and there is nothing wrong with the little pieces by themselves."

High sighed. "Sounds like we are going to have to go visit the Red Dragon."

Jay pointed to a nearby rooftop. "Shh. They are still up there." He winked at Trudy and she smiled.

The others all looked at the silently staring buzzards on the nearby roof.

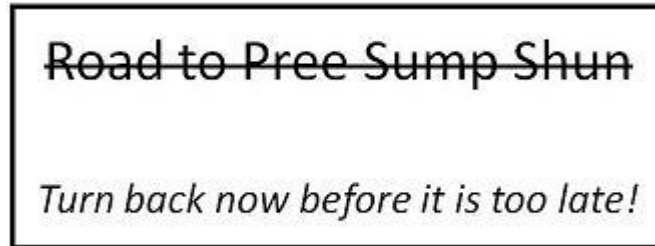
High's tail twitched. "Well, we are going to have to go to Begg. This is not working."

Reluctantly they all agreed.

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Chapter 15 – Fire Mountains

They soon found themselves on the south side of Vicious Circle. The dragon soldiers left them beside a sign that said, "Road to Pree Sump Shun." Someone had drawn a line through it and scribbled, "Turn back now, before it is too late!"



Soon they were walking through a barren landscape with no trees. The dragon soldiers may have left them on their own, but Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon continued to circle above. There was an occasional scraggly bush or tuft of grass growing out of cracks in the rock. There were also a few places, now and then, where little whiffs of steam were coming out of crevices in the ground. In the distant south they could see two volcanoes smoking continually.

"Mount Prince and Mount Band," announced High.

Pass said, "We are going to have to stop for the night."

Jay added, "And supper."

When they stopped, the two black buzzards landed on a nearby rock outcropping and looked at them wordlessly.

Firewood was in short supply so they ate a cold supper. The ground was too rocky to peg the tents down, so they decided to sleep in the open to avoid the chance of having the tents blow away.

Jay said solemnly, "We better take turns staying awake. There might be mountain lions and bandits about."

Trudy pointed at the buzzards. "I don't suppose they would consider taking a turn watching for us."

Jay chuckled, and then exclaimed. "Hey, look."

There was a hot air balloon in the southern sky coming towards them. The dragon slayers were in the twilight of the shadows of the mountain but the balloon was still high enough to catch the evening sun. It was striped red and yellow. It floated by to the north too high for them to see who or what might be in the large basket hanging from the balloon.

Trudy explained. "That's probably the balloon that takes food to the Red Dragon."

The rest agreed.

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The night passed without event, but not so the following day.

After breakfast they continued walking south on the road. They soon struggled up a steep slope, which required all riders to get off Lug. When they reached the top they realized that they had reached a kind of flat plateau. The only mountains ahead of them now were the two fire mountains to the south. Beyond them they could see ground became hilly again. They quickly found the road was no longer used by cars and trucks, if it ever had been, and was hardly recognizable as a road any more. Sometimes the only way they knew which way to go was by looking at Mount Prince and Mount Band and remembering that they needed to walk between them to get to the castle at Pree Sump Shun where Begg had her lair. The buzzards continued to circle above making everyone feel somehow down and full of dread.

Pass returned from one of her side trips looking for food. "Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon are not the only ones following us."

Everyone looked back the way they had come. Jay asked, "Where?"

Trudy asked, "Who?"

Pass fluttered her wings. "Bandits I guess. They are sneaking along in the rocks keeping up with us about a 100 yards northeast.

They could see nothing.

Pass went on. "There are three of them and they have bows, arrows, and swords."

Jay asked, "What color are they?"

Pass answered, "How would I know that? Oh, wait you mean ... they are wearing tan and gray clothing, about the same color as the rocks around here."

Jay shook his head. "I meant what color is their skin?"

Pass fluttered her wings. "Oh. Yellow."

They continued their trip. Pass would occasionally report the location of the three Fire Mountains people. Sometimes it was nearer, sometimes further. All morning the fire mountains loomed closer and the buzzards glided in lazy circles above them as they walked across the barren land. As they got closer to the mountains they found many places where some time in the past streams of lava had come out and covered the road and then hardened.

At noon they found themselves directly between the two mountains. Just as they decided to stop and have lunch, they heard a distant explosion. They looked up to see an extra, darker, puff of smoke come out of Mount Band. A moment later a rock the size of a basketball hit the ground about twenty feet from them. They noticed several other rocks hitting further away.

Jay exclaimed, "Wow! That was close."

High chattered, "We should eat lunch later, further away from here."

Trudy said, "That seems like a really good idea to me."

The started walking again, perhaps a little faster than before.

They heard another rumble from Mount Band. The looked up and more smoke was coming from it and a stream of hot glowing lava was oozing down the mountain in their direction.

Jay yelled, "Let's run!" No one wanted to discuss it. They just ran.

The two black buzzards had to stop flying in circles and fly straight to keep up with them.

The lava was moving so slowly that walking probably would have gotten them out of danger soon enough. Nobody mentioned that. After a mile they slowed back down to a fast walk. They looked back the way they had come. The lava had crossed the road and was forming into a puddle that would soon cover the valley floor.

Trudy announced, "Well, we are not going to be able to go back that way any time soon."

They put another couple of miles between them and the two mountains before they decided once again to stop for lunch. It was at this point, when they were the most tired and hungry, that the attack came.

A tawny colored mountain lion jumped from hiding on a high rock outcropping onto Lug's back. High screeched and climbed up the side of the rock outcropping. Lug tried to buck the lion off. Pass squawked and started to fly over to see if she could distract the lion. Trudy screamed and started looking for a stone to throw. Jay pulled his sword and ran over, wondering as he ran if his little sword would hurt the lion or just make it angry, but before he could strike, the lion fell to the ground and lay still.

Trudy and Pass rushed to Lug to make sure he was OK. Jay pushed the lion with his foot to make sure it was dead. The buzzards circled a few more times and then settled on the rock outcropping where the lion had been hidden, staring silently at the scene below. High, almost to the top where they were, hurriedly climbed back down.

Jay asked, "Is Lug OK?"

Lug said, "I'm fine."

Trudy exclaimed, "He has wounds on his neck and back."

Pass added, "They are bleeding"

Lug was not concerned. "They aren't gushing. They are just oozing. I'm fine."

Jay looked at them seriously. "Well, if it is not an emergency, you might want to see this." He pointed to an arrow in the chest of the mountain lion.

Pass asked, "The bandits?"

High added, "If they are bandits."

Jay asked, "Why would they do that?"

Trudy suggested, "Perhaps, because they want us to slay the Red Dragon before they attack us."

That seemed to be the best guess to everyone.

They used up a canteen of water to clean Lug's wounds and then sat down to a quiet and thoughtful lunch of trail rations.

While they ate a hot air balloon passed low in the sky to the east. It was yellow and red striped, with the stripes going up and down. The basket underneath appeared to be made of wood. The balloon was going southward.

One of the buzzards flew up to it and landed on the basket below the balloon. After a few minutes, he flew back and continued the silent staring.

High complained, "Well, there will be no surprising Begg, the Red Dragon, now." The balloon was still in view when it descended to a spot beyond some low hills. Jay commented. "And we know where to find the Castle at Pree Sump Shun now."

High chattered, "I know where it is."

Pass chirped. "You do now."

High looked at her angrily as his tail twitched.

Soon they were trudging south again with the ever-present escort of circling buzzards. It was not long before they were standing on top of a hill looking down on the ruins of a castle and a village.

"Pree Sump Shun," announced High.

Evidently Pree Sump Shun had been destroyed by an earthquake. Most of the houses were rock, but there were a few of brick or wood. Most of the houses were just piles of debris, but some of them were almost intact. The ones in the worst condition were along a break in the ground, or little cliff just a couple of feet high, running east and west the entire length of the town and beyond. It was clear with the way the road and houses were around it, that when the town had been occupied this break had not been there. Evidently it had appeared suddenly during an earthquake.

The castle was south of the town. The main castle keep seemed to be intact but most of the outer walls had tumbled to the ground. The courtyard between the main part of the castle and the ruined walls had a hot air balloon tied down in it. They could see little people going to and from the balloon carrying things inside the castle. There was a small stream coming from a spring from a nearby hill that ran through the village and disappeared to the east. There were several trees and grass growing near the stream.

The buzzards continued to circle above them.

Jay was puzzled. "I wonder why they don't land. We are not moving."

Pass answered. "Haven't you noticed? They never land unless they can look down on us."

Jay suggested, "We should just stand here and see how long it takes them to get tired."

Pass fluttered her wings. "They are gliding most of the time. They are not likely to get tired."

Jay continued. "I wonder which one is Low Dead and which one is Bogus D. Lemon."

Lug said, "If you can't tell any difference, then it probably doesn't matter."

High chattered nervously, "Well, I guess we should go to the castle."

Trudy replied, "It is what we are here for," and began to walk down the path towards the castle. The others followed her.

After they passed through the ruins of Pree Sump Shun to the castle, Pass flew above and scouted, but could not see a way through the ruined walls, so they started climbing over the pile of rocks that used be the wall. The buzzards flew beyond them and landed high on the keep's walls silently watched the dragon slayers struggle. It was most

difficult for Lug. While they were making their way over the ruined wall the balloon took off, and was well up in the air by the time the dragon slayers reached where it had been.

Jay looked up at the balloon disappearing to the north. Then he looked at the buzzards and called out. "I don't suppose Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon would show us the way to the Red Dragon?"

They just stared at him.

It turned out it did not matter. The dragon was easy to find. They entered the large main doorway. It was wide open. They found themselves in a hallway about 60 feet long, with a large open doorway at the other end. There were several small doorways on either side. The hallway was covered with red carpet. The walls were paneled with wood panels made from cherry trees. There were large painted pictures in wooden frames hanging all along it on both sides. All the pictures were apparently different poses of Begg herself. The ceiling was stone with wooden chandeliers hanging down every few feet, with six lights on each.

Trudy said thoughtfully, "It seems to me the dragon would not be able to fit through any of these doors except that open one at the other end."

The others nodded in agreement and they continued down the hall. The buzzards flew in with them but there was not enough room for them to circle. Instead they flew from chandelier to chandelier keeping up with the dragon slayers.

When they entered the room at the other end they found a fat red dragon lying in the middle of it.

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Chapter 16 – Too Many Doors, Too Little Time

The room with the Red Dragon in the middle of it looked very similar to the hallway, with carpets, paneling, and chandeliers. There were no pictures here. Instead there were wooden framed mirrors everywhere, and twelve little doors. Each little door had a lock, and each one looked as if might be the magic door to their own world, for which they searched. Four were behind the dragon, three were to each side of the dragon, and one was on either side of the large doorway through which they entered.

The two buzzards landed on the two chandeliers closest to Begg's red head, one on the right, and one on the left. One of them spoke to Begg saying, "Nothing much new to report, ma'am. Key and the children are still being followed by the bandits, which last we saw, were sneaking through the town. Key and the children still haven't made any plans." When Jay and Trudy heard the buzzard's voice the two children were glad the buzzards did not like to talk. The voice sounded like a cross between a screech and a growl. It was a very unpleasant sound. The dragon slayers realized that they were once again, without a detailed plan.

However, with four dragons already gone, they were not as afraid as they were before. They were still fearful, but with a bit more confidence. While the buzzard was speaking they continued into the room and formed a semi-circle about a dozen feet in front of the dragon. Lug was the only one who seemed more nervous than in earlier dragon meetings. All the time they were talking, Lug kept looking around the room and even behind them instead of paying attention to the dragon.

Begg, the Red Dragon, asked, "What is the matter with you, Mr. Magician? Why can't you keep yourself together, Key? Or should I say Keys?"

High answered angrily, "He ... I mean, I ... I mean, we can keep myself together just fine."

Begg snickered. "So, I see."

Jay argued, "That's not fair. Just because he is in parts does not mean he can not keep himself together."

Looking at Jay, Begg replied calmly, "But Key is in three parts."

Trudy replied, "He did that on purpose. He had to fit below the line to get into Low Check." She turned to Jay. "Didn't the last dragon try this already?"

Begg interjected, "See. Now don't you feel stupid for not having made plans?"

High screeched, "I have made plans."

Begg looked at High, "Don't you feel silly, High, making a fool of yourself in front of your friends."

High's tail was waving about angrily. He screeched again, "I have not made a fool of myself in front of anybody."

Begg laughed. "Then why don't they know your plans?"

Lug asked, "Begg, what is your plan?"

Begg laughed again. "I'm not going to tell you my plan. You are my enemy."

Lug replied, "Exactly. It is the same with us."

A little smoke came out of Begg's nostrils as she said, "I heard about what happened up at Single Side. An entire town thrown into confusion and civil war. Why are you so-called dragon slayers so determined to cause so many people trouble?"

Jay replied, "We are only determined to set them free from the control of lies. The trouble was caused by the lies."

Little puffs of smoke or steam came from the dragon's ears. "Set them free? Ha! Where are you hiding the gold you stole from the other dragons?"

Trudy answered. "That's not true!"

Begg was triumphant. "So you are keeping the gold with you? I thought you might be."

Trudy went on, "None of it is true. We took no gold and we neither hid any nor carry any."

This time smoke and steam came out of Begg's nostrils, her ears, and her mouth. "Why do you keep dodging my questions?"

Trudy held up her hand like the little innkeeper in Single Side had, and started counting off on her fingers as she spoke. "We have answered every one of your trick questions. First, you asked why Key could not keep himself together. That was really just an accusation that he was not in control of himself, not a question at all. We all know that is not true. Second, you asked if we felt foolish for not having plans. Our plans may not be as detailed as we would like, but we do have them."

Jay interjected, "They are strategic plans instead of tactical plans."

Trudy looked at Jay without understanding what he said.

Jay explained, "General overall plans, rather than practical and detailed plans."

Trudy shrugged and continued, "Begg, don't you feel foolish for trying to make us believe something we knew was not true?" Steam was coming off of the Red Dragon from all over his body. She did not wait for Begg to answer. "Fourth, you asked High if he felt silly for making a fool of himself. What ever gave you the idea you could speak for us? Or read our minds? We did not think High was foolish. Fifth, you asked us what our plan was, but had to admit it was a question that should not have been asked expecting an answer."

At this point Trudy was out of fingers so she started over again. "Sixth, you asked a really tricky question that was really several different accusations."

Trudy changed hands and started counting on it. "First, you accused us of wanting to cause trouble for people. That was simply an accusation about our motives, which only we can know about for sure. It might have at least been a useful accusation, if there had been other listeners, but we certainly know our motives better than you. Second, you accused us of causing trouble in Single Side, which we did not, as Jay pointed out. Third, you accused us of not being real dragon slayers, which given what has happened with other dragons in the last two weeks is just silly. Fourth, you said there was a civil war in Single Side. I'm not sure, but don't people usually kill each other when they have a civil war? There was none of that there."

Trudy went back to her original hand and pointed at finger number six again. Then she silently went back through one to five, and then back to six saying, "So that one question was really four accusations, and not a question at all."

They could smell the sulfur in the smoke coming from Begg.

Trudy continued. "Seventh, you asked a question that was really an accusation that we were stealing gold. Again, it would have worked better if there had been someone else listening. We all know there was no gold. Eighth, you accused us of not answering your questions. But you only asked us one question, the one about our plans, which you admitted was a question not to be answered. The rest of your questions were just accusations. Don't you feel embarrassed?"

Begg tried to breathe fire on them, but only steam and smoke came out. It made the dragon slayers blink, cough, and take two steps back, but it did not harm them. Then she raised up on her hind legs and turned to lava. For just a moment there was a perfect outline of a dragon in molten lava and then it all fell to the floor in a big mound, which gradually began to ooze outward in all directions.

Three little Low Check people dressed in tan and gray ran into the room. Evidently they had been hiding just outside the door. One of them said, "That was wonderful! Congratulations!" He grabbed Trudy's hand and shook it.

One of the buzzards turned to the other and growled/squawked, "That didn't take very long, did it?" With that they both flew out of the room.

Wherever Begg's lava went things caught on fire. The carpet was beginning to flame all around the molten glowing pool. It quickly reached the four doors on the far side of the room and set them on fire.

Lug exclaimed, "Quick! We don't have much time." He ran to the right side of the room, to the little door in the middle of the wall. The dragon slayers all followed but Jay was the first by Lug's side. Jay tried the key, but it did not work.

Jay said, "The others quick!"

Lug replied, "No! It is not them. No time. We got to get out of here!"

He was right. The room was rapidly filling up with smoke and flame. The dragon slayers and their three new companions all ran from the room, from the castle, and went to the other side of the courtyard in front of the castle's main keep. Everyone was out of breath and coughing from the smoke. They found large blocks from the ruined wall to sit on and sipped from their canteens. Trudy shared hers with Pass. Jay poured some in a pan from his pack for Lug.

By the time they had caught their breath the castle had flames coming out of the upper windows and smoke coming out of everywhere. They could hear some of the rock in the castle begin to crack from the heat. It was already unstable from the long ago earthquake so it should not have been a surprise when in less than five minutes it collapsed into a heap of burning rubble.

Lug said, "That didn't take very long, did it?"

Jay smiled and asked, "Are you sure that was the right door?"

Lug replied, "No."

That was not the answer Jay had expected or wanted. "What?!! What do you mean? I thought you knew."

Lug answered, "I studied the doors the whole time we were in there. I narrowed it down to three. The one we tried was the most likely, so I tried it first. The one on the back wall on the left was in flames almost instantly; we never could have gotten to it. It was the next most likely to be the magic door. The other one was on the other side of the room, but I'm pretty sure it was not it. That fire was hot and quick. Too many doors; too little time."

Trudy asked, "But what does it mean? What if one of those other doors that got burned up was the real magic door? How will we ever get home?"

Lug sighed. "I do not know. I think the Magician Key will know what to do about it, when we get back together, at least I hope so. There is no reason to get discouraged. There is a very good chance we tried the proper door. If we didn't, the odds are that the one we want is one of the four remaining doors we have not yet visited."

Jay said, "Four?"

High spoke up, "Yellow, White, Black and Orange dragons. But be careful we have listeners."

The three fire mountain people had been forgotten in the excitement of the moment. They sat near by listening with interest. The dragon slayers turned to them with questioning looks. They noticed that they were armed with swords as well as bows and arrows.

One of them stood up and bowed, "Hello, I'm Sunflower. These are Daisy and Buttercup."

Trudy smiled. If someone had asked her why she smiled, she might not have been able to explain it. Partly she smiled because these rough looking little warriors had such dainty flower names. Partly she smiled because for the first time since she arrived in Low Check a color and a name matched. The people all had lemon yellow skin.

"Hello" said Daisy and Buttercup in unison as they bowed.

Trudy laughed. Daisy and Buttercup were little Low Check women. To Jay they looked exactly like each other. Sunflower was the only man among the three. Trudy got up and went over and shook their hands, still laughing. "I am very glad to meet you," she said.

The two little women smiled at her greeting and then turned to each other and shrugged.

Lug spoke up, "To which of you do I owe thanks for saving my life?"

"Him," said Daisy and Buttercup together pointing at Sunflower. Sunflower looked down at his feet and grinned sheepishly.

Lug said, "Thank you very much."

Sunflower looked up. "I did it for me, for us. We wanted you to slay the Red Dragon."

Pass asked, "Why didn't you just come over and join us?"

Sunflower shrugged. "Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon"

Jay exclaimed, "Look at that!"

Everyone looked in the direction he was pointing. The hot air balloon, with the red and yellow stripes, had returned and was landing on the north side of the ruins of Pree Sump Shun. North was the other side of the little village from the dragon slayers.

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The Fat Lazy Dragons

Book VI Slope, the Yellow Dragon

Chapter 17 – Up, Up, and Away!

High asked no one in particular, "I wonder what is going on with them?"

Jay replied, "Let's go see."

Sunflower objected, "That is not such a good idea. They'll have two dragon soldiers with them."

Jay replied, "Whatever happens to the dragon, happens to the teeth."

Sunflower smiled.

Jay began climbing back over the tumbled down wall towards the town. The rest started to follow him except for High.

High called out, "Wait."

Everyone stopped and looked at High.

High's tail twitched. He opened his mouth a couple of times but nothing came out. Finally he said, "OK. Let's go."

Everyone resumed clamoring over the stone blocks. As they worked themselves down the other side, three Low Check men dressed in blue walked up to the bottom and waited for them. They were unarmed.

After they reached the bottom and were all standing facing each other the little man in the middle announced, "I'm Happy. These are two of my crew. What is going on here? What happened to the castle?"

Trudy smiled. Perhaps she smiled because the little man had yellow skin and a "yellow" name like Sunflower, Daisy, and Buttercup did. Perhaps she smiled because he said he was happy, but he looked very unhappy.

High answered, "I'm High and we'll ask the questions. What are you doing here?"

Pass chirped, "Nonsense, High. I'm Pass. This is Jay, Trudy, Lug, High, and Sunflower." She pointed at each one in turn.

The men nodded to each of them as Pass introduced them.

Pass went on without pointing, "The two ladies are Daisy and Buttercup, but I'm sorry to say, I do not know which is which."

"I'm Daisy" said one.

"I'm Buttercup," said the other.

Pass was thinking to herself that she still did not know the difference.

Jay added, "Begg, the Red Dragon, became a lake of lava, which caught the castle on fire, and it burned down. We barely got out in time."

Happy looked surprised. "The same thing happened to our two dragon soldiers. They burned right through the bottom of the basket and fell to the ground. We got the fire out, but decided to come back here for repairs. We saw the castle burning and decided to land outside of town."

