

Galendor
The Five Magical Items
(Book II of The Galendor Trilogy)

W. Eric Myers
www.wericmyers.com

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Dedication/Acknowledgment

To Jesus, the Creator in human form, and to my wife, Joy, for unending love, our beloved pets who enrich our lives, and to our parents and friends for their encouragement.

Prologue Chapter One of Three: No Distressed Damsels Here

Nine days before the full moon, Princess Jessica sat in her chambers thumbing through a picture-painting album of her and her father. “Oh Dad,” she whispered aloud, “why can’t you snap out of it? Perhaps if Mom were around, she could harass you into one of her grand adventures. Maybe that would save you from this apathy?”

The king had been showing signs of boredom, but it soon grew into a complete lack of will. In the years since the queen’s disappearance, he had become Jesse’s whole world and to see him wasting away broke her soft heart. So, a day earlier in the twin towns of Hither and Yon, Princess Jessica decreed to marry any man who could entertain the king.

* * * *

“Mom, are you still out there? I could use some help.” No one knew where or how it happened, but the

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queen got blown to Smithereens when Jessica was very young. Picture-painting albums weren't around back then, so Jesse had few reminders. Her remaining memories were sharpened each time she saw her own auburn hair and big brown eyes as she had grown to look just like her mother.

Blaring trumpets followed by the slam of the drawbridge helped stifle her welling emotions. The distinctive sound of rockers with their runner-shaped hooves clopping into the castle courtyard heralded the first of surely many entertainers and possible suitors.

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Jessica ran down the steep stone stairs leading to the place where the men offloaded their carriages. As she peeked around the corner, she laughed for the first time in weeks. From this first carriage stepped forth a plumber and the plumber's helper dressed in player's clothes. Around the plumber's head clung a tight fitting hood from which protruded his round, chubby face. His shirt must have been made when he stood as a thinner man, for now it couldn't possibly cover his belly. Though his trousers were larger than his hipline, his overhanging stomach pushed them down.

The helper only came up to the plumber's waist. He wore a ridiculous hat that curled up and over to hang a little bell between his eyes. An ugly green jacket having twin tails and bells at the tips offset putridly with his yellow-checked pants.

"Surely this motley crew will do the trick," she whispered. "And if I do have to marry this fellow, at least we'll always have running water." For a brief moment she

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cringed at the thought of life as the plumber's wife, but so great was her love for her father, any uneasiness passed.

Jesse fled to the curtains behind the king's throne to watch in secret. A battery of the royal knights burst through the doors and aligned the tapestry wall as the two plumbers frolicked and bumbled their way down a wide strip of blue carpet (Jessica and her father were partial to blue carpet over red carpet). Dancing and skipping around, they tried to be graceful while singing very poorly. The helper tapped his feet rapidly, throwing his hands all over and waving his arms. Occasionally he'd stomp his feet and shout, "Hey!" This display went on in vain until the two fell out, exhausted.

Seeing their antics weren't working, Jessica came from behind the curtain crying. The king continued to lie slumped in his chair resting his head in one hand with his opposite foot drooped over the throne's arm.

* * * *

Days came and went along with throngs of unsuccessful entertainers. As each day passed, Jess noticed more and more of the castle staff acting like her father. Finally, five days after her marriage decree, people stopped coming. The gates were open, but not one rocker-drawn carriage rolled in.

"I'm fed up with being scared and sad!" she yelled. "I am the princess of the land of Yorh, and not some helpless maiden. I'll just pack everything needed for a journey of undetermined length and sneak off in my single-seater! At the very least, it would be better than staying here, waiting to become a lazy slug!"

Normally, her retainers would have questioned her

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every move and a guard would have been made to go with her, but as everyone had been overcome by lethargy, Jess made a clean getaway.

* * * *

She drove an hour out to the town of Yon. Even though her family ruled the entire land, she had developed her own little comfort zone of Hither and Yon and the lands to and from each. She thought someone, somewhere in her slice of the world would have the solution to the situation.

* * * *

To her dismay, Yon didn't hustle or bustle. The people just moped around, exactly like at the castle. She drove slowly towards the center of town. "Is this some sort of Biblical plague? Why haven't I been overtaken?" Her eyes caught a sight she'd never seen before as she spoke to herself, "Odd! That man has trimmed the gliders right off of his rocker; how strange its feet look with rounded little tips."