Jay nodded. "We saw you."
Happy looked at him carefully. "You folks are the dragon slayers, aren't you?"
High spoke up, "Everyone does not have to know everything."
Pass shook her head, "They already know."
Trudy replied, "Yes, we are."
Happy asked, "So you killed Begg?"
High chattered, "That's right. We killed her."
Trudy shook her head. "Not exactly. We just made her so mad, she melted."
Jay asked, "So what are you going to do now?"
Happy looked back in the direction of the balloon. "Fix her and fly back to Vicious Circle."
Jay asked another question. "How long will that take?"
Happy shrugged. "I don't know. I expect it will take all day tomorrow, and we'll lift off the next day."
Jay then came to the point. "Can we have a ride?"
Happy looked at him carefully, and then at the others. "Do you have food?"
Pass chirped. "Enough and plenty for everyone."
Happy said, "It's a deal."

* * *

It turned out that Happy had two more men in his crew guarding the balloon. They all camped near the balloon for the night and the next day began raiding the nearby ruins for wood and materials to fix the basket of the balloon. The work progressed quickly and everyone got along very well. The dragon slayers, Sunflower, Daisy, and Buttercup eagerly helped. Everyone quickly learned to ignore High who tried to supervise everything, but knew nothing about balloons. It would have been a really good day except for two things – Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon. They had not left the area. During lunch Pass noticed them lurking on a rooftop and pointed them out

Sunflower asked, "Do you want me to shoot them with an arrow? The way they are lined up, I think I can get both with one shot."

High exclaimed, "Yes!"

Sunflower started to reach for an arrow from his quiver.

Jay said, "No. It's not fair."

Sunflower paused. "What's not fair?"

Jay went on. "They can't do anything to us."

High chattered excitedly. "They have bothered us for three days. They told everything about us to Begg, and now they are still spying on us."

Jay looked determined. "That is no reason to kill someone."

Sunflower looked puzzled. "You are killing the dragons, why not the dragon's spies?"

Trudy spoke up. "We are not killing anyone. We are protected by ... "

High screeched, "Do not tell them about that!"

Trudy shrugged and shook her head.

Jay said, "Why not? The dragons already know all about it."

High said, "How do you know that?"

Jay looked bewildered.

Trudy asked, "You mean they don't know they will die if they attack us? Of course, they do. Some of them have said so, haven't they?" She looked uncertain.

Lug said, "The dragons know, and if somebody doesn't tell this man what is going on, he'll kill those buzzards for no good reason."

Trudy explained while High's tail twitched. "We are protected by magic. The dragon's know this and attack us anyway."

Sunflower looked puzzled. "You mean they know it will kill them to attack you, and they do it anyway?"

Lug explained, "That's right. Dragons have three faults – they are liars, they are full of pride, and they get angry easily. Their pride makes them try to trick us with their lies, even when they could just avoid us. If they fail, their anger makes them attack us, even when they know it will kill them."

Sunflower's eyebrows went up. "If they fail? I thought you guys had some kind of magic to make sure the dragons always failed. What happens if the dragon succeeds."

Lug went on, "We fall under the spell and become the dragon's slaves."

Happy stood up a little straighter and put his hands to his sides. He bowed deeply towards the dragon slayers and said, "Thank you for your great service to us. Thank you for risking your freedom to win ours."

High said, "You are welcome."

The other dragon slayers bowed back, even Lug and Pass.

Trudy thought about telling Happy that there was another side to the story. They were, after all, just trying to get home. But before she could form the words, Sunflower continued. "I'm still thinking I should take a shot at those buzzards."

Pass said, "Don't be hasty. The magic works both ways. We can't attack them either."

Lug said, "Maybe."

The little bird's wings fluttered. "Maybe?"

Lug explained. "Sunflower is not technically with us, and Begg is already dead. I'm not sure how the magic would work in that case. Are you?"

Pass was flustered. "No. I'm not sure."

Jay spoke up. "Doesn't matter. It is not worth the risk, and it would not be right."

Everyone went on with their work under the watchful stares of Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon.

* * *

Happy's guess as to how long it would take turned out to be exactly right. By evening the balloon basket was ready to go, but the balloon itself was starting to sag and droop.

After supper Jay asked Sunflower to show him something about sword fighting. Sunflower showed Jay a few moves that were different than what Reg had showed him. Later Jay wished he had asked Happy to show him about the balloon instead.

High's tail twitched as he watched them, but he did not say anything.

Later as they were sitting around a campfire Trudy sighed. "There was no red lie either."

Some of their new friends wanted an explanation. High started to object but settled for twitching his tail as Trudy explained. "The brown dragon called painting meat brown, browning the meat, when browning really means cooking the meat. The blue dragon talked about feeling blue when that had nothing to do with what we were talking about. The green dragon said trees turning green make the weather warm."

Lug spoke up, "And we know purple mountains have two sides."

Pass chirped, "There was a red lie."

Jay and Trudy both said, "What?"

Pass explained, "Trudy told it. At the very end you told Begg she looked embarrassed. But it turned out you were wrong. She was really angry."

Jay shook his head. "What has that got to do with red?"

Pass went on. "There are more reasons for someone turning red than just being embarrassed. Trudy was assuming something that was not true."

Trudy shook her head. "But I did not say anything about turning red. She was red already anyway."

Pass fluttered her wings. "I was just trying to help you find a red lie like the Red Dragon might have told."

Trudy smiled. "Oh. OK. You are right; it is a red lie. We can not automatically assume someone is embarrassed just because they are red. They might be angry or just have naturally red skin."

Lug added, "Or sunburned."

Jay laughed. "Or she might have gotten into her mother's make-up and put lip stick all over her face, like a certain little girl I know."

Trudy turned red with embarrassment and anger. She pretended like she picked up a rock, but her hands were empty, when she threw the imaginary rock at Jay. Jay ducked and laughed.

The others looked at each other in bewilderment.

Pass asked, "What is make-up?"

High asked, "What is lip stick?"

Sunflower asked, "What did she do that for?"

Happy asked, "What did he laugh about?"

After that there was a long explanation that you, dear reader, already know.

One of Happy's men was given the job of rising early and getting the fire started that would make the balloon rise.

* * *

The next morning they packed everything up and prepared to take off. The balloon was heated and tugging at the four ropes that held it to stakes in the ground. Happy decided they should load Lug first since that would be the most difficult. It took his entire crew to lift Lug into the basket. Everyone else was able to climb in and out without difficulty. Jay wondered why the balloon's "basket" had not been built with a gate or ramp. When he asked Happy explained that they did have a ramp that folded over the side for loading and unloading but that it had fallen out of the balloon with the dragon soldiers the day before.

They decided the next thing they would do is load the supplies.

Sunflower and Jay were in the basket with Lug, ready to take on supplies the others would hand over the sides, when suddenly the two buzzards swooped down. They each pulled a slip knot out of a rope that was holding the basket. The other two ropes had evidently been almost gnawed through the night before, close to the stakes that held them. With two of the ropes untied the remaining threads of the other two ropes snapped and the balloon began to rapidly rise.

The buzzards had chosen their moment well. No one was close enough to the dangling ropes to grab one except for Trudy. She grabbed one but she was not heavy enough to delay the rising of the balloon, so as it rose she held on for dear life.

Pass chirped as loud as she could, "High! Don't let them get away!"

High quickly scurried to the top of a half ruined house, and as the rope without Trudy passed near overhead, lept up and grabbed it. He was up the rope quickly, and in the basket. Pass simply flew up to the basket. Sunflower and Jay pulled up the rope with Trudy until she was high enough for them to help her into the basket.

Happy and the crew were running along under the balloon yelling something none in the basket could understand. Jay heard something about control lines, but could not understand the rest. Buttercup and Daisy were still where the balloon had been tied down. They jumped up and down and waved their arms. Trudy was pretty sure they were yelling, "Come back! Come back!"

After Trudy was safely in the balloon Jay and Sunflower were out of breath from the effort of pulling her in. As they were catching their breath they noticed that the two buzzards were gliding along beside them.

One of the buzzards growled/screeched, "That did not work very well, did it?"

The other answered with the same irritating voice, "No."

Those in the balloon wondered what they meant.

The balloon drifted due west. The buzzards flew northwest and gradually became further and further away from the balloon. Once Jay caught his breath, he began studying the balloon. There was a large clay pot suspended above them with a coal fire burning in it. There were a number of thin ropes that went up into the balloon and apparently controlled valves. There were heavy canvas bags tied all around the outside of the basket apparently containing sand.

Trudy asked, "Now what?"

Jay shook his head. "I have no idea how to operate this thing. I know that they make it go up and down until they find some wind going the way they want to go. I know they can drop bags to make it go up, and they can add coal to the fire to make it go up, except there isn't any coal to add. I have no idea how to make it go down, unless it has something to do with these lines and valves."

Trudy asked, "Why isn't there any coal?"

Jay answered, "They lost most of it when the dragon soldiers burned the hole in the bottom of the basket. I heard them talking about it. What's left is in that fireplace up there." He pointed to the big clay pot that was smoking.

Pass fluttered her wings. "That is good! When the fire goes out we'll go down."

Jay shrugged, "Yeah, but they said there was enough coal to get them back to Vicious Circle."

Trudy brightened. "I know! Pass can fly down and ask them how it works, and then fly back and tell us."

Jay looked back at the rapidly disappearing ruins of Pree Sump Shun. "That might be a good idea, Pass."

Pass shook her little head. "I would never catch you again, and that is exactly what those buzzards want."

Jay looked north at Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon. He looked puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

Pass explained. "They can't attack us, so they tried to separate us. They know we need to be together."

High agreed. "What would you have done without me to lead you?"

Trudy said, "That was a brave leap you made, High."

High's chest got bigger.

Jay looked back at Pree Sump Shun again and shrugged. He saw that Pass was right. The little bird would never catch the balloon again if she tried to go back for instructions.

Sunflower said, "I should have shot them buzzards when I had the chance."

Jay looked at the control lines again. "Should I experiment?"

Lug said, "One of those lines is for disconnecting the basket from the balloon in an emergency. Unless you want to chance falling down fast and hard, you'll leave the control lines alone."

Jay said, "What if Sunflower shot holes in the balloon and let the hot air out. That should let it down slow."

Trudy objected, "Won't that make it fly all over the place like when you let go of a balloon you have been blowing up?"

Jay shook his head. "No, they are made of stretched rubber that pushes the air out, like a rubber band that returns to its shape after you stretch it. This is cloth or canvas or something like that. It won't pop or anything. I will just let the hot air out slowly and we will settle to the ground."

No one seemed to have a better idea or any objections, so Jay nodded at Sunflower. Sunflower strung an arrow and shot up at the balloon as close to the side as he could get it. The tip of the arrow went through but the feathers on the back did not. The arrow just hung there, blocking the hole it had made.

Lug said, "That did not work very well, did it?"

Sunflower replied, "No."

Jay looked around. "What have we got with us?"

It did not take long to check. Sunflower had a bow and a quiver full of arrows. Jay had three Low Check coins in his pocket, and a sword strapped to his side. Trudy had Lucus Light's letter in her pocket. No water. No food. No tents. No sleeping bags. No change of clothes. No matches. Nothing else.

They looked down at the land they were passing over. The Fire Mountains, Mount Prince and Mount Band, were behind them to the Northeast. To the north of them there was a dark cloud or smoke on the horizon. The hills around Pree Sump Shun were directly behind them but there were plenty of similar barren rocky hills below them. Ahead of them to the West was a flat plain that looked like a tan sea. The buzzards were distant dots in the sky far to their north. The dragon slayers did not know it, but the buzzards would return to attack them again.

"It's the Mirage Desert," announced High.

"Domain of Slope, the Yellow Dragon," added Pass.

Trudy said, "It's what we are here for."

Jay exclaimed. "Hey! Didn't that letter talk about that desert?"

Trudy pulled it out of her pocket.

Jay went on, "Read the part about the Yellow Dragon."

Slope, the Yellow Dragon, has his lair at an oasis called Fake Pree Sis Shun. He will be the easiest to find because it is right on the main road in a large yellow tent. The yellow desert people are nomadic herders. They have to move their flocks and herds constantly to keep from running out of grass since only a little grows, and all of it near the different oases, most of which are in the central part of the desert within twenty miles of Fake Pree Sis Shun.

Trudy stopped and asked, "Oases? What is that?"
Pass answered, "It is the plural of oasis. One cat, two cats. One oasis, two oases."
Trudy thought for a minute and then asked another question. "What color are the yellow people?"
Pass said, "You mean their skin?"
Trudy nodded.
Pass replied. "I don't know."
High said, "White."
Sunflower spoke up. "You mean the desert people?"
Trudy nodded again.
Sunflower said, "Yeah. White skin."

Slope requires that the desert people feed him one lamb from their flock each day. Slope is said to have a black snake, which spies for him, but there are few that ever see her. Her name is Slippery. She is small and very sneaky, but apparently not very dangerous. The captain of his soldiers is named Cud. I've heard he is smarter than Captain Spit, but that isn't saying much. Slope likes to tell two different kinds of lies. One of them is to try and get you to look at too much or too little detail.

Trudy was puzzled. "I wonder what Lucas means by that?"
Pass said, "I think it means that he tries to get you to see trees when you should be looking at the whole forest, or look at the forest when you should be noticing each tree."
Trudy thought that over for a minute and then went back to reading.

The other thing Slope likes to do is convince you that a whole bunch of things all in a row will lead from one to another, when they won't.

Trudy stopped again. "What could that mean?"
Pass explained, "That is like when someone says you should not be kind to people because they will just take advantage of you, and then pretty soon they will be telling you everything to do."
Sunflower spoke up. "That's true. I've seen it happen."
Trudy objected. "But not all the time."
Sunflower agreed. "No; not all the time."

Since he uses two different kinds of lies, he may be more difficult than the other dragons. I'm sure a wise monkey like you, will manage it.

Sunflower complained, "I don't see how any of that helped anything."

Jay said, "Well now we know most of the oases are north of us."

Sunflower went on, "We can't steer this thing north, and I don't want to go to the north. I want to go east, back to Buttercup and Daisy."

Trudy said, "Do you miss them?"

Sunflower looked at her puzzled. "Miss them? They are my little sisters. I want to take care of them."

Trudy asked. "Can't they take care of themselves?"

Sunflower looked surprised. "Of course, they can. I told our parents I would take care of them. I said I would, so I will."

Pass agreed. "Yes, that is important."

Jay said, "Look at that."

The balloon was over the desert. It was sandy in places, rocky in others. They saw some dots on the horizon far to the north that could have been oases. To the south was nothing but tan desert. Far to the west the horizon was in a kind of vague cloudiness, but above it were the peaks of snow covered mountains barely visible in the distance. The balloon continued west. As the sun rose so did the temperature. There seemed to be little to talk about.

By lunchtime they were hungry and thirsty, but there was nothing to eat or drink. The fire in the pot had gone out but still the balloon floated on. They were sitting down or lying down in the bottom of the basket trying to endure the heat. By supper time they were really suffering. The mountains were much closer but they still could not see where they met the ground. When the sun went down the temperature began to fall. They huddled together for warmth and dozed. At first the stars were clearly visible, but later in the night something awoke Jay and there were no stars visible at all. He guessed correctly that clouds had moved in during the night. The basket hit something and there was a dragging noise. Then nothing.

It happened again and everyone else woke up.

Jay said, "I think we are dragging along the ground."

High said, "Good, let's get out of this thing."

Jay shook his head not realizing that no one could see it in the pitch blackness. "If anyone gets out the balloon will go up and leave him behind."

It happened again only this time the dragging noise did not stop.

Lug suggested, "It might be time to try those control lines."

Jay began feeling his way over to the lines. "Which one do you think I should, try?"

Lug replied, "Yank them all."

Jay grabbed all the lines in his hands and jerked down on them with all his weight. The dragging noise stopped and they were completely still. There was no sound except their own breathing. There was no light.

Trudy asked, "Now what?"

Pass replied, "Let's go back to sleep."

Sunflower objected, "Shouldn't we post a watch?"
Jay agreed, "Yes, but how can we can tell when it is time for each one to take a
turn."
Trudy asked, "Watch for what? We can't see."
Sunflower said, "We can listen. I'll stay awake as long as I can, then I'll wake you,
Jay."
Jay replied, "OK."

* * *

Chapter 18 – The Mirage Desert

The next thing Jay new someone was shaking his shoulder. He could barely see in the dim light of an overcast dawn.

Sunflower whispered, "It hasn't been very long, but we'll be moving soon, and I'd like a nap before we go."

Jay stood up. Sunflower lay down on the basket floor.

Jay climbed out of the basket and looked around. The basket was sitting on the desert sand. It still had ropes hanging off of it in a tangle all around but there was no balloon anywhere to be seen. The canvas bags still hung all around its sides. As he watched one of the ropes on the basket moved, detached itself and began to make its way across the desert floor. It was about three feet long.

Jay rubbed his eyes and looked again. The rope continued to move away and soon disappeared from view.

Gradually as it became lighter the others stirred. There were no tents to take down or sleeping bags to roll up. There was no water to wash their face. There was nothing to eat and nothing to drink. It was chilly and everyone felt as if they had not slept at all. The sky was overcast. There was nothing but flat desert in every direction as far as the eye could see.

Sunflower was the last to awaken. After looking around he complained, "There is no way to tell which way is which."

Pass said, "Our choices are to stay here and die of thirst, or try to find water."

Sunflower shook his head. "Without some kind of landmark we will just go in circles"

Pass said, "Maybe there will be some water in one of those circles. There sure isn't anyone looking for us."

Jay had been walking around looking at the desert closely. He had been trying to decide whether to tell everyone what he had seen.

Jay announced, "I know which way to go."

Sunflower looked doubtful. "How?"

Jay explained. "Apparently we had more company in the balloon than we realized. Slippery, Slope's snake spy, was hiding someplace on the balloon. I saw her leave this morning, and as long as it doesn't get windy, we'll be able to follow her trail." He pointed at some marks in the sand.

High asked, "What if she doesn't know where she is going?"

Trudy objected, "What if it was just a common desert snake?"

Lug said, "It is all we have."

It was a bit of a struggle helping Lug climb out of the basket but soon they were following the snake's trail.

At first they trudged for an hour and rested ten minutes. By midday they were walking ten minutes, and resting fifteen minutes. At least, that is what the children

guessed. No one had any way to tell time. There was almost no conversation. High and Pass rode on Lug. Lug seemed to suffer the least.

It was mid afternoon. Trudy wanted to say something about being glad the sky was overcast instead of them having to walk in the bright sunlight, like they had had the day before, but she could not think of the words. She realized her tongue was too thick to say anything anyway. She thought that was funny, and she wanted to laugh, but she could not do that either. The next thing she knew she was laying on her back in the sand with Jay kneeling over her asking her if she was alright with words too slurred, for her to be sure she was hearing them right.

She sat up. Everyone else had taken the opportunity to sit down. Evidently she had fainted. When she sat up, Jay rocked back off his knees and sat as well.

Sunflower said, "If something does not change, by this time tomorrow we will all be dead." Or at least that might have been what he said. No one was really sure, not even Sunflower. But it was something which meant that.

Maybe.

Trudy decided, if they were going to rest, they might as well do it right. She laid back down in the warm sand and closed her eyes. Some time later she felt strong arms lifting her up to a sitting position. A bowl or glass was put to her lips and cool liquid went down her throat. Once, twice, three times she swallowed. She wanted more but the bowl or glass was gone. Strong arms lifted her and then she was sitting on something. It reminded her of a horse, but it wasn't a horse. Somebody said something. It sounded like it was important, but she could not make out what it was.

Whoever it was, said it again, "Put your arms around me, and hold on."

She obeyed.

The thing she was sitting on began to move and bounce. She was glad she had been told to hold on. Later strong arms laid her on a cool soft something, and someone gave her three more swallows, and said something in a soothing tone. She wanted more to drink, but her greatest desire was for sleep.

* * *

Trudy woke up lying on a comfortable mat in a large blue and white striped tent. The others were with her except for Lug. Sunflower was standing at an opening of the tent looking out. Sunlight was streaming in. Trudy realized she had been awakened when he opened it. Jay was already sitting up rubbing his eyes. High and Pass were stirring as well. Jay's sword was lying next to his mat. He automatically put it on. Trudy noticed that Sunflower had already put on his quiver and strung his bow around him like he usually carried it.

Sunflower had a canteen and was drinking from it. When he saw the others looking at him he pointed at a bunch of canteens stacked around a tent pole. Trudy wondered if she was being impolite just to take them without asking, but she took one and shared it with Pass.

Sunflower advised, "Not too much. You have to give yourself time."

Trudy drank three big swallows and stopped.

Pass asked, "Where is Lug?"

Sunflower answered, "He is out here talking with one of the camels."

Trudy exclaimed. "Camel! That's what it was. We rode here on a camel."

Jay smiled at her. Sunflower looked at her with a puzzled look on his face and then shrugged.

Sunflower announced, "Here comes somebody." He backed away from the door and a little man entered wearing a long blue garment with his head covered in the same material. It was the same blue material almost everyone in Low Check seemed to wear, except this was in the style of desert people, instead of the tunic like shirt and pants that they had seen before. His skin was white. Not white like Trudy and Jay, but white like snow, or cotton, or fluffy clouds. His eyes were dark and he had a dark droopy mustache.

The man looked around and then said pleasantly, "I see you have found your water. We will have food for you shortly. I am Sheik See Quin Chul Non Sequa Turs. You may just call me Non. This is the oasis Con Tin You Um, but we call it Tin. You are welcome here."

Pass pointed to each as she said, "Sunflower, Jay, Trudy, High, and I'm Pass. Thank you for helping us. I don't know how we can ever repay you."

Sheik Non bowed slightly. "In the desert we help each other."

Both of the children had questions they wanted to ask but Sunflower spoke first. "I'm anxious to get back to the Fire Mountains. Can you tell me how I could do that?"

Sheik Non looked thoughtful. "I believe they are far to our south east." He pointed to a back corner of the tent. "It would be a very difficult journey the direct way, I think. I do not believe there is any water between here and there. Probably you will need to go north, and take the Low Check Highway to the east. When you get to Single Side there is a road to the south I believe."

Jay commented, "They changed the name of Single Side to Double Side."

Sheik Non looked at him and lifted one an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

High's tail started twitching. "Must we always tell everyone everything?"

Jay looked at High. "It is just geography. It is not about us."

High put both hands beside the top of his head like he was trying to keep it from exploding. "Why don't we just paint signs telling everything about ourselves and wear them?"

Pass chirped, "Please excuse our monkey. He is very excitable."

Sheik Non nodded. "I'm not here to pry. My son, Josh, will be here with your breakfast shortly." He looked at Sunflower. "If you want to travel the Low Check Highway, we are moving to Oasis Fake tomorrow. We would be happy to have you accompany us."

Sunflower asked, "Oasis Fake?"

Sheik Non answered, "Fake Pree Sis Shun Oasis. It is a day's journey to the North. The Low Check highway goes right through it."

Sunflower nodded his head. "Yes, please!"

Sheik Non bowed a little again and said, "You will be welcome."

Jay asked, "Trudy, isn't that where Slope, the Yellow Dragon is?"

High still had his hands beside his head. Now he was twirling slowing in place shaking his head and saying under his breathe, "Everybody's business, everybody's business."

Trudy answered, "Yes, Jay, it is." Turning to the Sheik she asked, "Can we all go with you?"

The snow-white face looked surprised. "Of course. Isn't that what we just decided?" His face brightened. "Oh. You are not together."

Trudy asked thoughtfully, "How long has it been since you have had any news from the rest of Low Check?"

High was still making sounds as he twirled and twitched, but nothing that made any sense.

Sheik Non had his curiosity aroused. "Three weeks. I gather there have been important events since you would ask such a question, and since cities are changing their names. However, here is your food, and I'll wait to satisfy my curiosity until after you have eaten."

A younger little man, probably a teenager, came in carrying a tray heaping with good things to eat. Following him were others, all in blue desert garb, carrying a lightweight folding table with four folding chairs. Sheik Non left as they came in. The young men set everything up and then all the desert men left. Sunflower and each of the children took a chair. High and Pass just sat on the table near the tray. As soon as the young men left Lug came in.

Jay exclaimed. "This is perfect. These people do not know who we are, or what we are doing here. We can break Slopes spell and be done with him before we ever get to Fake 'what you call it' Oasis."

High corrected, "Fake Pree Sis Shun Oasis"

Pass said, "Is that what we want to do? Trick ignorant people into believing the truth."

Sunflower looked sheepish. "I'm afraid they already know. At least some of them."

Everyone quit eating except Lug who was not eating. They looked at Sunflower.

He went on, "Ya'll had pretty much conked out last night. I talked to the guy that gave me a ride here. They wanted an explanation of what we were doing wandering around in the middle of the desert. One thing led to another and I told him the whole story. I did not realize you wanted to keep it a secret."

Jay stood up. "Maybe if we hurry. It hasn't made it around to everyone yet. That Sheik did not know yet."

Lug said, "He does now."

Jay sat back down. "How do you know?"

Lug answered, "Somebody was filling his ear with it all as I came in."

Jay shook his head. "I guess High is right. We should keep things more secret."

High chattered, "That's right. That's right. And that is right. Everything is not everyone's business."

Lug went on. "That may be, but in this case I do not think, it would make much difference."

Jay asked, "Dragon wax in their ears?"

Lug shook his head slowly for side to side. "Nope, but they might as well have it. It is the kind of lie they believe. It inclines them not to listen."

Pass said, "Did try something earlier?"

Lug replied, "No. I've just been listening to them talk."

Jay asked, "What do you mean then?"

Lug replied, "I can't say exactly. It is just the way it seems to me. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think we will be having to go see Slope himself. I don't think it would have helped to have them ignorant of who we are."

Pass said, "Well, either way there is no hurry. Let's finish our breakfast."

Trudy asked Lug, "Did I understand Sunflower to say you were talking with one of the camels?"

Lug replied, "Yes. Clyde. He belongs to the sheik. It seems Slope gave each of the tribal sheiks a talking camel. Clyde told me there are twelve tribes of desert people who wander in this desert."

* * *

Chapter 19 – Under the Big Top

It turned out that Lug was right.

They tried several times, but it always turned out pretty much the same way it did with Sheik Non.

Trudy asked, "I understand that Slope, the Yellow dragon, is the ruler of the desert. Why is that?"

Sheik Non shook his head. "Now, we really do not need to talk about that. You might convince me it is not right, and then I would try to do something about it, and of course he is a dragon, so I would lose, and then what would happen to my son, Josh? It would be terrible. It would better if we just did not start that kind of talk." With that he bowed his little polite bow and went his way.

So it turned into a day with nothing to do. They watched as the desert nomads began to get things ready for their trip the next day. They had camels to ride and carry things, and large flock of sheep. They had dogs to help them keep the sheep under control. There were a dozen gaily colored large tents and many small tents set up around the oasis. Most of them had to stay set up for their final night before the trip, but a few including the blue and white one were taken down during the day. What packing could be done ahead of time was done. The dragon slayers had nothing to do. So they just watched and rested.

Jay asked one of the men who had a sword and who seemed friendly to show him something about using it. The man agreed, but his sword was different. Jay had a straight sword, but the man's sword was curved. They had a long discussion about which was best, for which kind of fighting.

When they were done High spoke up. "You really should leave that sword behind. It is going to get us in trouble."

Jay shook his head. "I think it will get us out of trouble."

During the night Trudy learned an important lesson. They found smaller tents for them to sleep in that night. Trudy shared one with Pass. It wasn't quite big enough for her to stand up straight but it was comfortable. Trudy had just drifted off to sleep when she was awakened by something nuzzling at her feet. One of the camels had stuck his nose into the tent. Trudy felt sorry for him and just ignored him.

A little later Trudy felt something moving beside her and realized that the camel had his whole head and part of his neck in the tent. She was sorry she had let him in to start with. She regretted not just closing the tent flap when it was just a nose, because now she had more camel than she knew what to do with. She had no idea what to do about it, so she tried to go back to sleep.

Trudy must have dozed off because when she woke up again the camel was trying to get into the tent entirely. Of course the tent was too small for him and he ended up tearing it down. Not knowing what else to do, she and Pass just kind of pulled it back over them like a blanket and slept under the stars. It was a terrible night's sleep and Trudy and Pass were a little grumpy the next day.

The morning was a blur of activity. Jay and Trudy were amazed at how quickly the rest of the camp was taken down. Everyone seemed to know exactly what to do, even the little desert children, probably from having done it hundreds of times. It seemed like no time at all before they were full of breakfast and on their way.

Their journey through the desert was quite different this day than it had been just two days earlier. They carried with them water to drink. There were not enough camels for everyone to ride at the same time, so everyone except the smallest little desert children, took turns walking and riding, so that no one became over tired. Of course, Lug had to walk the whole way just like the camels and sheep. High rode the whole way on Lug. Pass flew some but mostly rode on the shoulder of one of the children. The caravan stopped every couple of hours to give the animals a rest.

It was well after lunchtime and Jay began to think there would be no lunch at all, when they came to a small oasis and stopped there for lunch. The desert people quickly had a pavilion set up with some tables under it. The tables were filled with food. Everyone took some food and settled some place on the ground among the palm trees of the oasis to eat.

The dragon slayers and Sunflower sat together. As Trudy enjoyed some dates for desert she asked no one in particular, "Why do the dragons bother to talk to us at all? They could avoid being slain if they did. In fact, all they have to do is not attack us. There is nothing we could do to them, if they left us alone."

Jay answered, "We do not kill them. They do that to themselves."

Trudy nodded. "Yes, exactly. But why?"

Lug explained. "Don't you remember. We talked about this at Pree Sump Shun. Dragons are very different from each other, just like people are all different, but all dragons have three things in common – a love of lying, arrogant pride, and uncontrollable rage."

Trudy nodded again. "Sure I remember, I just do not understand it. And there was no time to ask questions. Why are they like that?"

Pass tried to help. "They like to control everyone around them with their lies."

Lug agreed. "Yes, and their pride keeps them from not taking the challenge of trying to control us. When they fail, their rage makes them do the stupidest thing of all -- try to attack us."

Jay added, "Sometimes people are like that. I've seen them at school. They like to bully everyone, and if you stand up to them they get mad, start a fight, and get in trouble."

Trudy nodded. "Or some people just walk around looking for things to get mad at, so they can do something ridiculous. It is like they have a big red button on their chest that has a label on it that says, 'Press here to make me do or say something stupid'."

Lug said, "Those people probably have some of your invisible dragons whispering lies in their ears."

Trudy and Jay looked at each other in amazement. Before they could think of anything to say it was time to go.

The desert people quickly took down the pavilion, tables, and food and the caravan was on its way again. The sun was beginning to dip below the horizon when a large oasis came into view. Instead of one pool of water with a few palm trees and patches of grass, like the others they had seen, this was a whole chain of about three dozen various sized pools, with many kinds of trees, grass, and permanent buildings. It had one outstanding feature. A large bright yellow tent, which looked like a circus tent, was set up at the edge of the largest pool of water. Also, there was a highway going through the oasis, east and west.

"Fake Pree Sis Shun" announced High.

As they approached, a troop of a dozen dragon soldiers came out to meet them. The leader wore a yellow cap on his pointed head. Their odd cone shaped bodies seem to glide along the sand because of their short legs and the dim light.

Jay complained, "Oh, no. Just like the Blue Dragon. It is not fair. I'm tired."

Trudy said, "It is what we are here for."

Sheik Non brought the caravan to a stop as the dragon soldiers approached. The sheik and the dragon soldier with the yellow cap spoke for a moment, but the dragon slayers who were near the end of the caravan, could not hear what was said. After a moment the soldiers came to the back of the caravan where Sunflower and the dragon slayers were.

"I'm Captain Cud," said the yellow capped one with a little stiff bow.

"I am Pass." Pass introduced everyone pointing with her wing. "Luggage"

"Just call me Lug."

"Trudy, Jay, Sunflower, and High," she finished, pointing as she went.

Trudy and Jay also gave a little stiff bow without even realizing they were doing it. They had been around so many bowing people the last two days they had picked up the habit.

Captain Cud offered, "The Magnificent Slope would like to offer you dinner and a place to sleep for the night. He would like to meet with you in the morning, if that is suitable to you."

Jay replied, "Thank you very much, yes."

High chattered, "No. We want to meet him tonight."

Pass chirped, "High, don't be so rude!"

Trudy said, "It's what we came for."

Sunflower, "If it is all the same to you, I need to head east first thing in the morning."

Cud looked at each one who spoke with growing surprise. He gave another little bow, and said, "Certainly. Mr. High may meet with him now, the others in the morning, and Mr. Sunflower is free to go at any time."

High objected. "No, I meant all us of now!"

Jay argued, "I'm tired."

Trudy said, "It is what we are here for."

Pass added, "A good sleep would be good for the children, High. They did not ride all day like you."

High still argued, "But we will lose the element of surprise."

Trudy said, "I'm not sure how surprised he would be since he sent some soldiers out to meet us."

Jay pointed at a little black snake crawling out of a basket hanging on the side of a nearby camel. They all watched as she dropped to the sand and crawled rapidly away in the direction of Oasis Fake.

"Slippery, sure goes fast, doesn't she?" wondered Jay.

"Black racer," explained Lug.

Pass said, "High, I think we should be polite and sensible, and meet with Slope in the morning. I do not think it would wise to meet with him now. Our surprise, if we had any, just crawled away across the sand."

High's tail twitched but he did not say anything else.

Jay turned to Captain Cud. "We will be pleased to accept the invitation to meet in the morning."

Sunflower shrugged, "You know, on second thought, I think I'll stick around for a little while in the morning, and watch this."

Captain Cud bowed again. "Very well, follow me please."

Little desert people in Oasis Fake watched quietly as the strange procession walked in the direction of the large yellow tent. They followed the soldiers to what appeared to be their own barracks in a building next to the yellow tent. Food was brought to Sunflower and the dragon slayers.

High complained, "How do we know it is not poison?"

Pass answered, "Because that would be an attack against us and the magic key would protect us."

Sunflower looked worried, "What about me? Does it protect me?"

High said, "Sure. You are with us."

Lug and Pass looked at each other in a puzzled and uncertain way.

The mutton was very good, as was the ice cold milk. Trudy had not seen any cows about, but found that she did not want to ask which kind of animal had donated the milk. No one even got a stomachache, so clearly it was not poisoned.

During supper Trudy suggested, "I need to get the Yellow Dragon's lies in my head. Remember how we had colored lies for each of the other dragons?"

Jay nodded, "Browning meat, feeling blue, green makes warm weather, purple mountains have more than one side, and turning red can mean more than one thing."

Trudy went on, "Maybe we could do that ahead of time with the Yellow Dragon."

High asked, "How can you have two different kinds of lies the same color?"

Trudy looked puzzled.

Jay spoke up. "Maybe you could have them be about two different kinds of yellow things."

Trudy brightened. "Yes! Good idea. The one where you assume one thing leads to another could start out with someone slipping on a yellow banana peel, which means they fall down, so of course they break their leg."

Jay added, "Or their neck."

Trudy continued. "They might slip on a banana peel, and they might fall down, and they might break something, and they might die, but it is not for sure and for certain."

Pass chirped, "Good! What about the too much detail and too little detail?"

Trudy shook her head. "I can not get the example you used out of my head."

Pass asked, "You mean about looking at the trees instead of the forest, or noticing the forest without seeing the trees?"

Trudy nodded and scratched her head.

Jay suggested, "They could be lemon trees."

Trudy looked at Jay, "Well, I guess so." You could tell she did not really like the example. It looked like they were stumped and would have to settle for lemon trees.

Lug suggested. "You know, just because a flower is yellow, doesn't make it a buttercup."

Trudy laughed. "Yes, and just because Buttercup was colored yellow, did not make her a flower, she was a lady. Perfect, Lug."

Jay shrugged. "I still like the lemon trees better."

* * *

The next morning a good breakfast was served by polite dragon soldiers.

As they were eating, Pass commented, "We really have not had a chance to make many plans."

High chattered, "We have no idea who might be listening to us."

Jay was thoughtful. "I wonder if we could make a plan where it would not matter if they knew what it was."

Trudy shook her head. "We have not had a detailed plan yet. We seem to be doing OK. I say we just do what we always do. Listen for the lies and respond with the truth."

High asked triumphantly. "Isn't that what I have been saying all along?"

The others had to admit that it was similar to what he had been saying.

When they had finished their breakfast, Captain Cud led them to the giant yellow tent. As they approached the tent, they saw that it was guarded on all sides around the outside by about twenty or thirty dragon soldiers. If any of the little desert people came near they were waved away by one of these guards.

Jay commented, "No one will be listening to this conversation."

Jay also noticed a wet trail leading from the little lake next to the tent, into the tent, evidently left there recently by Slope after he took a swim. The tent was large enough for a lot more than was in it. A large, fat, yellow dragon was in the middle, with

droplets of water still covering him. Behind him was a small adobe building with a small door in it. The dragon slayers and Sunflower arranged themselves in front of the dragon in a semi-circle. They seemed nervous, and perhaps a little afraid, particularly High with his twitching tail. Behind them Captain Cud and his soldiers formed an even larger semi-circle.

Slope dipped his head slightly as if to bow. "Thank you for meeting with me."

They could not help but notice the little black snake, Slippery, perched partly on Slope's neck, and partly on his head, with her head near his left ear.

"We are not here to make friends," chattered High.

Pass chirped, "High, mind your manners."

Slope continued as if High had not spoken. "I have heard that some dragons to the east have had a bit of trouble with you. I just want you to know that will not be necessary here. You are free to travel through or stop and visit, as you like. Stay here as my guests, if you please."

"High asked sarcastically, "Did you have a nice lamb for breakfast?"

Slope nodded. "Yes, very tasty. Thank you for asking. I enjoyed my swim afterwards as well."

Lug nudged Jay.

Jay spoke up, "We want to know why you have enslaved the people of the Mirage Desert and make them feed you lambs from their flocks. It is not fair."

Slope chuckled. "Of course, it would be unfair to enslave people, but I'm afraid you have been misinformed, my young sir. The people of the desert are free to come and go as they have always been. Did you see any dragon soldiers with the caravan of Sheik Nun yesterday? I'm sorry, we have not been properly introduced. I am Slope, also known as the Yellow Dragon. Sounds scary doesn't it?" Slope chuckled. "The charming little snake on my head is Slippery. She keeps an eye on things for me."

"I am Pass." Pass pointed to their party, "Luggage, Trudy, Jay, Sunflower, and High.

Jay said, "If you are not these people's ruler, why do you need a snake to spy on them?"

Slope shook his head. "I never said, I was not their ruler. I said they were not slaves. It is two different things. It is like apples and oranges. They are both fruit, but they are very different things. As their ruler I carry a heavy responsibility of watching after the welfare of my people, and seeing to it that they are not harmed, and do not harm themselves. In order to do that, I naturally need a lot of information about what is going on. Surely you can see that. Slippery keeps me informed of everything I need to know to carry out my duties."

Jay looked confused.

Trudy asked, "What is the difference between a ruler and a slave master?"

Slope answered, "Let me explain using the sand of the desert. Imagine if I took a grain of sand and set it before you. Then I added another grain of sand, and another, and another. Eventually it would become a sand dune. If I kept it up long enough it would become a whole desert of sand. Just because all three are just sand added to sand, does

not mean they are all the same things. Surely you can see that two grains of sand, a sand dune and a desert are three different things. And yet, at what point do they become different? A thousand grains of sand? A million? A billion? Yes, a benevolent ruler and a slave master have certain things in common, like a sand dune and a desert, but that does not keep them from being quite different things."

Trudy looked puzzled. "Gee. That sounds true."

Jay said, "Yes, it is a pretty good example that shows that a ruler and a slave master could be two different things, but it doesn't answer the question about which one Slope is – slave master or ruler."

Slope's belly growled deep within him. He chuckled and said, "Mr. Jay is correct, of course, but I have already offered evidence of my kindness in the freedom that Sheik Nan enjoys, as well as the other tribes of the desert. The Sheik takes his tribe and his flocks wherever he likes. I do not send dragon soldiers to make him do anything. He manages it all the way he sees fit. Does that really sound like a slave master?"

High chattered. "He is lying. First he called him Sheik Nun and then Sheik Nan. His name is Sheik Non."

Slope looked at High. "The monkey has an ear for details, but isn't there a difference between lying on purpose and simply saying the wrong thing by accident? I freely admit, I do not remember people's names very well sometimes. But does that really make me a liar?"

Jay agreed, "No of course it does not. But I wonder how much freedom the Sheiks have when each of them has a talking camel, a gift from you, spying on them."

Slope answered, "Would you really look a gift camel in the mouth? You have no reason to believe they are my spies. Lug is the only one who has talked to one, and it was a friendly conversation."

Jay asked, "How do you know that?"

Slope replied, "Slippery keeps me informed of everything I need to know to carry out my duties. I have heard what you did to the east. Naturally in order to properly watch over my people, I spied on you."

High asked, "If you are a kind and benevolent ruler, why don't you know the names of the leader's of the tribes?"

Slope looked at High. "What does kindness have to do with remembering people's names? If I ordered them about all the time like a slave master, I would certainly need to know their names. But since they are free to do as they please, there is no need to remember their names."

Trudy spoke up again. "And what has kindness to do with the difference between slave master and ruler? Also, you can order people about without knowing their names. You can call them 'hey you,' or have Captain Cud here," she pointed over her shoulder with her thumb, "give them their orders. The difference between a slave master and a good ruler depends on whether these people gave you permission to be their ruler, not how kind you are, or whether they are free to travel. If you consulted with the tribal sheiks often, you would know their names. I think you probably just do as you please."

Slope's stomach growled louder. Jay noticed out of the corner of his eye that several of the soldiers were holding onto their stomachs as if they were in pain.

Before Slope could speak again, Jay added, "When I spoke to Sheik Non the other day, it was clear he was so afraid of what you might do to him that he would not even talk to me. That sounds like a slave to me."

Slope's stomach growled again and two of the dragon soldiers sat down.

Slope said, "You are not looking at the big picture. I protect these people from other dragons. If I were not here, soon the other Fay Lacy dragons would be here ruling over these people. They are not as kind as I am. Things would soon be much worse."

Trudy replied, "There are very few other dragons left, and I doubt they would want this desert, and perhaps they would be a better master than you."

Slope responded, "You do not know any of that for sure. Besides, my dragon soldiers protect the oases from attacks from bands of outlaws. Without them soon the whole desert would be in chaos and war."

Trudy shook her head. "None of these people have mentioned any bands of outlaws. Sunflower here, and his two sisters, is the only outlaw band I know about, and he is not going to attack anyone. Besides there were no dragon soldiers at Oasis Tin and nobody attacked it."

Slope replied, "You could not possibly know how many bands of outlaws there are. Without me, the rule of law would collapse; the slightest insult would become a fight, which would lead to feuding between the tribes, and finally general civil war. There would be a whole lot more lambs killed then, I assure you. I use my authority for the good of these people, or soon there would be no authority at all."

Again Trudy shook her head, "These people are too polite to have feuds, I think. And even if I am wrong about that, they seem smart enough to make and keep their own laws, without any help from you at all. Besides, it does not matter if I am right about what the other dragons might do, or the number of outlaws there are, or whether these folks would have a civil war. What matters is that I might be right. It shows that you are wrong about those things leading one to another automatically for sure and for certain. The other dragons might come here, or they might not. There might be bands of outlaws, or there might not. These people might be able to rule themselves, or they might not. The point is, that you have no right to make these decisions for them."

Another loud growl came from Slope's stomach and all the dragon soldiers sat down holding their middles, except for Captain Cud.

Slope said defiantly, "I take good care of my people!"

Lug spoke up for the first time, "You take good care of your property. What does that prove?"