Her train of thought came unhitched when a horrible growl echoed from just ahead of her. Excited by the change of pace, she goaded her rocker to find the source. In the middle of the town square stood an enormous and fearsome beast with the head, forearms and calves of a wolf, but the body of a man. As menacing as it appeared to be, no one paid it any attention. Jessica recognized the creature as a lobothian, and knew all the stories that surrounded their kind. Therefore, it astounded her when people weren't running to guard their children as the creature screamed and swiped its arms at them.

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Fearing for her own safety, she kept driving along her original path and tried not to notice. As she passed, curiosity overcame her fear and she took a glance. The two made eye contact and in that flash, she saw great fear and sadness in its eyes.

“Thou canst see me!” he shouted, but Jesse kept driving, as she didn’t know what to say or do.

Her young mind raced with thoughts and emotions. Never had she been more scared, excited, sad, and lonely. “Never have I been more entertained!” She laughed and smiled at all of the conflicting feelings.

* * * *

Driving the carriage around several city streets, she peeked back to see if the beast had followed. It had not, and as a feeling of safety returned, Jess picked up on another anomaly. “I am the Princess of Yorh. How come no one is paying *me* any attention?” She slowed her rocker and addressed a peasant plodding along. “Good sir, do you know who I am?” she asked puckishly.

He paused, droop-eyed with no expression in his face. “No. Some lady...I guess.”

She threw her nose in the air. “I am your princess.”

The man could not have sounded more flat, “I have a princess? Whatever.” He faced forward and continued his lumbering gait.

Stunned by his complete disregard of status, she just sat back and mumbled to herself, “Well, not so much *your* princess as everyone’s princess—*the* princess.” Processing further, she put some pieces together. “Ok, no one can see that I am royalty, and no one cares that a lobothian beast is

right in the center of town. Therefore, he and I have a connection and I'm going to find out why!" She cracked the reins and drove her carriage back to the town square.

* * * *

The loboethian had gone, but she could see its clawed tracks in the dust and figured it couldn't have gone far. Wanting to follow inconspicuously, she kept her rocker's pace very slow as she tracked the prints out of town. The further she went, more and more little unmarked paths split off from the main road until she lost the trail. "Well, crumbs on a cracker! It could have gone in any direction. I have no idea where to go!"

Jesse continued south and west with ever unpleasant feelings of doubt and dismay. She allowed her panic to take over. "I have no plan. I can't go home, and can't even imagine where I could end up." Luckily, before hyperventilating, she came to a Major Crossroad. "Oh, thank Heaven!" she shouted.

"Hmmm, I suppose you could thank Heaven, but you only need to thank the highway department." The Major joked. Major Crossroads were signposts carved with the visage of scholarly old gentlemen and enchanted to provide travel information for passersby.

"I don't know what I'm doing out here. I've been tailing a loboethian since Yon, but now it seems all I've accomplished is to get lost," Jesse confided.

"Well, little missy, you haven't done too badly. Any loboethian around this area would more than likely hail from the Yonder Forest. Any paths heading south will lead you there. You should go east, back to the main road and turn

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south. It won't be long until you see the fork in the road. Tine left and head on into the tree line."

"Yonder Forest!? I'll have you know I'm Princess Jessica. Are you sure you want to be responsible for sending me into a place that will swallow my soul?" she said sternly, trying to mask her fear.

"Ha, Ha, Ha... m'lady, my whole family comes from the Yonder Forest and I can personally vouch for the quality and character of the enchantments you'll find. Top quality trees, just aces."

* * * *

Jessica followed the Major's instructions until reaching the huge silver fork at the head of four branching paths. Each tine had a destination etched. She tined left and stopped just before entering the forest.

"My word," she addressed her rocker, "have you ever seen such grand trees!? How daunting. No wonder legends persist that the forest will haunt your soul, or induce cravings of potted meat food product."

The rocker nickered, but had no opinion to offer.

The sun would be setting in a couple hours and she intended to find safe lodgings before that happened. She prayed to find a kind stranger who could help her locate the wolf-beings' village. Lobothers, to her, were creatures of mystery and she feared them, yet she didn't sense a savage beast when she made eye contact with the one she followed.

"I really don't want to go in there. Am I supposed to forget a lifetime of horror stories at the word of a public works sign?"

This time, her rocker tooted—much as rockers will.

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“Right! Anything is better than remaining here. Onward!” Jessica flicked the reigns and the two slipped beneath the darkened canopy.