Jay added, "Yes, it sounds like to me you think you own these people. Are you saying that because you take good care of your property, it is not your property? That makes no sense. They did not ask you to rule over them, did they?"

Without warning Slope tried to attack. Suddenly he screamed and jumped forward into the air with his wings spread wide. He was too fat to fly, but he appeared to be trying to. By the time he came down on Trudy and Jay he was nothing but sand. They were buried in it. Sunflower and Lug helped dig them out. Trudy and Jay were spluttering sand out of their mouths, but they were unharmed.

They looked around the tent and noticed that there was a smaller pile of sand where each of the dragon soldiers had been. One of the piles had a yellow cap on top of it.

Lug said, "Is this a whole desert or just a sand dune?"

The others all laughed.

Jay yelled, "Look!"

Slippery, the black snake, was crawling out of the tent. No one tried to stop her. They did not realize it then, but they would see Slippery again in a time of great danger. They looked around the tent again and noticed the little building sitting behind where Slope had been.

Trudy exclaimed, "Let's try that Door of Doom!"

It did not open.

* * *

The desert people were very grateful. Much to the embarrassment of Trudy and Jay, and the pleasure of High, the Sheiks politely insisted on a celebration. Preparations took until the following evening, so they spent two days exploring Oasis Fake, and getting to know the people there. Jay made friends with several of the men who were happy to practice sword fighting with him.

Sunflower did not stay for the celebration. He left early in the day. As soon as his desires had been made clear, the Sheiks paid a truck driver to take him to the east. The dragon slayers and Sunflower said their good-byes beside an empty steam truck parked beside the Low Check highway. Sunflower was awkward when Trudy hugged him good-bye. As the truck steamed east, the dragon slayers waved good-bye to him, and he to them. Trudy hoped that Sunflower would soon be re-united with his sisters, Daisy and Buttercup.

I will not keep you in the same suspense as Trudy, dear reader. He found them soon enough, but discovered he only had one to care for. Happy, the balloon crew chief, had married the other one. I never could figure out which one married Happy; Daisy or Buttercup. I'm not sure if Happy or Sunflower even knew that.

The evening of the celebration Sheik Non and three other tribal leaders made speeches, as did High. Each of the Sheiks assured the dragon slayers of some gift to help them on their continued journey to the west -- money, mountain clothing, supplies, and transportation. It was Sheik Non who gave the transportation. There were fireworks, music, dancing, and plenty of food. A good time was had by most.

* * *

The Fat Lazy Dragons
Book VII Compo , the White Dragon

Chapter 20 – Journey to East End

That night, after the celebration the dragon slayers slept in the same dragon soldier's quarters again. Before settling down for the night they got out Lucas Light's letter and Trudy read the last page.

Compo Sis Shun, the White Dragon, is called Compo. I do not know what the long name means. Her lair is in the northern section of the White Mountains. In the highest and coldest valley there is a castle built of ice. Compo's lair will be the most difficult to find of all. There is no trail to follow. A group of dog sledges goes up there twice a week to carry her food from Fort Glacier. I don't know how you will be able to get them to let you go with them.

The coal and gold mines are in the southern section of the White Mountains. There are plenty of roads down that way, but none going north. Fort Glacier is right on the Low Check Highway about half way through Division pass, which goes through the White Mountains, and divides the northern and southern sections.

Compo has two bears that sometimes roam the mountains on errands for her. A polar bear named Ebony and a black bear named Ivory.

Trudy stopped and asked, "Did he get that right?"

Jay agreed, "It sounds like it should be the other way around. A polar bear is white and should have the name Ivory. Ebony would be a better name for a black bear."

Pass fluttered her wings. "Why must their name's match their colors? It probably has something to do with their character. That makes more sense."

Jay and Trudy looked at each other and smiled. Trudy read more.

Ebony and Ivory are extremely smart, strong, and dangerous. The leader of her soldiers is Major Molar. He will be more of a challenge for you than the captains you met before. Compo likes to tell two different kinds of lies, but both of them are a little bit like Slope's, so maybe that will make it easier. One of them is to try to say there is no difference between two things because you can not say exactly where the line should be drawn or ...

Trudy brightened. "That was kind of what Slope was talking about with the grains of sand and the difference between a dune and a desert."

Pass agreed. "Yes, but he was accusing us of telling that kind of lie, instead of using the lie himself."

Trudy nodded and read on.

. . . or tries to say there is nothing in between two things , no third thing, just because you can draw a line .

Trudy stopped again. "How is that the same kind of lie. Seems like they are the exact opposite. It would be like saying there is no such thing as a sand dune because a desert is not a grain of sand."

Pass chirped "Your example is right, but don't you see that they are really two sides of the same coin?"

Jay spoke up. "I'm completely lost. Between the coins and grain of sand, I have completely lost track of what we are talking about."

Pass explained. "We are talking about figuring out how different something has to be before it really is different. Sheik Non has a beard, but his son, Josh, does not. Right?"

Jay nodded.

Pass went on. "How many hairs would Josh have to grow before he has a beard?"

Jay shrugged. "I don't know. A lot I guess."

Pass chirped. "Exactly! No one knows exactly how many. The lie happens when someone tries to say there is no difference in having a beard and not having a beard because no one knows the exact number of hairs it takes."

Jay nodded. "Ok. I see that, but what is all this about two sides of a coin?"

Pass answered, "Well, the other side of the coin is when someone lies saying, since there is obviously a difference between having a beard and not having a beard, there is no such thing as a mustache."

Jay nodded again. "I understand what you are saying now, but it still seems like two different kinds of lies, although I can see they are similar."

Trudy shrugged and read the rest.

The other thing Compo likes to do is convince you that a whole thing is just like its parts, or the parts are just like the whole thing.

Dress warm.

I have run out of time. I will give you the details on Perf, the black dragon, when you get to Low Check City.

Your friend,

Lucas Light

Trudy shook her head. "I don't get that parts and whole, whole and parts, thing."
Jay also shook his head. "Me neither."

Pass explained, "If you have a house that is twenty years old, that does not mean every part of it is twenty years old."

The children nodded and Jay replied, "That's right. We just bought a new front door when we moved in, so that part is not as old as the rest of our house."

Pass fluttered her wings. "See. Pretty easy."

Trudy shook her head. "Wait a minute. I don't understand. Where is the lie?"

Pass answered, "It would be a lie to say the door was twenty years old, because it was part of a house that was twenty years old."

Trudy looked surprised. "Oh. That is easy."

Lug added, "Yes, but I think it will not be so easy, when it is buried in the middle of an angry argument."

Jay still looked puzzled. "I understand the door in the house example. The parts of the house are not like the whole house. But when you turn it around the other way, I do not get it. Isn't the house just the parts that it is made out of?"

Pass answered. "Sure, the house is the parts it is made out of, but it is not like its parts. A door swings on hinges. Does a house?"

Jay smiled. "Of course. I see. But I still think it is four kinds of lies."

Trudy gave him her, "Who cares?" look and said, "However you count it, those are the lies we will be listening for. Saying there is no difference, when there is; saying there is only two kinds, when there are many kinds; saying part of something is just like the something; and saying something is just like one of its parts."

She did not realize Jay had been counting on his fingers as she talked. Jay laughed. "Yes, four!"

Trudy stuck her tongue out at Jay.

Lug reminded them. "Don't forget. She can tell other kinds of lies, too. She just likes to use these two kinds, or four kinds if you count them Jay's way."

Trudy nodded her head. "That's right! We better review the other kind of lies."

Trudy said, "Brown lies mix up the meanings of the words, like browning meat means cooking it, not painting it brown."

Jay added, "Blue lies try to make you think about something else, like how blue someone feels."

Jay went on. "Green lies say things are caused by other things when they are not, like trees turning green in the Spring does not make the weather warmer."

Trudy smiled. "Purple lies look at thing from only one side, but purple mountains have more than one side."

Jay grinned. "Red lies start out like everyone already knows something is true, but just because someone turns red, does not mean they are embarrassed."

Trudy laughed. "Yellow banana lies say that one thing leads to another every time when it doesn't always. Slipping on a yellow banana peel might cause you to break your leg, but it might not."

Jay ended triumphantly. "Yellow buttercup lies make you look at too little, or too much detail. Just because a flower is yellow, does not mean it is a buttercup. You need more details."

After a moment Pass said, "What about the rest of them? The two (or four) lies that Compo will tell? Aren't you going to give them names, too?"

After a lot of hard thinking and false starts they decided on three, instead of two or four. After about an hour, Trudy said, "Ok, then. One more time what are they? What did we finally decide?"

Jay said, "The white lie that tries to say there is no difference, when there is; we decided to call the white snowflake lie, because even though snowflakes all look the same from a distance, when you look close you see they are different."

Trudy nodded. "The white lie that tries to say there is only two choices, when there are many; we decided to call the white light lie, because even though the light switch says all you can choose is off or on, if you hold a prism up to the light you get lots of colors, not just white."

Jay finished, "And a whole thing being more than its parts, and a part being different than the whole thing; we decided to call the white cloud lie, because a white cloud is nothing but water droplets, but it doesn't act like water. Also, water doesn't act like a white cloud except when it is in a white cloud."

High said, "Now can we go to sleep?"

* * *

The next morning Sheik Non, his son Joshua, the dragon slayers, and a half dozen camels set off down the Low Check highway to the west. It seemed everyone in Oasis Fake turned out to cheer for them as they left. They had new packs, provisions, bedrolls, tents, and money to buy mountain and snow gear in East End. East End they had discovered was their destination. It was a little town at the eastern end of Division Pass just where the Mirage Desert met the White Mountains.

Each of the children had a camel of their own to ride. Lug had to walk the whole way, but one of the camels was designated to carry the packs Lug normally would have lugged. High rode on Lug and Pass flitted about as she usually did. East End was a half-day trip if one rode hard, but they took a more leisurely pace, that was planned to get them there enough before supper time to find an inn and buy mountain supplies.

Not long after they left Oasis Fake Lug trotted up next to the lead camel.

Lug said, "Clyde?"

The camel replied, "I'm still here."

Lug seemed relieved. "I was afraid of what might happen to you when Slope turned to sand."

The camel snorted. "Me, too. He always threatened that if I did not do as I was told, I would lose my ability to speak. Nothing seemed worse to me. Looks like I'm fine."

Lug asked, "What kind of things did he ask you to do?"

Clyde answered, "I just had to answer questions whenever that little black snake, Slippery, came around. Seemed pretty harmless."

Lug assured him. "You may have done no harm."

Clyde said, "I hope I did not."

The road was straight and flat. Steam trucks going east or west several times passed them. Once they passed a group of desert people in a caravan going east. Here they found several kinds of cactus growing including barrel cactus. Jay knew from a report he had done at school that these type of cactus stored water in the middle. If they had grown where the balloon came down, they would have at least had water. Twice they passed oases. At the second one they stopped for lunch.

Jay noticed that he and Sheik Non both finished their food before the others, so he asked the Sheik to show him something about sword fighting. The Sheik stood up with him and they practiced a few moves.

High was next to Trudy and said to her, "Can you get him to leave that sword behind. It is going to get us in trouble."

Trudy shook her head. "I'm staying out of it. I don't know whether it is a good idea or not, so I'm minding my own business."

Pass agreed. "Me, too."

High's tail twitched, but he said no more.

If it had not been for the heat and the glaring sun it would have been a pleasant restful day. At least they had plenty of water with them.

As they traveled the distant mountains loomed larger and larger. They had been told that on the western side, the White Mountains gradually became foot hills and flat lands down to the sea, but that on this side they just seemed to spring straight up out of the desert. By lunchtime they could see for themselves that this was true. By mid afternoon they could see the gap between the north and south sections of the White Mountains, and were soon able to make out buildings right where the road disappeared into the mountains.

Just as Jay noticed an odd white blob near the little town High announced, "East End."

Jay urged his camel up next to Sheik Non and asked, "What is that big white thing near the town?"

Sheik Non pulled out a small telescope and put it to his eye. He closed it up and put it back in a pocket and looked at Jay seriously. "It's a white dragon."

The Sheik brought the little caravan to a halt so they could talk it over.

High demanded, "Why did we stop?"

Jay explained, "Compo, the White Dragon is waiting at East End for us."

No one said anything for a few clumsy feeling moments.

Pass asked, "What choices do we have?"

Everyone looked back down the long empty road they had just traveled.

Jay shrugged.

Trudy said, "It is why we are here."

With that they started again. It wasn't long before they saw a dozen dragon soldiers coming to meet them. One of them wore a white cap.

Sheik Non brought them to a stop when the dragon soldiers were within talking distance. The one with the white cap snapped. "You will follow me."

They just started the camels up again without any comment. Even High was calm.

After the soldiers scurried to surround them on all sides Jay said, "Major Molar I suppose."

The cone shaped creature with the white cap looked at him. "Yes. Keep that in mind, if you know what is good for you."

Jay shrugged.

The town was very small. It had an inn, a store, and a dozen houses. Compo was sitting in a bare area on the western end of the town. With her were another dozen dragon soldiers, a large black bear, and an even larger polar bear. About thirty White Mountain people (whose skin was black like the mailman, as Mayor White of E. Rail town had said) were standing beside the road and silently watched them pass.

Jay said, "They do look like Lucas Light, don't they?"

Trudy said, "No, Lucas had blue eyes. These folks have brown eyes."

In just a moment they were on the western side of town. The dragon slayers with Sheik Non approached Compo and the two bears. Josh stayed behind to keep the camels.

The White Dragon and the two bears stood up. The polar bear, Ebony, said, "This is what we are going to do. Major Molar and I will escort you to the ice castle while Compo and Ivory wait here. If your key works in Compo's Door of Doom, you can go home. If it doesn't you can just move on to Low Check City and try your luck with Perfidy."

Jay shook his head. "We can not do that."

High asked, "Why not?"

Pass reminded him. "That will let Compo loose on another world."

Jay added, "That would not be fair."

High said, "Oh. That's right."

Ivory, the black bear, demanded. "What do you care? There are already billions of invisible dragons over there. How could one more hurt? Besides you don't even know if the key will work on Compo's door."

Pass said, "It would not be right for us to turn a dragon loose on another world without their permission."

Ebony suggested. "She'll be here. It would take an hour for her to be drawn through the door. You could close it behind you very quickly."

Lug objected. "Nope. It doesn't matter how far away she is, it only takes a second."

Compo sat down. "I'm not going anywhere. Go on up to the castle."

Trudy said, "OK. We are just going to go on over and have a nice chat with those folks over there." She pointed at the little crowd just inside the town, watching at a distance.

Compo stood back up. "Wait."

Ivory quickly asked, "What harm would it do for you to just try the door? If the lock unlocked you could just not open it, and lock it back. If it did not unlock, you could go on to Low Check City."

Lug objected again. "Unlocked is unlocked. There is no locking it back. The key will disappear, and we will be without protection from you. The only way we could save ourselves would be to open the door."

Ebony insisted. "You have not answered my question. What harm will one more dragon do among billions?"

Jay answered. "Whatever harm Compo did, we would be responsible for it. We are not going to do it."

Ebony went on. "It would be like adding a grain of sand to the desert. There would be no difference."

Trudy spoke up. "Haven't we heard this one before? Yes, there would be one difference. Before we opened the door Compo would be here. After we opened the door Compo would be there. The rest of the dragons have nothing to do with it. Compo is the one we would have caused to be there."

Compo shivered and then said, "Let me think this over. If you will agree not to talk to any of these people, we can talk it over again in the morning."

High chattered. "We are not going to do what you want us to do."

Compo said quietly, "Major Molar, kill them all."

Major Molar drew his sword and shouted, "Draw your swords and kill the town's people."

The other dragon soldiers drew their swords and started back towards the town. The little mountain people all ran. The soldiers started to run after them.

Trudy exclaimed, "Wait! We agree! We agree. We'll wait until morning."

Compo called, "Major Molar!"

Major Molar shouted, "Stop!"

The dragon soldiers put their swords up and returned to gather around Compo and the dragon slayers.

Compo said, "Major, escort our guests to the inn. If they say anything you don't like kill whoever they are talking to."

They all turned back towards the inn. Pass said, "Let's say nothing at all."

The dragon slayers, and the Sheik, crowded into the rental office of the inn, with Major Molar and several dragon soldiers.

The inn keeper looked very nervous, and no one said anything at all for a few seconds. High's tail was twitching. Finally Major Molar said, "A room key for your guests. They'll pay you tomorrow."

Jay looked at Major Molar with contempt and put money on the counter.

The inn was not large, and the rooms were arranged in a barracks style. They were given a room with six bunk beds and so little space that there was no room for Lug

to bed down on the floor. He had to squeeze onto one of the bottom bunks. They ate trail rations from their packs. Major Molar stayed outside to guard their door himself.

Jay said, "Whew. That was close."

Lug spoke up. "I'm not sure it was necessary, but we can not take the risk."

Trudy asked, "What do you mean?"

Lug said, "I think if they attacked someone to force us to do something, the magic key would have killed the attackers instead."

Trudy looked puzzled. "Are you sure?"

Lug answered, "No. That is why I said we could not take the risk. But if they push it too far, we may have to."

Sheik Non spoke up. "If you can arrange it so that I could be your test, I'm ready to take the risk."

No one knew how to answer that, but they certainly admired Sheik Non. Trudy thought to herself, this little desert man was certainly more courageous now that he was no longer yellow. The thought made her smile.

Finally Pass said, "Hopefully it will not come to testing Lug's idea."

Jay complained, "That conversation with the White Dragon did not work very well. It was different somehow with the two bears joining in the conversation like that. Everything felt, I don't know, sort of flat."

Trudy nodded. "That is the way I felt, too."

Pass suggested. "Compo acts like she is afraid of us. She would never agree to let us try the door, unless she was pretty sure she was going to lose. Naturally they would rather live as an invisible dragon than not live at all, but they hate it."

High agreed. "She should be afraid of us! Look at what we have done. Brown, Blue, and Green. Purple, Red and Yellow. Six down and three to go."

They put out the lights and tried to go to sleep.

After a little while Trudy said in the darkness. "We were over confident. We did not do it very well. We better be more careful tomorrow, or we are going end up mining coal in the South White Mountains."

After another little while, Jay agreed. "You are right. We better be on our toes in the morning."

Lug said, "I don't have any toes."

Everyone laughed.

* * *

Chapter 21 – Cold Logic

When they opened their door in the morning the dragon soldiers were there ready to escort them back to the bare place just beyond the town. Their breakfast had been more trail rations, and was not sitting too easy on their stomachs. None of the little mountain people could be seen anywhere. The dragon and the bears were waiting for the dragon slayers. When the dragon slayers and Sheik Non approached, the black bear just started talking, as if there had been no night in between their last conversation and this one.

Ivory accused, "You are guilty of being unfair. You told Track, the Blue Dragon that you would leave him alone, if he would let you try his door. Why doesn't Compo get the same chance? It is not fair to her."

Pass answered, "I was the one that made that offer, but no one else agreed to it, including the Blue Dragon, Track."

Ivory continued. "You are part of the Magician Key and a member of this little group of dragon fighters who are protected by the Magic Key. What you say counts for all of you."

Jay replied, "That is not fair. We each speak for ourselves."

Ebony, the polar bear asked, "How was the Blue Dragon supposed to know that?"

Jay shook his head. "He did not agree to it, so it does not matter."

Ebony shook his head. "It does matter. How is anyone supposed to trust you, when some of you say things that are not true?"

Jay was still shaking her head. "Pass did not know it was not true."

"Perhaps she did not," replied Ivory, "but when she made the offer she spoke for all of you, and that should have made it true."

Trudy spoke up, "Something is true or not, regardless of what anyone says about it."

Jay added, "Besides, you do not get to decide who speaks for us. We will do that. Pass made a mistake that turned out not to matter, because the Blue Dragon did not agree."

Compo shivered and then spoke up. "It does matter. It means none of you is to be trusted."

Jay exclaimed, "That is not fair. Just because one of us makes a mistake, does not mean we can not be trusted. Anyone can make a mistake."

Compo exclaimed. "You admit it then! All of you make mistakes, and can not be trusted."

Lug answered. "Sure we admit that we all make mistakes. And certainly, it is up to you to decide who you trust. Was there something else you wanted to talk about?"

Compo accused. "You are all liars!"

Jay exclaimed. "That is not fair!"

Trudy agreed. "That is not true! We are not all liars."

Compo replied, "So you admit that some of you are liars."

Trudy shook her head. "I meant none of us are liars."

Compo asked, "Which is it then, not true or not fair? You just proved you are liars, when you can not even agree among yourselves. This little girl can not even agree with herself. First, she says some of you are liars and then she says none of you are liars. Which one of the things she says is true? None of you can be trusted."

High screeched, "I am not a liar. My friends are not liars. You are the liar!" His tail was twitching uncontrollably.

Compo sat down. "Prove it."

High's mouth opened and closed several times but no sound came out.

Trudy said quietly, "I can answer that."

Compo turned to look at her. "Prove you, and these people with you, are not liars."

Trudy answered. "There are so many things wrong with what you are saying I hardly know where to begin. First of all, like the Brown Dragon you are using one word to mean two different things."

Compo replied, "That is not true."

Trudy shook her head. "Let me finish. You throw the word liar around very freely. Sometimes you mean someone who lies all the time on purpose. Sometimes you mean someone who once said something by mistake that was not true."

Compo said, "What the difference? If you say something that is not true, you are a liar."

Trudy answered, "There are two important differences. One is how often you say something that is not true, and the other is the reason you say something that is not true."

Compo shivered and asked, "How many lies does someone have to tell, before they become a liar?"

Trudy took a step forward and looked up at the dragon. "It depends on the reason you are trying to call them a liar. If you are their friend and trying to wake them up to a possible flaw in their character one lie is enough to call them a liar, if you say it kindly. If you are trying to determine if a person can be trusted, you need to understand how frequently they say things that are not true. If they say a thousand things a day, one lie a day would not make them untrustworthy, would it? If they say one thing a day, and it is always a lie, it would be a mistake to ever trust them. Anything in between is a judgment call. And that does not even begin to talk about the difference in lies and mistakes, which you do not seem to be able to tell apart, except when you make a mistake. You are certainly free to decide that we can not be trusted, but when you call us a liar, and say we can not be trusted, you are obviously telling a lie."

Compo shivered. Jay noticed that several of the dragon soldiers shivered as well. Most of them had their long arms wrapped around themselves as if they were cold.

Compo shivered again. "It is not a lie. I do not trust any of you."

Trudy asked, "Then why are you trying to make an agreement with us?"

Compo shuddered. "You said there were lots of things wrong with what I was saying. I still say you were not being fair making an offer to Track, the Blue Dragon, and not making the same offer to me."

Jay replied. "Where is the law written that says dragon slayers are supposed to treat all dragons the same?"

Trudy continued. "You said that I contradicted myself, when I did not."

Compo said, "Yes you did. First you said some of you were liars and then you said none of you were liars."

Trudy shook her head. "I said we were not all liars. That is not the same as saying that some of us are liars. You are using Begg's, the Red Dragon's, kind of lie. When I said we were not all liars, it could mean some of us are liars, but it could also mean none of us are liars."

Compo shook her head. "It is not my fault you were not clear."

Jay stepped up beside Trudy. "That is not fair. When you misunderstood her, she did make it clear. What I mean is, that when you took it the wrong way, she told you which of the two possible ways she really meant it."

Compo's wings were close to her body as if she was trying to use them as a blanket. All of the dragon soldiers were shivering. All of them except Major Molar had their arms wrapped around themselves. Major Molar had one hand on his sword handle.

Compo shivered and shuddered. "So which is it, not fair, or not true?"

Trudy answered, "Why can't it be both? It is not true and it is not fair."

Jay accused, "I'll tell you what is not fair. It is not fair to lump us all together. You took one little mistake that one of us made and tried to say it was all of us that made it."

Pass added, "I'm the one that made the mistake. I did not mean to say something that was not true."

Compo said, "You are all in it together. What is true of the whole is true of the parts, and what is true of the parts is true of the whole."

Jay said, "Prove it."

High laughed.

Compo commanded, "Major Molar, I need another soldier."

Major Molar drew his sword, stepped closer to one of his soldiers. The soldier screamed and held up one arm to stop the blow, and tried to reach for his sword with the other hand. Major Molar swung his blade and sliced the soldier in two pieces, as the soldier screamed in pain. The two pieces rolled around on the ground for a minute as if in pain, and then before their eyes became two dragon soldiers, complete with a sword for each of them. Both of them were a little smaller and thinner than the rest of the soldiers.

Compo said triumphantly. "That is real proof. The whole and the parts are the same."

Trudy shook here head. "That proves nothing. A seed grows into a plant but that does not mean there is no difference in them. Potato pieces grow into potato plants with more potatoes. Dragon soldier pieces grow into dragon soldiers, but that does not prove anything."

Compo screamed. She tried to breathe fire on Trudy but it came out like snow from a snow making machine. It knocked Trudy to the ground but she was not hurt. The dragon took a step forward, grabbed Jay around the waist in a giant claw and began to lift him off the ground. Then she turned into ice.

Jay was a foot off the ground, grasped in the claws of a full sized ice statue of a dragon. The dragon soldiers had all become cones of ice. Sheik Non helped Trudy to get up out of the pile of snow that almost covered her. Ivory, the black bear turned and walked west on the Low Check Highway. That was not to be the last they saw of that bear. Ebony, the polar bear looked around in a puzzled way and walked over to where Jay was trying to wiggle out of the icy claws.

Trudy shouted, "Don't you bother my brother!" She started in the direction of the bear, but Sheik Non held her arm.

Ebony looked at her and replied. "I am going to try to help him." The polar bear reached up with one paw and began to break off chunks of ice until Jay was free. Jay landed on his feet and looked around with his hand on his sword handle, as if he expected something else to happen.

When nothing did, Jay dropped his hand to his side, looked at the polar bear and said, "Thank you."

Ebony nodded. "I'm sure you would have done the same for me."

Jay looked up at the ice statue looming above him, which was a perfect ice sculptor of an angry dragon, except for the broken front claw. "I'm glad it was ice and not iron like Slant. I would have been dangling there a long time."

Trudy looked thoughtful. "What would have happened to us if Slope had turned to hot lava like Begg, instead of sand? We would have been cooked for sure."

Jay looked at the ice cones that used to be dragon soldiers. "Hey, if we had some cherry syrup, we would have snow cones."

Trudy made a sour face. "Ew! Jay! That's horrible!"

High asked, "What are you talking about?"

A group of about a dozen mountain people came running out of the village cheering. Soon the dragon slayers were surrounded by a little crowd of happy little men, women, and children; wanting to thank them and shake their hands. They wanted to know what they could do for them and the dragon slayers looked at each other in bewilderment.

Pass answered for them, "We are very grateful, but we need to talk with each other and make a plan. We did not think we were going to meet a dragon here."

The polite little people took that as a hint and withdrew to the town. The dragon slayers were left alone with the polar bear, Sheik Non, Josh, Clyde, and the rest of the camels.

High said, "Perfidy, the Black Dragon, is next."

Trudy objected, "We need to try Compo's Door of Doom first."

High seemed truly apologetic. "Oh, yes, of course."

Ebony spoke up. "I can lead you to that."

High was suspicious. "Why do you want to help us?"

The polar bear looked down at the little monkey. "I'm thankful. I was under that dragon's spell just as much as the mountain people."

Pass asked, "What do we need for the journey."

Ebony answered, "Well. You'll have to leave the camels and the donkey behind and get some snowshoes for yourself. A dog sledge to haul supplies might be a good idea, but we can make it there in a day and back in a day, so if you can handle it kind of rough, you can forget the sledge. We would have to go all the way to Fort Glacier for a dog sledge, and we are actually closer to the ice castle here."

Jay said, "The camels are going to head back to Oasis Fake, but the donkey goes with us."

The polar bear studied the donkey carefully. "Those hoofs of his will sink in the snow where we are going. He would be up to his belly and helpless in no time. A dog sledge might be able to haul him, but it would have to be all that was on the sledge."

Jay asked, "Didn't you say there were no dog sledges around here?"

Ebony nodded his big white head. "No dog sledges in East End. We have to go higher where the snow is. Even if they had a dog sledge here we would have to carry it up to the snow."

Jay suggested, "Couldn't he wear snowshoes like the rest of us?"

Ebony laughed. "He would look ridiculous, but if he wasn't hauling anything I suppose it might work. If it doesn't work, he'll just have to turn back, though"

They went to the general store to buy supplies, but all they could do was get supplies, not buy supplies. The grateful little mountain people would not let them pay for anything. The polar bear was too big to fit in the door, so he stayed outside and told them what to buy.

Ebony explained, "We are really not very far from the ice castle. We can make it in a day. We'll spend the morning climbing up to the high plateau. It is high enough to be snow covered year round, but it is flat. The "climb up" doesn't have any cliffs or anything, just a long steep walk up. There is no trees, grass, or anything on this side of the mountains, so we will just be walking on rock or sand most of the way. So you will need good boots and snow shoes that fit over them for later. It is a hard climb so bring only enough food and water for two days. You want to cut your weight as much as possible.

The ice castle is magically warm inside, so you won't need a tent or bedrolls. It is cold on the way, so you will need to bring fur lined coats with hoods, thick gloves, and scarves etc. The donkey can probably carry those and the snowshoes until we get up where it is cold. I'll be back for you in the morning. I need to take care of a couple of things." With that he went down the highway to the west.

They spent the morning getting the supplies the bear suggested. They had tents and bedrolls and extra changes of clothes they had been given at Oasis Fake. They made arrangements to leave them behind with the innkeeper and pick them up on the way back. Trudy with the help of a kind lady in the store sewed a little coat, hat, gloves, scarves, and boots for High.

Jay, Sheik Non, and Josh worked on fixing four boots to fit on Lug's hoofs, which would then fit in the snowshoes. They stuffed the toes of the boots with cloth and laced them up tightly. When Lug tested them they worked fine, but Ebony had been right, Lug looked pretty funny with boots and snowshoes on all four hoofs.

It was decided that the dovekie's feathers might be good against the cold, but if they were not, Pass could ride in Trudy's coat pocket.

There was no big celebration in the village, but the dragon slayers were not permitted pay for either their stay at the inn, nor their food there.

The dragon slayers, Sheik Non and Josh had a nice lunch together in the inn. Afterwards they said their good-byes to the Sheik and his son, Josh. They stood and watched as the two little desert men disappeared down the highway to the east.

There seemed to be nothing to do in the afternoon but wait. Jay practiced his sword moves alone and was surprised when a group of the little mountain men asked him to show them how to use the sword. They had some swords that they said their fathers and grandfathers had buried, when Compo first came to the mountains. Jay showed them what he knew and they practiced together.

Trudy and Pass browsed around in the general store and Lug went for a walk with High riding on his back. While they walked High complained about "that sword of Jay's," but Lug said nothing about it.

After a nice free supper at the inn, they were given the same room as before. It was truly the best they had. As the dragon slayers settled down for the night Trudy said, "How do we know we can trust Ebony. There is something funny about him."

High said, "I know the way to the ice castle. We really don't need him."

Pass chirped. "Oh, really. So where is it?"

High answered, "North."

Jay asked, "Why would Ebony be lying to us?"

Trudy replied, "If we follow him, he could lead us out in the middle of nowhere and leave us to die."

High replied, "The magic key would see that as an attack."

Pass added, "Maybe"

Lug spoke up, "Or maybe not."

Trudy said, "I am beginning to think that magic key is not foolproof. If Compo had turned to iron instead of ice, Jay would still be dangling there, and if Slant had been lava instead of sand, we would be ashes."

Pass objected. "But that is not what happened."

Trudy argued, "But it could have."

High said, "But it didn't."

Trudy said, "Next time I'm standing further away from the dragon." (But she didn't.)

Jay agreed. "Me, too." (He didn't either.) Jay went on. And I'm not going to count on the Key for everything. I'm going to keep my eye on this polar bear, and let's all keep track of where we go."

Pass added, "And let's carry more food than he said we'll need."

Jay said, "And a tent and bedrolls." They left one tent behind, the changes of clothes, most of their tools, and half the food. But they took more than the bear had said.

* * *

Chapter 22 - Ice Castle

True to his word the polar bear was waiting outside the inn at dawn. He urged them to make it a quick breakfast and soon they were on their way. Ebony stared at their extra supplies on Lug's back for a minute, yawned, but said nothing. He also briefly noticed the backpacks and bedrolls strapped to the children's backs.

They walked about a mile west on the Low Check Highway, which curved and wound gradually rising higher. There were high mountains to the left and right, but ahead it appeared to be just low hills. They turned north into a valley between two mountains and almost immediately their way became much steeper.

It was all grunting and breathing hard, no conversation. Every now and then Ebony would say, "Wait here." Then he would scout ahead out of sight and then come back and say, "This way."

The first time he did this Pass asked, "Are we lost?"

Ebony laughed. "No. I'm just trying to find the easiest way for the donkey. He can't exactly grab on to things and pull himself up, and somebody decided he should carry more than we really needed."

The dragon slayers were glad for the frequent little five and ten minute breaks it gave them from climbing. It was while Ebony was on one of these scouting trips that the attack came.

From above them five snarling grey wolves attacked. Two went for Lug, and one each for Trudy, Jay and High. With his back legs Lug kicked one yelping up against a rock, where it lay stunned. The other got on Lug's back and Lug began to buck energetically. Trudy found herself laying on her back keeping a wolf from biting her in the throat by holding on to his ears. High was more maneuverable than the wolf that was after him, but the wolf was faster, so it was only going to be a matter of time. High was leaping around and the wolf was spinning around snapping at him. Pass was fluttering around the one on Trudy trying to peck his eyes. Jay stuck his sword in his wolf's heart, and then began to work on the others.

First he took care of the one on Trudy, then cleared Lug's back, and finally the one chasing High was slain. The one Lug kicked turned out to be the lucky one. He got up, shook his head, and slunk off down the way the dragon slayers had come. The whole thing was over in less than a minute. Lug had a couple of slight wounds, which Trudy cleaned and dressed. She was shaking from the experience, which made it a little difficult.

When he caught his breath High said, "OK. You can keep the sword."

Everyone laughed.

They were picking up the supplies Lug had bucked off when Ebony returned from his scouting. He looked around at the four wolves lying dead on the ground and asked, "Did you have some trouble?"

Jay answered, "No, not too much."

Ebony looked at the wolves again, yawned, and then said, "This way."

As they climbed it became colder. They were seeing pockets of snow caught in the crevices of the rocks. As it got colder they took things from Lug's back to put it on. They actually climbed higher than the plateau because when they came to it, it was as they topped a rise, and they found themselves looking down on a plain of snow, from about 100 feet above it. The sky was clear and the sun glistened off the snow.

Ebony pointed with one paw. "Ice Castle"

In the distance they could see what looked like a white castle on a little hill of rock that rose above the snow.

Jay asked, "How long will it take to get there."

Ebony replied, "Two or three hours. You can put your snow shoes on at the bottom of the hill."

Pass said, "We need to stop for some lunch."

Ebony sat down without saying anything. He yawned big and then laid down.

They ate cold trail rations. After they ate, they had to shake the bear to get him awake.

At first the walk across the snow was refreshing and beautiful, but as the afternoon wore on, and the clumsy snowshoes took their toll, it became just a battle of determination against weariness.

At long last they found themselves looking up at the ice castle. Trudy and Jay had imagined it differently. They thought it would be giant slabs of clear ice put together to form a sort of crystal palace. The roof and ceilings were slabs of ice that let the light in, but the walls were made of white bricks of compressed snow like an igloo. Inside everything was dragon sized, with huge doorways and rooms. There were huge tables and chairs made of wood. The bed was a comfortable size for a dragon, with cushions and blankets to match. The wall and ceilings were made of snow and ice, but the floors were wooden. But it was not warm inside the castle, and all was not right.

There were giant ice cycles hanging from all of the ceilings. The cushions on the bed and chairs looked like they had been soaked in water and then frozen. There were patches of ice on the wooden floors that looked like they had been puddles of water. The kitchen and living room were the worst. The wall around the living room fireplace was tumbled down, and they could barely tell there had been a fireplace, because of the chunks of ice and snow piled around it where the ceiling had collapsed. They could not even get into the room that Ebony explained had been the kitchen.

Jay asked, "What happened here?"

Lug answered, "When Compo froze the magic left the castle. It began to melt from the heat inside and then re-froze when the cold from outside came in."

Once Lug explained it, it seemed obvious.

Trudy asked, "Where's the Door of Doom?"

Ebony replied, "In the bed room, under the bed."

When they got in the bedroom Lug laid down and looked under the bed. "Yes, it is in the wall behind the bed. High you should be able to get to the lock."

High took the key from around Lug's neck and crawled under the bed. Hope was high but soon passed. The key did not work.

Trudy asked, "What now?"

High replied, "Perf, the Black Dragon."

Pass said, "Food, sleep, and a walk down to East End."

Ebony yawned and said, "I like the sleep idea."

They decided the castle might not be stable enough to stay in, so they went outside and tried to figure out which side of the castle would have the least wind.

Ebony said, "I'm going to let you figure all that out. I'm just going to dig a hole in the snow and go to sleep. I'll see you in the morning." With that he yawned again, and went down the little hill to the snow and started digging.

They had not brought a hatchet so Jay went in the castle and used his sword to chop furniture and flooring to get wood for a fire. They decided not to try to peg their tent down on the rocky hillside, but instead drape it over them all like a huge blanket, to add to the protection of their bedrolls. They warmed their food on the fire and enjoyed its warmth before going to sleep, still wearing their coats. They took turns staying awake and watching for wolves. They organized it so that they could keep the fire going – Trudy, Pass, High, Lug and Jay. That way Trudy could feed the fire at the beginning of Pass's watch, and High at the end of it, and so on.

Some time during Lug's watch it began to snow. By morning everything was covered with snow except the area right around the fire. While Trudy and Jay were preparing breakfast, Pass flew down, to the pile of snow that was Ebony's bed and asked Ebony if he was hungry. From within he just growled, "No."

After breakfast they began to pack up and Pass flew down to Ebony again. "We are about ready to go."

Silence

Pass tried again louder, "It is time to go!"

Ebony growled. "Leave me alone, can't you see I'm sleeping."

Pass rejoined the dragon slayers and told what had happened. She ended with, "I think he is hibernating. He has probably been magically deprived of it for a long time, and now with Compo gone, he can't help himself."

Lug added, "Maybe."

High said, "I guess we'll just have to leave him behind."

Trudy asked, "Which way do we go?"

High answered, "South."

Jay asked, "Which way is that?"

They all looked around. The sky was cloudy. The snow was falling so thickly they could not see the mountains surrounding the plateau. Jay was pretty sure he knew which direction they had come from, because he remembered which side of the castle they had first approached. He realized that even if they set out in the right direction they would soon be lost in the snow.

Jay said, "I'm going to go have a talk with that bear."

Soon he was next to Ebony's bed. After several attempts he finally got a growl and "Go away! I'm sleeping."

Jay considered prodding him with his sword, but decided that would be very unwise. Ebony was no wolf. He could slap Jay silly and never even notice the prick of his little sword.

He walked back up the others and just shook his head.

They stood around the fire and looked glum. Finally Jay commented, "Well, we have plenty of wood in the castle. With fire we can stay warm and turn snow into water. We have enough food for three or four days. When the snow stops and we can see some landmarks and tell which way is south, we'll go back."

No one could think of a better idea, so they just arranged their supplies around the fire so they could sit around it. The day took on a quiet rhythm. Every time Jay got up to get firewood he cut a little extra to try to build it up their supplies for the night. The snow fell, the fire crackled, and the children talked of their home and they all talked about their adventures. When they got hungry they ate. Lug was very interested in the technology of the children's world. They told him as much as they could about airplanes, TV sets, computers and such things.

They talked over what had happened since the children arrived in Low Check. It was during this conversation that Trudy commented, "You know I don't think Compo used very many of her own kind of lies."

Pass asked, "Are you sure? Let's go over it. Maybe those bears helping her did, or you have forgotten."

Trudy rubbed her chin. "Well, at first they just tried to bully us. Then the bears tried to say it did not matter if you added one more dragon to the billions of dragons already on our world. That is a blue dragon lie. They were just trying to change the subject."

Pass said, "Yes, but I think it was also a white snowflake lie. The bears were trying to say it would make no difference when it would. However, you are right, the whole idea was to try to make us forget the main point, which was turning a dragon loose on unsuspecting people is wrong."

Trudy nodded. "You are right. I missed that one. Then Lug had to explain to all three of them how the magic key actually worked."

Lug spoke up. "I think they knew already. I believe they were just trying to trick us."

Trudy nodded. "That was the first day. The second day the bears said it was unfair of us not to make the same offer to Compo, the White Dragon, as we had Track, the Blue Dragon. That was a Red Dragon lie. They just assumed it was true that not making the same offer was not fair."

Jay agreed. "We never agreed to treat all the dragons the same."

Trudy went on. "Then the bears did use the white cloud kind of lie by saying Pass spoke for all of us because she was part of us. So, that was one of her kinds of lies."

Jay nodded. "Yes, and then they tried to say because Pass made a mistake we all could not be trusted. That was not fair."

Trudy continued, "Yes, it was really two kinds of lies. It was a white cloud kind of lie, because it made all of us just like Pass. But it was also a lie like the Brown dragon, because they mixed up the meanings of 'lies' and 'mistakes'."

Pass said, "Yes, that's right."

Trudy brightened. "Then Compo did use another white lie. Jay said they were not being fair, and I said they were not telling the truth. She used the white light kind of lay saying it had to be one or the other, not fair, or not true."

High agreed. "Yes, I set her straight on that one."

Trudy smiled. "I remember you said, 'My friends are not liars.' Thank you for standing up for us."

High's chest got bigger.

Trudy looked up and thought for a minute. "Then Compo tried a white snowflakes kind of lie by saying there was no difference between the trustworthiness of those, who told a few lies, and liars, who told many."

Pass chirped. "Yes, I remember that."

Trudy kept going. "Then Compo misinterpreted something I said, and tried to blame me for it. That was like the Red Dragon kind of lie, because it just assumed something, which we had not really agreed to."

Pass added. "That is true but it is also kind of like a Brown Dragon kind of lie, because Compo was changing around the meanings of 'some', 'all', and 'none'."

Jay asked, "Is that when she had Major Molar slice that soldier in half?"

Trudy replied, "Compo went back and tried some of her earlier arguments first, but yes, that was about it. Even that whole ugly sword thing was just trying to prove her white snowflake lie. She only used her own kind of lies once or twice each."

Pass said, "I don't think Compo had much confidence in herself. That is why she tried to bargain with us, and why she used her own kind of lies so little."

They all agreed.

Trudy suddenly thought of something. "What happens to the keys in our world when a dragon here is destroyed?"

Lug answered, "If it is still over there it will vanish. Here it will not vanish unless it is used to unlock a door."

Jay then thought of something. "What would happen if someone in our world found one of the remaining keys and wished to come here? Would they end up in your library?"

Lug said, "No. They would come here, because here is the Magician Key."

Some time in the late afternoon the snow stopped and the sky began to clear. Shortly after this Jay was on his way back with some wood for the fire when he suddenly stopped and said, "Look!"

Jay's arms were full of wood so he could not point, but everyone looked in the direction he was staring. About a mile away were three dog sledges with teams and drivers. They were headed straight for the castle.