Prologue Chapter Two of Three: A Stoveside Chat

Entering the first offerings of trees, she thought there would be some great wave of magical energy to enrapture her. Alas, just a serene breeze and the natural beauty of a healthy forest presented itself. “This is it? *This* is the forest that I’ve been taught to fear all my life? The forest of no return!? What a letdown—a relief to be sure, but a letdown nevertheless.” In the ever increasingly lonely days, Jessica had become accustomed to voicing her inner dialogue to break up the monotonous silence.

Deep into the woods, her awareness of the surroundings became amplified. The sounds of the animals and details in the trees became clearer, and the colors more vibrant.

Eventually she came upon a small stone hermitage with a thatched roof and beautiful flowers growing in boxes

below the windows. As the light grew hazy and the visible sky grew orange, this house would be her first and best chance at getting shelter for the night.

The cottage appeared dark inside, but she knocked eagerly anyway. “Pardon my intrusion, but is there anyone at home?” She was ecstatic to see lights come up through the windows.

“Oh, I’m sure there are countless people at home. The odds of everyone being out all around the world at the same time would be astronomical.” A warm, golden bass voice jokingly answered her.

Jesse smiled. “Hardy har har, but my inquiry was to the status of occupancy in *this* domicile. I’m a traveler hoping to find safe lodging for the night.”

“Inquiry... status of occupancy... domicile... that’s fifteen silver’s worth of words. You must be a kindred spirit to my master! Please, do come in.”

The princess opened the door to a cozy little living area with a rickety old bed to the far side and a wicker basket on the near wall. An oval knit rug separated the two. Huge cedar beams trimmed the walls and windows and a round wooden table stood just to her right. However, no one occupied any of these areas. The only visible movement was the fire wavering in a strangely crooked old iron stove.

“Hello? I’m sure I just talked to someone, and there is no back door that I can see...so have I finally gone stark raving mad?” Jesse stood in the doorway and searched every angle of the cottage.

“I don’t know whether you’re barking or not, but you’re welcome to stay. I’m afraid I can’t offer you anything to eat, but I can keep it comfy cozy in here.”

Jesse crossed her arms. “*Ah haaa*, an old enchanted

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stove is it? Are you sure the owner of the house won't be surprised to see me here?"

The stove replied, "If he saw a pretty girl like you here, he would most definitely be surprised! But, he left last Thursday and it's anyone's guess when he and Sir Wicket will be back."

"Sir Wicket?"

"Galendor is the human master of the house, and Sir Wicket of Narfingham is his best friend. They were commissioned to go on a quest to find some musicians and put on a concert for the king," Ye Olde Mr. Stove informed.

Jessica's heart raced. "Entertain the king!? When should he have arrived at the castle!? How was he going to do it!? He left Thursday and hasn't come back!?"

Stove calmly interrupted, "Slow down, slow down. They left on Thursday, but they didn't head straight for the castle. They had to find others and form a group first, then they were supposed to see a 'keeper' and from there...who knows? Suffice to say, you're not going to get in trouble for being here, he wouldn't mind. Where are you headed anyway?"

"I'm Princess Jessica! Something is happening to Yorh and I'm trying to find answers!"

"*The princess? Here!?* Oh my, m'lady...we should have cleaned up a bit...I'm so sorry for talking so informally!" Stove panicked.

"Stove, it is ok. Please, tell me...do you think your master is capable of achieving his quest?" Jessica felt queasy.

"Yes ma'am, he's a very good boy and has much to offer. I have total faith in his abilities, if others could just see what people who know him see. You mentioned something

is wrong with Yorh? I thought it was just your father who was sick.”

“It started with my dad, but then more and more people just stopped. Stopped being excited, or happy or sad or angry, everyone has become indifferent. The people in Yon were affected too and I don’t know how many countless other regions are falling victim. A lobothian was in town and no one paid it any mind. Then, it seemed truly amazed when I looked at it.”

“Hmmm... I wonder if that was Garoetoth? It’s pretty rare for him to go to town, something must be awry.”

“You know a lobothian!?” Jessica almost reached out and touched Stove in shock.

“Sssuuurrrre, they are wonderful people and awesome neighbors. Galendor is godfather to Garoetoth’s kids.”

“So, they’re not carnivorous beasts who steal children?”

“They’re carnivorous all right. Garoetoth is a master at the grill and you can’t beat the smell of Dara’s turkeys. But why on earth would you even *think* that they’d steal anything, much less a crumby little kid?”

“I’m sorry, you’re right. Can you tell me how to get to Garoetoth? I must find out what he knows.”