* * *

The Fat Lazy Dragons

Book VIII Perf – the Black Dragon

Chapter 23 – Fort Glacier

The dragon slayers went down to the snow to meet them. In less than ten minutes they had arrived. Each of the sledges was pulled by a team of eight dogs. Each was driven by a mountain man in a blue toboggan. They brought the sledges to a stop and came over to the children. The dogs all sat down and panted. The men looked almost identical except for the color of their eyes. One had dark brown eyes, another had green eyes, and the third blue eyes.

The one with green eyes said, "Hello, my name is Rod. These are my brothers, Mush and Idita. We just came up from Ft. Glacier." He pointed in the general direction of the other two men in such a way that it was impossible to tell which was which.

Pass said, "I am Pass. This is Trudy, Jay, High and Luggage," pointing to each in turn.

"Just call me Lug," said the donkey. "Pleased to meet you."

Rod and the others nodded to them. Rod asked, "So is it true? What we heard. Is it true?"

Trudy asked in return, "Is what true?"

Rod added, "Is it true there is no more White Dragon? Did Compo turn to ice and melt into a puddle at East End? Is it true you are the dragon slayers from the east we have been hearing about? Did you turn her into ice? Are all the dragon soldiers gone? Are we really free?"

Trudy answered, "Yes, probably, probably, no, no, and the last is up to you."

The other two men burst into laughter. Not just, "Ha, ha," laughter, but belly shaking, knee slapping, turning red in the face, series of loud noises, laughter.

At first Rod turned red with embarrassment, but when they kept it up he started picking up handfuls of snow and throwing it in their faces. Finally, they quieted down. The one with the blue eyes walked over and shook Trudy's hand. "I'm glad to meet someone who can give it back to him."

Rod grabbed the man gently by both shoulders and moved him back out of the way. Then he said, "OK. Maybe I deserved that. I do sort of talk a lot and ask a lot of questions. I'm sorry. Let me try again. The White Dragon is gone?"

Trudy explained, "We met with Compo in East End. As happened with other dragons to the east, she became frustrated when we did not believe her lies. When she attacked us, the magic we have, which she knew all about, turned her to ice. She was still an ice statue when we left East End, but it seems likely that she has melted by now. Her dragon soldiers all turned to ice as well, but the dragon soldiers of the black and orange dragons still exist. If you were under Compo's spell, you are no longer. Whether you use that to keep your freedom or not, is up to you."

Rod looked at Trudy with growing astonishment. "You have a truly amazing memory for conversation. Wow. You really did answer all my questions. That was very impressive. That is quite a gift you have."

Jay commented. "You have no idea how annoying it can be."

Rod looked at Jay and smiled. "Annoying? You are her brother, aren't you?"

Jay nodded.

High asked, "Why are you here? Did you bring Compo's food?"

Rod shook his head. "No, day before yesterday, in the morning all of a sudden we all started having thoughts like we had never had. We started wondering why we brought Compo her food, and why she was in charge of everything. That afternoon that black bear, Ivory, walked into to Fort Glacier and told us not to make our usual food run, because Compo was not here. He told us to sit tight and he would tell us when to start making the run again. Then he walked on to the west. Not too long ago, we would have just done as we were told, but like I said, we were having new ideas. Yesterday we started hearing the rumors about Compo, and decided we would come up here and see for ourselves. So, here we are."

High looked at the sledges suspiciously. "So what is all that stuff if not food for the dragon?" He pointed at the sledges.

Pass chirped, "High, don't be rude."

High said, "Trudy told them all our business, and now I want to know theirs. What is wrong with that?"

Rod cocked his head to one side and looked at the monkey. "Suspicious little monkey, aren't you." He turned looked at the sledges, and looked back at the dragon slayers. "In case the rumors were true we thought you might need some things. We have tents, sleeping bags, food, toboggans, matches, lanterns, pots and pans, and all kinds of things. We wanted to show you our gratitude. So, we just threw a bunch of stuff together and came up here lickity split."

Pass spoke up. "That is very nice of you."

Rod continued, "We are glad to do it. We enjoy the ride. It is fun gliding across the snow. We can give you a ride wherever you want to go, too. We have the best teams in the mountains. We can off load some of this junk here, if we have to. Probably have to wait until morning. It is getting kind of late. Something I don't understand though. If the dragon is dead, why did you come up here? Treasure or something?"

Trudy said, "No, we ..."

High interrupted. "He does not need to know our business. Clearly they just came up here because they thought there was some treasure."

Idita and Mush laughed. Not like before, just a short laugh.

Pass said, "High!"

Rod looked at his brothers with a frown and then turned back to High. "Not at all. I was just curious. Keep it to yourself. I don't care, really. I did not mean to pry. I do not really care that much. If it is private, I really do not mind."

Trudy went on, "The dragons already know all about it, so there is no reason not to tell you. Each of the dragons guards a magic door. One of them leads to our home and we are trying to find it."

Rod looked up at the castle. "Is it here? Have you found it yet? Hey, the castle is kind of sagging, isn't it? I don't think you ought to go in there."

Trudy smiled. "No, yes, yes and we won't again."

Idita and Mush laughed.

Rod turned red.

Trudy explained. "I'm sorry. I couldn't resist. We did find Compo's door, but it is not the one that leads to our home. When Compo became ice the castle lost its magic. It started melting from its own warmth until the cold from outside froze it again."

Rod nodded his head, "Well, it looks unsafe. Good thing we brought tents. We'll set up in that flat place around your fire if that is OK. I see you picked the side that is usually out of the wind. Good thinking."

Jay nodded, "Sure; that will be fine."

High's tail was twitching, but he said nothing.

Trudy commented, "Kind of rocky for tent pegs."

Rod smiled. "We come prepared. Steel pegs and sledgehammers will do the trick. I love the sound of steel pegs being driven into rock. They sing, you know."

The three men went about their work quickly. Jay was impressed at how well trained the dogs were. He was standing near the blue eyed brother and said, "Wow. Those dogs really obey commands well."

To Jay's surprise one of the dogs replied, "Yes, but we can't seem to get the men to do the same for us. Now, I ask you; is that fair?" Then the dog laughed and walked on as if it did not really expect a response.

Jay said, "Oh. They can talk."

The blue eyed brother shook his head as he continued to unpack the sledge. "Just the lead dogs can talk. The others just do what they do."

Jay said, "You don't talk much, do you?"

The man smiled. "Don't need to. We have Rod for that."

Jay laughed. "I'm sorry, I did not catch your name."

"Idita"

Trudy was standing nearby and had heard the whole conversation. She asked, "Is Rod the oldest?"

Idita replied, "Nope, youngest. We never should have taught him to talk." He laughed at his own joke.

Trudy asked another question. "Do you mind if I ask you something personal."

Idita gave her a puzzled look. "Usually I do, but I'm too curious. Shoot."

Trudy went on. "If it is none of my business just say so, but why do you and Rod have different colored eyes than most of the mountain people?"

Idita laughed. "That's no secret, and not personal at all. Our great grand mother on my father's side was a fire mountain lady with blue eyes."

Trudy pressed ahead. "Are you related to Lucas Light?"

Idita looked puzzled again. "The mailman?"

Trudy nodded.

Idita scratched his head. "I don't think so. Why?"

Trudy explained. "He has blue eyes like you."

Idita nodded. "Could be he is a cousin, I suppose, but about one in three dozen mountain people have different colored eyes. I guess you just haven't seen enough of us yet."

Trudy nodded, "Yes we have only seen a few." Trudy wondered why she remained suspicious of the mailman, even after everything in his letter turned out to be true. Then she realized what it was. She wondered how he knew so much about what kind of lies the different dragons told. How could he know that? She decided she would talk to the others about it next time she got a chance, but that chance did not come soon enough.

It did not take long before there were two large tents set up and a wonderful hot supper laid out for all. Everyone must have been hungry because almost everything that was said started with, "Please pass the ... " except for Rod who chatted about, dogs, weather and anything else that crossed his mind.

When Rod noticed that Jay had finished Rod asked, "What are your plans and how can we help?"

High's tail started twitching but he kept eating. Trudy thought he looked cute in his little blue coat, but knew better than to say so.

Jay answered, "We are going to Low Check City, but we left some of our supplies in East End, so we'll have to go back there."

That reminded Pass of something. "Oh, my. We did not invite Ebony to supper."

Jay said, "I think he is best left alone."

Rod asked, "Ebony? Is Ebony around here? Where is he? What is he doing here?" He looked alarmed.

Jay held up his hand. "Nothing to worry about. After Compo was iced, he turned friendly. He was under her spell, too, I think. I think he is hibernating. He is the one who showed us how to get here."

Rod answered, "Oh. You came up the short way from East End. Too many wolves out that way for me. Good thing you had a bear with you. Wolves wouldn't bother a bear."

Trudy and Jay looked at each other.

Rod continued. "So, he conked out and left you to fend for yourselves. I guess he could not help it. So, are these supplies in East End important? What did you leave there that you don't have here? We brought this stuff for you. Do you really have to go back to East End?"

Jay scratched his head. "I guess not. Anybody leave behind anything important?"

Trudy shook her head. "Nope."

Neither had anyone else.

High said, "Let's go to Low Check City and visit Perf."

Rod nodded. "We'll give you a ride down tomorrow."

Trudy looked around. "How will we fit? What about all this stuff?"

Rod laughed. "That's two questions, but I'll just give you one answer. We'll leave the 'stuff' we do not need behind." He chuckled at his own joke.

Trudy gave him a big smile. Then she looked concerned. "Isn't that kind of a waste?"

Rod shook his head. "Not at all. These tents are pegged down with steel in rock. They will last a good long time. Someone lost may find this stuff, or I might bring my family back up here to see the ice castle. Or ... well, anyway, it won't go to waste."

Pass asked, "Are we going to just leave Ebony behind?"

Jay answered, "He is a polar bear. I think he'll be OK."

That seemed to settle it, but what they did not know was that they would meet Ebony again later in their adventures.

The three brothers would not let them take any of the night watches. They said they had a system, and they would rather just stick to it. The brothers; Idita, Rod and Mush; took one of the tents and the dragon slayers the other.

* * *

The next morning the brothers seemed to be as rested as everyone else, not at all like they had missed any sleep. A day just sitting by the campfire, followed by an unbroken night of sleep had worked magic. Jay and Trudy certainly felt refreshed. The brothers were just as quick at breaking camp as they were setting it up. Of course, it helped that they left the two tents with most of the supplies zipped up in them. Soon they were on their way.

Lug rode in Mush's sledge, Trudy and Pass rode in Rod's sledge, and Jay and High rode in Idita's sledge. They rode southwest across the plateau. It was smooth, fast and exciting. As they began to go down from the plateau it was not long before they were winding their way among evergreen trees. About noon they came to a little cabin among the trees. They stopped the sledges.

Rod said, "Lunch! This is our cabin. We keep supplies here and stop here for lunch coming and going. We'll have a fire going in a jiffy."

The dragon slayers got out of the sledges. Trudy offered, "What can we do to help?"

Rod shook his head. "Not a thing. Not a thing. We have a system and it will go smoother if we just follow it."

The lunch was excellent and quick. They were soon on their way again.

After lunch the way was a little steeper. The men sometimes got off the sledges and dragged their feet to keep the sledges from running over the dogs.

In the late afternoon they broke out of the trees into a clearing with several buildings. A larger one seemed to be on the edge of a cliff. It turned out to be the top of a cable car rig. The three brothers locked the sledges up in a storage building and left most of the dogs in a kennel where there were other dogs and people to take care of them. Only the lead dogs remained with the men.

The dragon slayers walked over to the edge of the cliff and looked down. A thousand yards below was a small town of about four hundred houses, in a valley. A road ran through it east to west along the bottom of the valley. Another road went south into a tunnel in a mountain.

High announced, "Fort Glacier."

As they stood there a truck full of coal came out of the tunnel and turned to the west.

Jay said, "It looks like Double Side up side down."

High looked at him puzzled. "Up side down?"

Jay nodded. "Double Side has a tunnel going north. Fort Glacier has one going south."

High still looked puzzled. "What does that have to do with up side down."

Jay explained. "North is up on a map."

High nodded. "Upside down on a map. I get it."

Soon the dragon slayers, the three brothers, and the three lead dogs were on the cable car suspended over the emptiness. Trudy shuddered. "Cable cars make me nervous."

Rod asked, "Why?"

Trudy explained, "What if the cable breaks?"

Rod shook his head. "You stand up to dragons and bears and worry about cables breaking. I don't get it."

Trudy was embarrassed. She did not understand it herself.

When they reached the bottom they found themselves on the open public square in the middle of the town. It had a platform in the middle like the one in E. Rail, except this one was covered, like a big gazebo. It was right on the corner where Low Check Highway was joined by the road to the south. There were little mountain people going about their business. Some stared curiously. Others seemed to barely notice them. A few of the children pointed at them and asked their parents questions.

According to custom and plan they found an inn and rented two rooms. At least they tried to rent them. Turned out they were having a special. Dragon slayers got to stay for free. Also according to plan the brothers went to their homes and families, with a promise to return in the morning to walk with them part of the way to Low Check City. Hot baths and soft beds felt good. So did sitting down at a table to eat.

While they were in the restaurant eating they were approached by a man who introduced himself as the mayor of Fort Glacier. Pass introduced the dragon slayers and invited him to sit down.

The mayor said, "No, thank you. Am I correct that we have you to thank for your freedom?"

High said, "Yes."

Pass disagreed, "No."

Trudy added, "The dragons really do it to themselves."

Jay offered, "What we do, we do for ourselves."

Lug said nothing.

The mayor blinked and looked around at them puzzled. "Is there anything we can do to show our gratitude?"

Pass chirped, "High, hush!"

High who had opened his mouth closed it again.

Trudy said, "No, thank you."

Jay suggested, "There might be one thing. Idita, Rod and Mush have supplied us with everything we need. I think they may have paid for it themselves. Maybe you could make them share the cost with you?"

The mayor smiled and nodded knowingly. "Of course. We are planning a big celebration in three days. Would you stay for that, and be our guests of honor?"

Trudy shook her head. "Thanks, but we prefer it quiet."

Jay agreed. "And really. I'm glad you have been helped, but we really did it for ourselves."

High's tail twitched.

Pass said, "High, you got to give a speech at Oasis Fake. Let it go!"

The mayor studied their faces for a moment and then excused himself, saying over his shoulder, "Your meal here is on me."

* * *

The next morning as they were again eating in the restaurant next to the inn, only breakfast this time, the three brothers joined them. They sat down but would not eat. They had eaten with their families at home.

Rod spoke up, "We'll walk you half way there and then come back. It should take about half a day. You'll be in Low Check city by evening."

Jay answered, "We are glad for the company, but it really isn't necessary."

Rod shook his head. "Half way will get you well into civilization, beyond where wild animals are, and besides we want to. We don't get down that way real often. We'll enjoy it."

They agreed to meet out front in ten minutes and went back up to get their things. As they were packing up High said, "I wonder if we are being too careful taking bedrolls and supplies. It takes one day to walk to Low Check City, there is plenty of food and inns there, and along the way, and we have money. The sheiks gave us plenty of money, and no one has let us spend any of it."

Jay argued, "It won't do us any harm to take it along, and you never know, what might happen. Ebony tried to get us to leave some stuff behind that we would have died without. Remember?"

Pass replied, "Ebony didn't know the castle would no longer be heated."

Lug spoke up, "Maybe."

Trudy said, "Thank you High, for trying to lighten our load."

High's chest got bigger.

When they got out front the square was empty of anyone except the three brothers.

Jay looked around suspiciously. "Where is everyone?"

The brothers looked at one another and smiled. Rod spoke up. "It's a holiday."

The headed west on the Low Check Highway through the empty town. When they got to the edge of town they saw where everyone one had gone. For several hundred yards mountain people lined the side of the road. They were evenly spaced and there was only one row on each side of the road, men, women and children. They were dressed in Low Check blue but each one had a piece of white cloth tied around his neck, even the children.

Jay stopped and turned to Rod. "What holiday is it exactly?"

Rod answered, "Truth and Justice Day."

Jay shrugged. Trudy and Jay were sure they were not going to like walking out of town this way, but it turned out they were wrong. As they walked the three brothers dropped back behind them about twenty feet and followed. Each time the dragon slayers passed one of the little people, that person took the white cloth off of his neck, threw it on the ground, and stepped on it. Clearly it was a symbol of their new found freedom from Compo, the White Dragon. No one said a thing. There was no clapping, waving or cheering, just the stamping of feet on pavement – thump, thump, thump, on pieces of white cloth.

* * *

Chapter 24 – Low Check City

It was a pleasant walk. After the Fire Mountains, Mirage desert, and White Mountains, it was nice to be walking among trees again. There was no burning sun, no stinging sand, no frosty wind; just a pleasant breeze. After about an hour they came to a place on the mountain road where the western part of Low Check was laid out below them like a map.

In the distance was the Vast Ocean. There was a large inlet with a small city next to it. Roads fanned out from the city Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, and Southwest; as well as coming to the east where they were. Tiny villages and farmhouses dotted the landscape as far as the eye could see.

Another hour brought them among the farms and villages. People with orange skin, who were working on the farms, would turn and watch them as they passed. Little Low Check people in the villages would stop and watch them pass. They no longer were alone on the road. Instead of a lonely truck passing them every now and then, people frequently passed them on carts drawn by mules, or donkeys, or horses, or even oxen. Sometimes the carts were full of farm goods, or tools. Sometimes they had families in them. Sometimes people rode on horses or walked.

The people were not unfriendly, just curious but guarded. If Jay or Trudy nodded or smiled, the little Low Check person would nod or smile back. Twice they saw dragon soldiers. They were always in groups of four. They wore black arm bands with rank insignia. Each one had a black cap with rank insignia. They seemed more efficient and energetic than the dragon soldiers they had seen before. The soldiers looked at the dragon slayers, but did not say anything to them.

Around lunchtime they stopped at an inn in a little village for some lunch. The three brothers joined them and insisted on paying for it.

Trudy tried to continue a conversation they had before. "So none of you know anything at all about the black dragon?"

Rod shook his head. "It has never really been something people talked about. I've been to the city a couple of times. We have an uncle that lives over there. But we just visited and talked about family stuff. They have more different kinds of cars over there and something called "radio."

Trudy asked, "I thought this was where orange people lived. How could you have a relative in Low Check City."

Rod looked at her blankly, and then finally caught on. "Oh. You mean the skin. No. In the country side most people have orange skin. You'll see all different colored skin in the city, but they are all black, just like these farmers."

Trudy was amazed she understood what Rod said.

Jay commented, "There doesn't seem to be anything that prevents us from talking to these people. Maybe we can end this now."

Trudy nodded her head. She looked around the room. There were five other tables in the room besides their own. All of them had people eating at them except one. The inn keeper seemed very busy. Trudy turned to the two men sitting at the table closest to her. "Can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

The men looked at her and one of them said, "That depends. You are those dragon slayers, we have been hearing about, right?"

Trudy nodded.

The man continued, "We have been warned about you. You believe we are under the spell of the Black Dragon, Perf. You believe you can break that spell by talking to us. Am I right, so far?"

Trudy nodded again.

The man asked, "In that case would it be OK with you, if we don't talk?"

Trudy was puzzled. "Why?"

The man looked at her for a moment and then said, "You answer my question first."

Trudy started, "What ques ... Oh. Sure, if you don't want to talk to me that is just fine."

The man smiled and said, "Thank you," and both men looked at each other and resumed their conversation.

Trudy still looking at them started to say something and then changed her mind.

Pass commented, "We are not going to be able to get around that one, are we?"

Jay shook his head. "Let me try something."

He turned in the other direction to a couple and little boy sitting at the table closest to him. "May I ask you a question?"

The little man said, "Maybe. What is the question?"

Jay asked, "What can you tell me about the Black Dragon?"

The little man shook his head, "Please don't ask any questions like that."

Jay pressed on, "Can you tell us the way to Low Check City?"

The man smiled. "Sure, just keep going west on the main road. You can't miss it."

Jay tried again. "What kind of questions can I not ask you?"

The man quit smiling. "Those kind. May we finish our lunch now, please?"

Jay smiled and said, "Sorry. Sure."

Jay turned back to his own table and shook his head. "Perf is going to be tough."

Outside the inn they said good bye to the three little mountain men. When Trudy hugged them they hugged her back without awkwardness and laughed. They waved good-bye and walked east to their homes, families, and freedom. The dragon slayers headed west to the unknown.

Jay shook his head again. "Perf, has these people well trained."

Pass replied, "She has had more time than the rest."

High said, "It does not matter. We'll just go to Low Check City and deal with her."

The children did not feel so confident.

The road was mostly flat but they did gradually go down. It made for a very easy walk. By mid afternoon they could see the city. It was not a city like Trudy and Jay were used to. It had maybe 3,000 buildings at most. There was a downtown section that had

several buildings 10 or 12 stories high. Factories appeared at various places with tall smoking chimneys coming from them. They could not see the harbor, but High assured them that it had one with large ships in it, both sail and steam, that traveled the Vast Ocean.

The closer they got the dirtier they could see the city was. Some of the buildings seemed to be in need of a lot of repair. The farms ended about a half mile from where the buildings were all crowded together with no yards, and lots of pavement. Before the actual buildings there was an area of bogs, tar pits, garbage dumps. They were beginning to be close enough to make out people walking and vehicles on the streets, when a familiar vehicle came out of the city and came to a stop next to them.

Inside the mail car was Lucas Light. "Get in quick!" he called.

They climbed into the car taking the same seats as before – Lug and Jay in the back, everyone else in the front. Lucas turned it around and headed back to the city. Then he went on. "Perf has planned a welcome for you, but since I never got to finish that letter, I know you would rather wait until you know more. I got a place to stash you until we have had a chance to go over everything."

High said, "We don't need that. We can face her now."

Trudy objected. "I would like more information. I don't even know what kind of lies she likes to tell."

Pass added, "It is not like we have surprise on our side. It wouldn't hurt to know a bit more."

Lucas exclaimed, "Get down!"

They all obediently bent over. After another minute Lucas said, "OK. You can get up now."

They looked up and they were parked on a deserted street between two warehouse-looking buildings. The one across the street had a large door. The one on their side of the street was a featureless wall. Lucas said, "Follow me." He got out and walked across the street.

They all followed him. There was a speaker and a button next to the door. Lucas pressed the button. The speaker made a noise. Lucas said, "It's me. Open up! Quick!" Evidently the speaker also worked as a microphone. The door slid open and all was dark within. Lucas stepped in and they followed him. The door shut behind them and they found themselves in complete blackness. Lucas said, "The light switch is on the other side of the room. Wait here. I know where it is."

They heard him walking and then a clanging noise. Then the lights came on. They were in a large empty room about the size of a basketball court with a ceiling about thirty feet above them. Besides the door behind them, there was equal sized doors across and to their right. To their left was another doorway, but it was not filled with a closed door, like the others. Instead it was covered with a steel mesh something like a chain link fence. On the other side of it were Lucas Light and a dragon soldier. The dragon soldier's black cap had a gold star on it, as did his black armband.

The dragon slayers walked over to this door. High said, "What are you doing? Let us out this instant!"

The dragon soldier spoke. "My name is General Incisor. I am the commander of her majesty's forces. I'm afraid you are going to be detained here for some time. It is for your own safety. There is a mob of very angry people who have come to town and want to kill you."

Pass said, "How could you betray us like this, Lucas?"

Lucas shook his head. "I was on your side until you burned down Vicious Circle and all those people died."

Jay said, "That is not fair. We did no such thing!"

Lucas shook his head again, "That is not what all those people say. You turned the dragon soldiers into molten lava and whatever they were around caught fire. The whole town was destroyed in a firestorm. There is a mob of people from Vicious Circle in Low Check City that survived it, who are grieving over loved ones, family, friends." Lucas looked down. "I hear it was pretty terrible. They are all looking for you."

General Incisor added, "We can't let you go, until after they leave town. Then we can give you a fair trial."

With that both of them turned and walked down a hall out of sight.

The dragon slayers looked at each other in astonishment.

Trudy shook her head. "It can't be true, can it?"

Jay added, "I hope not, but the dragon and dragon soldiers did turn into lava. We saw what happened to the castle."

Pass said, "Let's not jump to conclusions. Remember we are in a war fought with words, and the ones on the other side are liars."

Trudy argued, "But Lucas seemed to really believe it."

Pass replied, "What he believes and what he knows might be two different things."

Jay said, "What do you mean?"

Pass responded, "He wasn't in Vicious Circle at the time it was supposed to have happened."

Trudy asked, "Why would they make up a story like that?"

Pass answered, "I can think of some possible reasons."

Jay asked, "Like what?"

Pass explained, "Make us lose confidence. Make us turn on each other.

Lug added, "Or fool the magic key."

Trudy asked, "Fool the magic key?"

Lug went on. "The key does not know everything. It can only see what is going on right around it like we can. It also can not read minds. They needed a plausible reason to lock us up, that did not look like a threat to the magic key, so they made up this lie about doing it for our own safety. The magic key would not protect us from an attack from people who are not under a dragon's spell. Why shouldn't Perf just let the mob have us?"

Jay asked, "Are you sure about all that?"

Lug shook his head. "No."

Trudy asked, "Are you sure of any of it."

Lug shook his head again. "No."

Jay looked around the room. "Looks like it is all steel."

Trudy asked, "What do we do now?"

Pass said, "We eat."

While Trudy was unpacking the supplies Jay went around the walls looking for a weak spot. The door on the wall opposite the entrance opened. "Hey look!" called Jay. He stepped through it and found a light switch. By the time the others got to it, Jay was coming out. "Restroom," he said.

They ate a quiet supper and then laid out their bedrolls.

Jay asked, "What do you think they will do?"

Lug said, "I don't know. But I do know this. Dragons are full of lies, pride and anger. Eventually Perf will show up and either be destroyed or enslave us."

A dragon soldier appeared at the door with the wire mesh and called out. "Lights out in five minutes." The lights flashed off for a second. And he was gone. Jay went over and turned the light on in the restroom. When the soldier came back and flipped the main lights off, the restroom light stayed lit. They were still able to see, but it was dark enough to sleep.

* * *

The dragon slayers were awakened to a banging noise, a scuffling sound, and some grunts. It was pitch black, black as tar. They could see nothing. The unseen guards had turned off the light in the restroom. They knew this because the light in the restroom came on first, followed shortly by the main lights, before they really woke up completely.

When the lights came on they looked around and found they had a visitor in the room with them. Next to the door across from the cage door was a polar bear blinking at the light, and looking around the room. It was Ebony. It appeared as if he had just come in to the room with them, through the door behind him.

Ebony said, "Well, that is something that does not happen every day."

The dragon slayers crawled out of their bedrolls and walked over to him. Pass asked, "What happened?"

Ebony looked at them and looked around. "I was taking a little nap until you were ready to go. The next thing I knew a black dragon dug me out of the snow and carried me here, wherever here is, and pushed me in this room. I guess he got you, too."

"She," corrected Trudy.

Ebony looked at Trudy. "OK, she. It was kind of interesting flying over everything. Would have been better if it was daylight, and I had not been afraid he, I mean she, might drop me. I'm guessing we are somewhere in Low Check City although I might have gotten turned around, and this is the City of Reason. It's a city next the ocean. I know that much."

Pass replied, "Your first guess is right."

Ebony asked, "So what is going on?"

The dragon slayers looked at each other. Trudy answered. "Well, we have been locked up and accused of burning a whole town down."

Ebony looked puzzled and yawned. "How did you get here?"

Jay replied, "Dog sled, walking, and finally a steam automobile. You have been asleep several days. We thought you were hibernating."

Ebony shook his head saying, "Wrong time of year for that."

Trudy asked, "When was the last time you hibernated?"

The bear lifted a huge paw and scratched his head. "I don't remember. Long time."

Trudy suggested. "Maybe you are over due."

Pass said, "We are about to have some breakfast. Would you like some?"

Ebony yawned and said, "I've been up for hours flying around. If it is OK, I would like to take a nap."

The dragon slayers looked at each other. The bear went to a corner, curled up, and promptly fell asleep.

After breakfast there was nothing to do but sit around.

Jay complained, "The least they could do is bring us some food instead of making us eat trail rations."

Trudy disagreed. "It is a good thing to have our own food. We don't have to worry about what they might have put in it. I wish I knew what kind of lies Perf told."

Pass suggested, "Why don't you come at it from the other side. What kind of lies are left?"

Trudy looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Pass answered, "There is only a limited number of kinds of lies. Think of the ones you know about and then try to remember some other kinds people have told. Perf's lies would probably be one of those kinds."

Jay objected, "How do you know there is a limited number of kinds of lies?"

Pass fluttered her wings. "I don't, really, it just seems reasonable. But let's suppose there are a limited number of kinds, identify them all, and then see if we can add to the list. There is nothing else to do, what could it hurt?"

Trudy nodded her head. "Ok, there is Quiver the Brown Dragon. She used words with two meanings as if they only had one. For instance, browning the meat is cooking it, not painting it.

Jay shrugged, "You know you keep saying that, but to be honest, I still don't know what 'browning the meat' really means."

Trudy shook her head. "It means cooking it, silly. It turns from red to brown when you cook it. There is Track, the Blue Dragon, who tried to get you to pay attention to something else besides the real argument. For instance, when he tried to get us off track by saying he felt blue."

Pass chirped, "He got me on that one."

Trudy nodded, "There was Cuz, the Green Dragon. She tried to make us believe one thing caused another just because they were close to each other in time or place, like trees turning green in the Spring makes it turn warm."

High said, "Nobody fell for that one."

Trudy continued, "Slant, the Purple Dragon, liked to tell just one side of the story, but we know purple mountains have more than one side."

Jay agreed. "We have walked in enough mountains to know that for sure."

Trudy said, "Begg, the Red Dragon, would pretend like we had already agreed that something was true when we had not. Turning red can mean more than just embarrassment. We should not let them make us jump to conclusions."

Jay agreed again. "Yeah, being red can also mean you have been in Mom's make-up."

Trudy shook her head. "I can't believe you keep bringing that up. I was three years old! Slope, the Yellow Dragon, would claim that one thing led to another when it did not. That's like saying if you step on a yellow banana peel you will die, because you are sure to slip and fall, and break something important."

Jay shook his head. "No, you slip on a yellow banana peel, break your leg, are late for your wedding, and the groom's father shoots you."

Trudy rolled her eyes. "Either way it is saying you are going to die for sure, when it is not sure at all. Then there is the yellow buttercup lie, when there is too much or too little detail. Just because a flower is yellow does not mean it is a buttercup. It might be a daisy. Knowing the flower is yellow is too little detail."

Jay shrugged. "I still like the lemon tree idea better."

Trudy glared at Jay. Then she said, "Then there are the white lies. White snowflake lies are when someone says there is no difference when there is a difference; like snowflakes are all different when you look closely."

Jay said, "Remember riding in the dogsleds across the snow. That was fun!"

Trudy looked at Jay sternly. "You are trying to mess me up on purpose. Stop it. This is important."

Jay laughed. "That is a red lie. You are assuming I am doing it on purpose. You don't know that."

Trudy sighed. "You are right. It was a red lie. Have you seen how serious that General Incisor is? He is twice as bad as Major Molar. The dragon soldiers here are efficient and energetic. Even the people here are well trained. Perf, the Black Dragon is not going to be easy. Lug was right. That dragon will talk to us eventually, and if we are not prepared, we may end up cleaning her kitchen or working in her factory. Why don't you help me instead of making jokes?"

Jay looked embarrassed. "OK. Sorry."

Trudy went on. "White light lies are when they say you only have two choices when you have many, like saying you can only turn the light off or on, when you could hold a prism up to it and get lots of colors."

Jay finished. "White cloud lies are saying a whole thing is like its parts, or a part is like the whole thing. White clouds are made of droplets of water, but they do not act like water, and water only acts like clouds when it is clouds."

Pass chirped. "Good! Now let's see if we can think of some lies that fit into other categories."

They made a game of it. They remembered lies they had heard and then tried to fit them in to their list.

Trudy said, "I remember trying to get Mom and Dad to let me stay up later by telling them all the other people in my class at school got to stay up later. It did not work, but now I understand it was because I was trying to trick them."

Jay spoke up. "That was a blue lie. What a bunch of other people were doing had nothing to do with what was going on at our house. You were trying to trick them in to looking at something else."

Trudy nodded, "Well, I had already tricked myself into believing it first, so it wasn't on purpose. Ok, now you give me one."

Jay thought for a minute. "I had a pair of socks that I used to wear to all my baseball games, because I thought they caused us to win. I called them my lucky socks. Our first three games I wore them twice, and we won the games I wore them to, and lost the one I didn't. I just kept wearing them to every game after that. It was silly, really."

Trudy said, "That is a green lie. The socks didn't cause anything."

Jay nodded, "That's right. OK, Pass, your turn."

Pass fluttered her wings as she began to think.

They played the game all day except for lunch and supper.

The first new kind of lie they found in the morning. They labeled it the black lie. It was when someone just said something they knew was not true. There was no trick or argument to it, except for taking advantage of the other person not knowing for sure, because they had not seen it themselves. Like teaching people who did not know English that black was white, and white was black, and then laughing at them when they got it wrong.

They named it after the black dragon because they felt sure she was behind the lie about Vicious Circle. Well, they hoped as much as believed it was a black lie.

It took them a long time to find another kind of lie. They discovered it by accident late in the afternoon when they were arguing about which kind of lie one example belonged to. Was it blue or red? Trudy said, "That is a new kind of lie!"

Jay shook his head, "No, its not. It is a red lie."

Trudy shook her head, "No, not the one we are talking about, the way we are talking about it."

Jay looked puzzled.

Trudy went on, "You could try to trick people into saying something was the wrong kind of thing."

Jay shook his head again, "What are you talking about?"

Trudy thought for a second and then offered, "Here is a "fruity" one for you. Suppose I said, 'All oranges are round, your head is round, so your head must be an orange.'"

Jay shook his head yet again. "But my head is not an orange."

Trudy nodded. "Yes, we know that because it is a simple example. But what would happen if somebody tried to use that in an argument about something, we were less sure about. It might sound right when it wasn't."

Jay nodded his head. "Yes, I see what you mean. So what color is this "wrong kind of thing" lie?"

Lug said, "Orange, of course, for Mal is the only dragon left with no lie. Mal, the Orange dragon may tell this kind of lie."

They all agreed that Jay's head was not an orange.

* * *

Chapter 25 – It All Comes Together

The next morning the dragon slayers were awakened in the same way, only this time when the lights came on, it was Fibber standing in the room with them, next to the closed door, looking bewildered.

The three parts of key and two children came over to her.

Fibber asked, "Where are we?"

High spoke up, "In jail."

Pass chirped, "In a warehouse, in Low Check City. What happened to you?"

Fibber looked at the polar bear sleeping in the corner. "Is it dead?"

Trudy said, "No, no. Just hibernating."

Fibber was still looking at the bear. "What happens if it wakes up?"

Jay laughed. "Nothing. He is friendly. So, what happened to you?"

Fibber responded. "I heard they were looking for anyone who had helped you, and headed east. I was sleeping in a nice soft spot next to a log in the Ergo Forest, when a big black dragon grabbed me up and flew me here."

High asked, "Why are they looking for people who were helping us?"

Fibber looked around at them. "Don't you know? They blame you for the disaster at Vicious Circle."

High chattered. "It is not our fault. We weren't even there."

Fibber said, "I know. I saw it happen. I was on a hill looking down on the town and all of a sudden fires broke out every where."

Lug asked, "Every where?"

Fibber replied, "Sure. Every building caught on fire at the same time."

Lug accused, "That is a black lie. Why would there be a dragon soldier in every building?"

Fibber shook her head. "I don't know what you are talking about."

Pass said, "Lug, I'm surprised at you. Maybe they were assigned there as guards or something. You are going to hurt her feelings."

Lug replied, "Not enough dragon soldiers to go around."

Fibber's tail curled up (which is shrugging for a lizard) "I don't have a big red button on me for people to press to make me mad. He's not hurting my feelings."

Trudy spoke up, "Hey! Wait a minute. That's my story. I said that in an oasis on the Mirage Desert. How did you know about that?"

Jay agreed. "That's right. We were talking about people we knew at school who acted like they had a big red button on them, that if you pushed it they would do or say something foolish."

Pass also agreed. "We were eating lunch in that little oasis on the way from Oasis Tin to Oasis Fake. Perhaps Slippery, the snake overheard. He was spying on us. But, Fibber, how did you find out about it?"

Fibber looked bewildered.

Ebony stood up and roared.

The dragon slayers were all startled.

The door nearest them slid open and in came: General Incisor with twenty dragon soldiers, marching precisely in step; Rook, the black crow; the black gull that spied for the Blue dragon; the black wolf, whose name was no one's business; the two black buzzards, Low Dead and Bogus D. Lemon; Slippery, the black snake; Ivory, the black bear; and Lucas Light.

Ebony said, "Fibber flubbed it."

Lucas nodded, "We heard. But then, what do you expect out of a tail?"

Fibber objected, "I thought I did really well acting like I was afraid of the polar bear."

Ebony growled, "I was better with that whole 'That doesn't happen every day' thing, and calling Perf, 'he' instead of 'she'."

The soldiers arranged themselves around the edge of the room.

The bewildered dragon slayers watched as the rest who had just come into the room, went to the center of the room along with Fibber and Ivory. They all stood in a line except for the birds, which stood on either side of the line. Slippery was at the end, then Fibber, then Ivory, then Ebony, with one buzzard on one side and the other on the other. The gull stood next to one buzzard and the crow next to the other. In front of Ebony was the wolf and in the very front was Lucas Light. No sooner had they taken their places then they began to merge together into a huge black dragon.

Lucas became the head, except his legs merged with the wolf to form the neck, Ebony turned black and became the chest, Ivory the stomach, Fibber and Slippery the tail. The birds on either side formed into wings. Ebony's front legs became the dragon's front claws, and Ivory's back legs became the dragon's back legs. It only took a few seconds and a different kind of dragon was before them than they were used to seeing. This was no fat lazy dragon. This dragon was muscular and energetic.

Perf, the Black Dragon, glared down at them, "I have no quarrel with these children. They may go." The door to the outside opened and daylight streamed in. "My quarrel is with the wizard, Key, who has tricked them into taking part in this slaughter of innocent dragons."

Jay said nervously, "We'll stick around."

Perf shook her head, "I'm surprised you would let your sister expose herself to such danger."

Trudy spoke up, "I can speak for myself." The quiver in her voice could be clearly heard.

Perf nodded. "Yes, I know. I saved your life once, and I'm trying to do it again." Turning to Jay she added, "And I'm trying to get you out of a fix again."

Jay still sounded nervous. "I'm not going anywhere."

Trudy added, "We came here to speak with you, why should we leave now?"

Perf looked around at all the dragon slayers and then back at Trudy. "You should go because you have joined the wrong side. This wizard, Key, has snatched you from your home and is lying to you."

Jay spoke up. "That is not fair. The dragons were all liars, and brought on their own ends by trying to attack us."

Perf looked at Jay. "Of course, they are all liars. All magic is done by deception. Don't you know that? From the simplest card trick to the most elaborate spells, magic is based on lies. Do you know any card tricks?"

Jay looked puzzled. "Yeah, a couple."

Perf went on, "Aren't they lies? Don't you trick people into looking at the wrong thing so they are mystified by the results?"

Jay nodded, "Yes, I guess."

Perf continued, "You are snatched out of your home, where a kind elderly man talks to you for five minutes. No one else sees him in this form, because almost right away you are hurdled into an adventure with a dull little donkey, a cute little monkey, and a sweet little bird. What is Key trying to hide from you? What is the hurry? Will the real Wizard Key please stand up, so we can see what he is really like?"

High's tail was twitching. "I am not cute!"

Trudy objected, "Lug is not dull."

Lug said, "Thank you."

Perf snorted and puffs of smoke came out of her nostrils. She took two steps to the right, looked down at High and said, "You didn't like it when Cuz said your were an ugly, annoying, little monkey, and you don't like it when I say you are cute. You can not be pleased."

High's mouth opened and closed and his tail twitched violently, but no sound came out of him.

Perf paced in the other direction and looked at Trudy. "Okay, so Lug is Mr. Excitement. What about the rest of my argument? What evidence do you have that Key is what he says he is? For that matter, has he ever even explained who he is?"

Jay answered, "Key has always been truthful with us about the things we can check, so it reasonable to think he is truthful with what we can not check."

Perf laughed and puffs of smoke came out of her mouth. She began pacing back and forth and talking at the same time. "Unless Key is doing that on purpose to trick you, but the old fool isn't that careful, you are just so taken in by him, that you do not notice his many lies."

Trudy asked, "Like what?"

Perf kept pacing. "The magic key keeps you from being attacked, right?"

Trudy nodded.

Perf continued, "And it also will remove all protection from you, if you attack, correct?"

Trudy nodded again.

Perf stopped pacing right in front of Trudy and put her face about a foot from Trudy's. Trudy drew back. But Perf's huge blue eyes still stared at Trudy. Perf asked, "Then how is it that Pass ate Quiver, the Brown Dragon? When she did, if Lug was telling the truth, you should have lost all your protection."

Lug spoke up, "That is a black lie."

Perf began to pace again. "Ok, Key. Explain it. This I have got to hear."

Lug went on, "Pass ate a brown lizard. Rook ate Quiver."

Perf laughed smokily. "Funny you haven't mentioned it before."

Lug answered, "I just now figured it out."

Perf laughed again. "And what new information showed up to allow you to 'just now figure it out'?"

Lug replied, "No, new information. I just had not thought of the magic key being in effect before. Once you reminded me of that, I realized it must have been Rook who ate Quiver. Rook said a bird ate Quiver and let us draw the wrong conclusion. The most effective lie is to tell the truth in such a way that it makes your victim draw the wrong conclusion. Rook set it up with an earlier lie about when Quiver was eaten."

Pass chirped, "That's right! That little lizard had no wings. I feel a lot better."

Perf stopped pacing and looked at Pass. "The sweet little bird speaks! Why? To draw our attention away from what is really going on. Lug, the magical expert, has yet again, come up with a long involved explanation to cover his previous lies. The magic key does not work the way he has told you, and every time something happens to show that it doesn't, he just adds some more rules to make things appear the way he wants. But I know the truth, and I have taken steps to make sure I am safe from the magic of the murdering key."

Jay had become too involved in listening to the conversation to be nervous any more. "What are you talking about?"

Perf admitted it. "Yes, we have people under our spell. And yes, we use them for our own purposes. Just like Key has you under his spell, and is using you for his purposes. The strong always rule the weak; it is a fundamental law of the universe. The magic key causes the dragon to become angry enough to attack, but it has to happen with Low Checkers as witnesses. There are no Low Check people here. I am safe."

Trudy said, "There were not always Low Check people ... oh, wait, there were. Reg and his men with Cuz, the Green Dragon. The meals on mules drivers with Slant, the Purple Dragon. Sunflower and his sisters with the Red Dragon. Sunflower again with Slope, the Yellow Dragon. The Sheik with the White Dragon."

Perf laughed. "Yes, some of the other dragons figured it out, but thought it only mattered if the witnesses were under their spell, or their own people. I know any Low Checker counts."

Lug said, "That is a black lie, too. No witnesses are required."

Perf ignored him and went on, "Naturally a magician does not like to have his tricks revealed in front of other people. The magic key latches onto any tiny negative emotion and multiplies it so that the dragon insanely attacks, sealing his own doom. Those dragons were murdered. They did not die by their own hand; they were sucked to their death by the magic key created by a scheming old wizard."

Jay accused, "But it is not fair for you to rule over these people."