“I’ll get you there, but don’t go tonight. It’ll be dark soon and you could get seriously lost in the forest at night. Head out at first light.”

* * * *

Jessica and Mr. Stove stayed up half the night telling stories and theorizing about what could be going on with the

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kingdom. It was the best companionship she'd had in months, which did wonders for her state of mind.

The comfort of Galendor's rickety old bed did little to slow the princess down in the morning. As soon as sunlight brightened the room, she awoke and started for the door.

"Hold on a minute, Jesse!" Stove clamored. "Take a spoon with you."

"What? Whatever for? I don't have any soup or cereal to eat." Her forehead wrinkled with confusion.

"Spoons in and of themselves are magical items. You can cut with them, dig with them, stir with them, get all the goodness out of a bowl or cup with them, and hang them on your nose. More importantly though, the utensils hanging behind me are as enchanted as I am. Take a spoon and it'll help you get to the lobothian village."

"That sounds like a plan, thanks Stove!" Jessica picked out a reluctant spoon that was still trying to get a few more of the allotted forty winks.

* * * *

The princess left her rocker and carriage behind as she planned to sneak through the forest and hide just outside the village to observe for a while. She tried to justify that the plan would allow her to learn more about lobothians before meeting them; in all actuality she was scared to pieces.

Though following Mr. Stove's instructions as best she could, she second-guessed herself. "I have no idea what I'm doing in this mess. I don't want to get eaten by wolf-people!" She took the spoon out of her pocket as it started to shake. "What can you tell me, old wise spoon?"

The spoon said nothing.

Jesse laughed. “How can you guide me if you don’t talk? What will you do, shake me in the right direction?” Again the spoon said nothing.

Jessica checked the thing top to bottom. It had no enchanted eyes or mouth, so for all intents and purposes it was a highly polished, wiggling spoon. However, upon closer inspection, she saw her reflection moving on its own. “*Oh*, I get it! You can use *me* to guide me.” She smiled.

Her reflection mouthed, “Very good, now head west.”

* * * *

Near the village, she crawled inside a dense bush in hopes it would mask any breeze from carrying her scent. She saw none of the charming characteristics Stove had spoken of like children playing, or plants singing. There were no pleasant smells of baked goods or cozy wood fires. She felt heaviness in her heart and a sense of dread.

“Spoon, do you have any way of knowing what’s going on here?” she asked.

Her reflection mouthed, “No. This is not normal. Something’s wrong.”

Voices behind her came closer. She froze and trusted the bush had no thin spots where she could be seen. Several human men passed by heading straight into town.

“I didn’t think humans came into this wood much, let alone going straight into a lobothian dwelling!” Jesse whispered.

Her reflection shrugged its shoulders at a loss for words.

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The men spoke of how odd it was for a clearing to be in such a dense forest. Then, lobotheians swarmed, growling and baying with bloodcurdling anger. Jessica held her ears closed in fear, yet the men kept walking without missing a beat. A giant, scarred and gray haired wolf-being swung a clawed punch that went right through its human target. The men continued on as if nothing had happened.

Jesse felt a sickly cold shiver. “Oh no! How is that possible? How in *this* world is that possible?” She stared at her reflection, which blankly stared back.

She witnessed as the men walked in and out of the houses right through the walls as if ghosts. Finally, they came to the enormous, gnarled and ancient tree at the center of town, took axes and started hacking away at its base. Waves of desperate and angry lobotheians tried to stop them, but the humans could not be deterred.

Tormented by the obvious pain and awful screams, she scrambled out from the bush and ran as fast as she could back to Galendor’s house.

* * * *

Noon arrived by the time she felt secure with Mr. Stove. Her story shocked the enchanted oven as she recounted the morning’s events.

“Princess, I’m just a stove and only know the world through Galendor and Wick’s conversations. But, if you tell me that things changed at your castle, then Yon, and now this forest, then I’m thinking it is spreading like a disease.

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You may be immune to it, or you may be outrunning it. I would suggest you collect information on how it's spreading or effecting people and for goodness sake, stay one step ahead of it! You are welcome to stay here as long as you like, but who knows how, when, or if it will strike us."

"I think I'll rest until tomorrow, and then head east to map and survey every road, house and village. I don't know what good it will do, but anything is better than sitting around, right?"

"Keep the faith m'lady. Things will work out if you do that!" Stove changed the color of orange in his fires to add visual warmth and comfort.