Perf snorted smoke. "Somebody is going to rule over them. It is going to be me, or the Wizard here. I prefer me."

Jay brightened, "A blue lie! What Magician Key may or may not do later, has nothing to do with it. It is still unfair for you to force people to serve you, whether you do it by deception or strength."

Trudy clapped her hands. "The game! The lie she just told was a white light lie. There are more choices than just Key being ruler or Perf being ruler. They could rule themselves or any number of other things. All that talk about Lug changing the rules was a yellow buttercup lie. He was trying to get us to look at too much detail. The simple truth is Lug always had a good explanation."

Perf acted like she was going to start pacing again and then stopped. She lifted up her front foot and looked at it in a puzzled way. She picked it up and put it down several times. It seemed to be sticking to the floor. Then Perf looked at Jay and asked, "I showed you that all magic is trickery, don't you see that shows that Lug is nothing but a trickster?"

Trudy looked at Jay. "Is that an orange lie or a white lie?"

Jay replied, "Hmm. Let me think. Saying that she has proved that all magic is trickery, is a red lie, because she is saying that we have already agreed to something when we haven't. All she showed us was that some magic is trickery, not all."

Trudy argued, "Yes, but the part about Lug being 'nothing but a trickster.' Is Perf putting Lug in with a wrong kind, an orange lie, or is she is saying something is like one of its parts, a white cloud lie?"

Jay rubbed his chin. "Even if Lug did use some tricks, that does not mean he is 'nothing but a trickster,' so I guess it is the putting in the wrong kind, an orange lie."

Trudy nodded. "Yes, that is what I thought at first, too. But then I thought if you think of trickery as a part of Lug, then she is using the white cloud lie, of saying Lug is like his part."

Jay looked puzzled, "Yes, I see what you mean. I'm not sure what kind of lie it is, but it sure is a whopper, isn't it?"

Trudy asked, "Have you ever stopped to count how many lies you have to catch them in before they get mad?"

Jay looked surprised. "Do you think it is the same amount each time?"

Trudy shrugged, "I don't know. You are the one who is always counting things. I thought you would know."

Jay shook his head and laughed. "You are the one who counted the Red Dragon's lies. Remember you used your fingers."

Trudy brightened. "That's right!" She counted silently on her fingers looking at the ceiling. "There were eight of them."

Jay shook his head. "Well, maybe so, but we haven't counted the others, and I've already lost count this time. Whose turn is it?"

Trudy replied, "Perf's."

The children both turned to Perf and waited expectantly.

Perf looked at one and then the other of the children. "So, you still think this wizard is truthful?" She was not pacing anymore.

Jay replied, "Magician would be a better term, I think. Doesn't 'wizard' mean an evil magician?"

Trudy explained, "Not always, but it does the way she is using it. You can tell by the snarl and contempt in her voice." Trudy imitated Perf's voice, "Wizard."

Jay asked with some excitement, "Is that a brown lie?"

Trudy shook her head. "No, she always uses it to mean evil magician. As long as she always uses it the same way, it is not a brown lie."

Jay turned back to Perf. "Yes, we believe the Magician Key is truthful."

Perf snorted and puffed smoke. "Ok. Tell me what he looks like." She seemed to have trouble pulling her tail loose from the floor to wave it about behind her.

Jay said, "Right now Key looks like a donkey, monkey and dovekie. When we first met him, he looked like a kind elderly gentleman."

Perf asked, "That doesn't seem deceptive to you?" She no longer was trying to move about in any way.

Jay shook his head. "He has never pretended to be someone else. You on the other hand pretended to be a whole cast of characters. Very deceptive." Jay turned to Trudy. "What kind of lie is that?"

Trudy answered cheerfully. "Well, when she said, Key was being deceptive, it was a red lie. She tried to pretend that we had already agreed that a change in appearance was automatically deceptive. I'm not sure about all the lies she told when she pretended to be all those different folks."

Jay scratched his head. "I think those are just black lies. No trickery to it, just a bald faced lie. Whose turn is it?"

Trudy smiled. "Let's just let Perf keep going. I think I ran out of examples yesterday, and she seems to enjoy it." The children turned and looked at the dragon.

Perf sat down. "I thought that game yesterday was childish nonsense. I still think it is nonsense, but I see now I should have stopped it. OK, you like to talk about the other dragons. Let's talk about Slant. Do you remember when he wanted to know why the Wizard Key needed your help?"

Trudy said, "Yes, I remember. It was Slant's final argument, right before he became an iron statue, deep inside an abandoned mine."

Perf nodded slightly saying, "That is right, but you never really answered Slant. He got a detail wrong and you caught him on it."

Trudy nodded. "That's right he said Lug saw no point in obeying the sign about being small to come into Low Check, but Lug actually was talking about the sign on the other side that said, 'No Exit,' or something like that."

The dragon agreed. "Yes, Slant got a little bit frustrated, and the magic key turned that little bit of frustration to anger, and then to rage. Why should Slant get angry, when he was really winning the argument?" Perf was sitting perfectly still.

Trudy shook her head. "I'm not sure about all the mind reading you are doing, but yes, it was a little detail about a sign." She turned to Jay. "Is pretending to read minds a kind of lie?"

Jay looked thoughtful. "You mean that part about Slant being a 'little bit frustrated'?"

Trudy nodded. "Perf could not possibly know how Slant felt about it."

Jay replied, "I think it is a red lie. She is trying to pretend we have already agreed that the magic key sucks them in, instead of it being their own fault. But we have not agreed to that."

Trudy turned back to Perf. "So, what about the sign?"

Perf went on, "Let me try Slant's argument again, only I'm going to get the little detail right. If that old wizard really killed the old dragon, Fay, by himself, why would he need someone's help to kill some more dragons?" The dragon was still sitting.

Trudy brightened. "That is very good. Almost word-for-word what Slant said. Then I said, 'He had to get smaller in order to come into Low Check'."

Perf retorted, "Lug said something that shows he has no respect for signs, whether it was the particular sign about being short, or not, does not matter. Lug does not care what signs say. He has said so more than once."

Trudy looked puzzled. "I do not see what you are trying say."

Perf said triumphantly, "If Key knew it did not matter how tall he was, and if he really did slay Fay, by himself, why did he break into parts to come into Low Check?" She tried to flap her wings to show her triumph but they seemed to be sticky, and flopped instead of flapped.

Jay joined in. "It could be a brown lie or a white cloud lie."

Trudy looked up in thought. "Well, I see the white cloud lie. She is saying that whatever Lug thinks, the Magician Key must think. Lug does not care what signs say. That is true. But that says nothing about what the Magician Key thinks. That is saying that a whole thing is like its parts. That is a white cloud lie alright, but I don't see any brown lie at all."

Jay smiled. "Sometimes when she says Key, she means Lug, and sometimes she means the Magician Key. Same word, two meanings."

Trudy smiled also, "Yes, Yes. Either way it is a lie. What Lug thinks is only part of what the Magician Key thinks. We don't know what the Magician Key thinks about signs. All we know is that he said we must obey that one. We also know that Perf knows all this. She herself when she was divided into parts, like Key is now, commented that Fibber was not as smart as some other parts of Perf, because Fibber was the tail. That proves that Perf knows she is lying about this. Does that make it a black lie, too?"

Perf laid down as if she were tired. All of the dragon soldiers were still standing exactly as they were before, all around the outside of the room. Perf said, "I would think you would show a little more gratitude. I saved the little girl's life by keeping her from falling off a cliff. The little boy I broke free from an icy grasp. Seems to me that should make you at least try to believe me."

Jay replied, "Yes, you did those things and I wonder why. You also lied to Pass so she spent a month thinking she had eaten a dragon, spied on us constantly, tried to separate us, sent us flying in the desert without supplies to die of thirst, tried to feed us to the wolves, and left us to freeze to death in the middle of nowhere. However, since we

are your enemies, I really do forgive you all that. What else were you going to do? I am puzzled by some of the things you did, but bringing them up right now is a blue lie. You are just trying to change the subject."

Lug spoke up. "I think she saved Trudy's life, to make sure the Red, Purple, Yellow and White Dragon were eliminated. She got you out of the White Dragon's grasp, so that we would all follow her out in the wilderness to be killed by wolves or freeze to death. She knew you would get out eventually anyway. She needed to pretend to be a friend to gain our trust."

Perf snorted out puffs of smoke. "Another long explanation from Lug the donkey, full of guesses and accusations without facts. If I wanted you to kill the Yellow and White dragons, why would I try to separate you in Pree Sump Shun or try to make you die of thirst in the desert?"

Lug answered, "Of course, you are right. I am just guessing. But I guess once it was down to just two dragons, you were willing to start taking some chances. If you weakened or killed us, you could take care of the Yellow and White dragon yourselves. If your plans did not work, then we would get rid of them for you, and you could still beat us, or so you thought. You got your way either way. I believe you want total control of all of Low Check."

Perf laughed. "Jay was right. You are not as smart as the Wizard. You seem to be having trouble counting up to three. What about the Orange dragon? There were three dragons left not two."

Lug replied, "Mal is on your side. The two of you are planning to take over all of Low Check together so that ... "

Lug did not get to finish his thought. Perf tried to breathe fire on them but all that came out was a stream of warm sticky tar, which covered the dragon slayers. They covered their faces in time to keep it out of their eyes, nose, and mouth. Then the Black Dragon became warm sticky tar, which, together with the tar from the dragon soldiers slowly flowed over the whole room until it was about an inch deep. But the dragon slayers were already stuck in place before it reached them, by what Perf had spewed on them. When the rest reached them it just made it that much stickier."

Jay said, "Lug, it looks like your guesses were right. Mal and Perf were in it together. That must have been a secret she did not want mentioned."

Trudy said, "Yeah. And it looks like you are a prophet, who can foretell the future."

Jay asked, "What do you mean?"

Trudy laughed, "Remember at the very beginning you said, 'I am going to stick around,' and 'I am not going anywhere.' Well, looks like you were right."

They could not get unstuck from the floor, and Pass could not get off Trudy's shoulder. It would not have done any good if she had. Her wings were stuck to her sides.

Trudy asked, "Now what?"

High announced, "Mal, the Orange Dragon is next."

Pass added, "We must try Perf's door first."

High apologized, "Yes, I forgot. Sorry."

Trudy sighed. "As much as I appreciate the need to talk about our future plans, I was asking, what do we do to get out of this tar?"

Lug said, "Call for help."

They all called for help for a few minutes. Nothing happened.

High complained, "We are not getting anywhere with that."

Trudy added, "I'm getting hoarse."

Jay said, "Let's take turns calling and wait longer between each yell."

They followed Jay's plan. It seemed like a very long time before anything happened, but thinking back on it later, the children decided it was probably only about an hour.

Some of the tar had run out the door. They could see the mail car still parked across the street, and see the puddle of tar outside the door, but not once did they see anyone pass. Finally, a black colored face peered in from the side, so the owner could stand on the street that was dry, instead of in the sticky tar right outside the open door. It was Rod. "Hello. Looks like you are stuck. Wait there; I'll be back in a jiffy."

Jay suggested. "Let's not wait for him to come back. We'll hide in the restroom and surprise him."

The others laughed.

He came back with the other two dog sledding brothers with him. They laid out boards across the tar to get to the dragon slayers. Then they brought in cans of solvent to dissolve the tar holding them in place. The solvent smelled terrible and made the Trudy sneeze. By the time they were loose a crowd of people all the colors of the rainbow had gathered outside the door beyond where the tar had run out into the street.

At first the people just stared at them, and then somebody in the back of the crowd began clapping. Soon the whole crowd was clapping and cheering. Idita, Rod and Mush walked with them to a nearby barber and beauty shop, where they spent over an hour getting the tar cleaned off them. It was a painful process. The worst part was their hair and feathers. By the time that was finished they were sore, hungry, and tired. The three little mountain men had not been idle while the dragon slayers were being cleaned. They had found the children new clothing and made arrangements for rooms at an inn. Soon they were clean, wearing new clothes, and sitting at a table in a nice restaurant with Idita, Rod, and Mush. A little lady from Am Big You Es swamp took their orders for food. At least they assumed she was from the swamp because her skin was blue.

After she left them Trudy asked the little mountain men, "What made the three of you come back to Low Check City?"

Rod explained, "Dragon soldiers. After we left you, when we got to the next village, eight dragon soldiers arrested us, brought us back here, and put us in jail downtown. They told us that we were being arrested for helping you. They said you had killed a bunch of people over in Vicious Circle. A few minutes after the dragon soldiers turned into tar some people came and let us out. We started looking for you. You know the rest."

Lug asked, "Do you know what really happened at Vicious Circle?"

Rod nodded. "Yes, we asked around about that, too. Several fires started when the dragon soldiers turned to lava, but they got them all put out except the dragon soldier barracks. It burned to the ground."

Pass asked, "Was anyone hurt?"

Rod shook his head, No, but said, "Yes, but nothing that won't heal OK."

A little swamp woman delivered their food and they all began eating. After the edge of their hunger was gone Jay asked, "If some magic gets its power from lies and some does not, how do you tell the difference."

Lug answered, "Lies have no power at all. Magic and everything else in the universe gets its power from good. Only good has power, not evil."

Jay looked surprised. "How can that be? That doesn't make any sense. Where does all the trouble come from if evil has no power?"

Lug replied, "Tell me about the most evil thing you can think of."

Jay thought for a minute. "A few years ago a group of men flew three airplanes into some buildings and killed themselves along with thousands of innocent people. They also crashed another plane full of innocent people. There was nothing good about them."

Lug shook his head. "There had to be some good, because only good has power. Airplanes are those flying car things you were telling us about, right?"

Jay nodded.

Lug went on, "Certainly the men must have been full of hate to do such a thing, but hate alone is helpless. Please do not misunderstand me, when I say this, but it took courage to fly those airplanes into those buildings. It took knowledge to be able to operate the planes. It took teamwork and determination for them to work together. They had to trust each other as well. Like I said, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying those men were good. I'm saying that if all they had was cowardice, hate, ignorance, selfish pride, mistrust of each other, and laziness, they would have not been able to do anything at all. Evil alone can do nothing. Evil must have good to do anything. But good does not need evil. You can have courage, knowledge, teamwork, determination and trust and do many good things without any evil at all."

Trudy shuttered. "That's terrible. Those men were not good."

Lug continued. "No, they were not good, but if they all they were was evil, they would have been helpless and powerless. They had to have something about them that was good, or they could not have done anything at all, good or bad."

Jay said, "I think I might see what you are saying, but what about lies? What is good about them?"

Lug replied, "There is nothing good about deception and lies."

Jay objected, "But you said there had to be some good for them to work."

Lug answered, "Lies get their power from the victim. Unless the person being told the lie believes it, the lie has no power at all. Lies draw their power from the trust of the listener, which is a good thing. If you do not believe a lie the only thing that happens is the person telling it looks foolish."

Jay thought about that for a while as he ate.

Trudy asked, "What about magic? Where does it get its power?"

Lug explained. "Magic gets its power from knowledge of the rules of the universe."

Trudy looked puzzled. "I don't understand. That sounds more like science than magic."

Lug went on. "There is no difference between science and real magic. I am able to do what I do, because I know more about the rules of this universe than you do. It is no deceptive card trick. Imagine how people in your world would think a few hundred years ago, if you were able to show them airplanes or VT. It would be like magic to them. Magic is just science the onlooker does not understand."

Jay asked, "VT?"

Lug explained, "You know those boxes you were telling us about that show pictures of things far away."

Jay and Trudy laughed. Jay said, "TV not VT."

Trudy sighed. "I would like to see some TV. How are we going to find Perf's Door of Doom?"

No one seemed to have any ideas, but just then a little Low Check man with orange skin walked up to them and said, "Excuse me. I'm sorry to interrupt. I'm the governor of Low Check City, and I would like to know if there is anything we can do for you to show our gratitude for what you have done."

Trudy said eagerly, "Yes, can you tell us where Perf's lair is?"

The Governor looked puzzled. "You mean where she lived?"

Trudy nodded. "Yes, please."

The Governor nodded back. "Sure, whenever you like."

Trudy gulped down the rest of her milk and then said, "I'm ready now." Then she stood up. Jay looked down at the food still on his plate and shook his head. The rest of the dragon slayers and the three little mountain men looked at each other. Jay shrugged, chuckled, and got up. They followed the Governor outside where they found a long open car, with seating enough for twelve people waiting for them. It was like a small bus with no roof. A little woman from Lake Lynn was sitting behind the wheel. At least they assumed she was from Lake Lynn because she had green skin. The dragon slayers, and the three brothers, climbed into it with the Governor.

The car was evidently gasoline powered. It pulled quietly away from the curb and drove through the city. As they drove they noticed people of all colors working. They were picking up trash, cleaning the streets, buildings, and cars, and repairing the buildings.

The Governor explained. "It is like we have been blind for years. We had no idea the city had become so nasty."

High replied, "This used to be the twin sister of the City of Reason, and every bit as beautiful. It was called Logic City back in those days."

The Governor nodded his head. "Yes, and our country was called the Land of Logic. We are planning a celebration tomorrow night. We plan to give the city and the country back its old name. If you are willing you will be the guests of honor."

High nodded his head. "Yes. Certainly! It would be wonderful."

They pulled onto a street that ran near the harbor. The harbor had about two dozen large ships, and a hundred or so smaller boats. There were both sailing ships and steam powered ones. Many of them were being cleaned and worked on as well. They saw a castle on a small hill in the midst of the downtown area. Taller buildings surrounded it on every side except the harbor side. They pulled up in front of it.

The castle was made of black volcanic rock. It had a large dragon sized door on the front of it. Trudy leapt out of the car and began trying to push the door open. She had to wait for Jay and the three brothers from Fort Glacier. It took all five of them to get it open. The Governor and driver stayed in the car.

The three little men waited outside as the dragon slayers entered the castle. It was beautifully furnished and decorated, but Trudy had no time for noticing that. She ran from room to room as the others walked about. All were looking for the Door of Doom. Soon enough they found it, on the second story, behind a floor to ceiling curtain covering one end of a hallway.

High turned the key this time, there was a click, and the key disappeared.

Trudy cheered. "Hooray! We get to go home. I'm so happy." Then she said. "I don't want to leave you behind. What are we going to do about Mal without the key? When will we ever see you again? I'm so sad." Tears began to roll down her cheek.

Jay looked serious and his eyes were a bit moist as well. That is a good question, "What about Mal, the Orange Dragon?"

Lug assured them. "With all of the Land of Logic against him, Mal does not have a chance. Where once there were nine dragons, now there is only one. We will be fine."

Trudy said, "Mom and Dad must be crazy with worry. We really have to go."

Pass chirped, "Of course you do. Good-bye. We'll never forget you."

Trudy hugged Lug and kissed Pass and High.

Jay awkwardly patted them all. "High, you make us a good speech at that celebration tomorrow night."

High answered, "Just like always."

Jay reached out and began to push the door open. Suddenly they were in Trudy's bedroom.

Trudy looked around. "I was going to turn around and wave before we closed the door."

Jay looked around the room. Everything looked normal. He said, "Guess not."

Trudy ran out the door, through the hall, and down the stairs calling, "Mom! Dad! We are back!" Jay was right behind her.

They found their parents in the living room. Both of them were out of their usual seats and starting to come to the door. Dad said, "What are you yelling about?"

Trudy ran up and hugged him and then quickly hugged her mother. "We are back. We have missed you."

Jay hugged them as well. Mom and Dad looked at each other bewildered.

Mom said, "Back from where? Jay was just down here an hour ago asking to watch television. Have you left the house without permission?"

Now it was Trudy's and Jay's turn to look at each other bewildered.

Trudy said, "We have been gone a month."

Dad chuckled. "I think I would have noticed that. Are you playing a game?"

Jay said, "We were gone a long time, where do you think we got these clothes, and I got this sword ..." He stopped. Looking down both children realized they were back in the clothing that had on when their adventure began a month before.

Dad suggested, "Maybe we should sit down and talk about this." They all sat down in the living room. Trudy and Jay took turns telling the story you have just read, (except they did not tell about what happened to Happy, Sunflower, Daisy, and Buttercup after Sunflower left them at Oasis Fake. They did not find out about that part until later, but that is another story.) When they finished the story Trudy said, "I know you don't believe us."

Mom shook her head. "Of course we believe you."

Dad agreed. "You have always been pretty truthful with us. I don't think you would tell us a black lie. It must have happened. Time in that world just goes faster than here, that's all."

Jay said, "But we can not prove it."

Dad shook his head, "Sure you can. You have the testimony of two honest witnesses. If that is not believable, what is?"

Mom agreed, "Proof enough for me."

Dad went on, "Besides, where is the key?"

Jay felt in his pocket. "I do not have it. It disappeared when Perf's Door of Doom was unlocked."

Dad nodded. "Exactly. There is some proof."

Jay shook his head. "But I do not have it."

Dad said, "That's right. You don't have it, because it no longer exists. What other explanation is there for the missing key?"

Trudy answered, "He could have lost it."

Dad shook his head. "Where did he lose it? A few minutes ago he had it in your bedroom. You came straight here. Do you think you would find it between here and there if you looked?"

Both children shook their heads no.

Dad said triumphantly, "That is plenty of proof."

Mom added, "Why would we name you Truth and Justice and then not believe you, and trust you to do right. We are proud of you for freeing the Land of Logic from lies."

Trudy and Jay looked at each other and smiled.

Trudy asked, "What about the invisible dragons here? Do you believe that, too?"

Dad nodded his head. "Oh, yes. Billions of them. I have suspected it for years."

Trudy looked around the room as if she expected to see some. "That is frightening."

Dad chuckled. "Nothing to be worried about. Remember, good is powerful. Evil is powerless. Good must win in the end. It is the law of the universe."

Jay asked, "But how do we get rid of invisible dragons?"

Dad answered, "The way to get rid of lie telling dragons here is the same way as there. Always tell the truth and never believe lies."