Prologue Chapter Three of Three: Your Mom Wears Pants

The next day, Jessica packed up and headed out into the crisp morning air before the sun rose. Driving out of Yonder Forest, she spoke to her rocker as if it could understand her, “Okay the thing is, the castle’s infected. Yon to the west is infected and this forest to the south is showing signs. What else? I can see change in people, and that lotothian can too. So, if we head east, we can stop at every house we come to and ask if they know of me and if they know about lotothians. Then we can go north or south from those points and see if this problem is spreading, right?” As expected, her rocker said nothing.

She performed her survey throughout morning, but by afternoon, a dark storm loomed in the west. She had twelve houses and communities plotted on her map when the bottom fell out, cautioning her to stop. Satisfied with her work for the day, Jess pulled into a dilapidated stone barn and set up the overnight coverings of her single seat carriage.

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Though severely leaking, the barn provided a good windbreak and dry areas for her rocker.

Anytime she lost focus on her task, thoughts of being alone and essentially homeless ate at her. Imagining being on a weeklong camping excursion with her mother settled her mind enough to let sleep take over.

* * * *

The storm poured all night until mid-morning. Jessica hadn't planned for adverse weather conditions and used many of her candles for heat. The muddy roads caused her rocker to struggle for every stride. Reading her map, she began doubting her plan to visit random houses or villages. She wanted to push eastward towards the metropolitan city of Andfro, but it was so far away and she'd be following the storm the whole way.

“What am I doing out here!? I'm not an adventurer like you were, mother! I don't know how to live without people giving me *stuff!*” Out on the prairie, her voice had no echo. Heading back toward the forest, she chose not to put her rocker through the pain of pushing to Andfro.

* * * *

The wet, impossibly slow travel and the lack of visual stimulus drowned her spirits in the never-ending sea of ground all around her. Being out on the plains, there were no trees to subvert the biting wind. Jesse unhitched her rocker to give it a rest. “I'll let you go so you can use the carriage to block some of that wind, but we have to get to that forest before nightfall.” She feared her blanket and

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lantern would do little to keep much warmth in and if her covering failed, she would be at risk of exposure.

A sickening anxiety set in after hooking her rocker up and discovering the carriage had settled in the mud. She exhausted herself through many attempts to (quite literally) free her home. She decided to camp for the night and let things dry, then pack grass under the wheels, and be to the forest by noon the next day.

* * * *

Darkness set in deeper than anything else she'd experienced. Only the faint blue of a sky still thick with moisture could be seen. The storm to the east covered any hope of moonlight. She sat on the buckboard, wrapped in a blanket to keep company with her rocker, until her candle died.

“No, no, no – *please no!!*”

The second that light went out, her mind regressed to a child alone in the dark. The howls of the lobothians replayed in her head while the shadows cast by the lightning in the eastern storm became a myriad of demons and ghouls. She wanted to get into the cabin and rummage for a candle, but a ghost light bobbing in the distance caused her to freeze in utter dread. She recalled all the spooky stories told around campfires and now believed every one of them hook, line and sinker. She wanted to scream, but couldn't. She wanted to run, but couldn't. She did not want to hyperventilate, but *that* she could do.

As the ghost light came ever closer, the lightning strikes revealed its hideous and demonic outline. The giant beast writhed, its bulky black mass like a seven-foot tall

maggot with a devilish, pointed head. From its silhouette, Jesse could see its body was covered with spikes and it made a hellish rhythmic noise as it drew near. Jesse knew she would never see her father again, and the entire kingdom was doomed to rot!

* * * *

“Hey. What’re you doing? It’s dark out here.” A slow and laid-back voice asked.

Jesse, still freaking out, stared wild-eyed at the knight who had ridden up on his rocker.

He continued. “It’s cold. You shouldn’t sit outside when it’s cold.”

She saw the pointed plume of his helmet and the jagged elements of his armor and realized he wasn’t some fallen fiend set to drag her to the underworld. To her dismay, he started to ride off without another word. She was still in shock but managed to scream out, “You’re not wearing any pants!” Indeed, he had armor on the top, but boxer shorts and socks on the bottom.

He backed up into her view. “*You’re* not wearing any pants.” Indeed, she wore a dress.

Still regressed to childhood, or put at ease by the odd character, Jesse almost instinctively sputtered, “Your mom wears pants.”

“Your *dad* does!” the knight rebutted. “I’m Doeglen, I’m a mid-knight.”

She sensed a simpleness to the knight’s actions and speech. “I’m Jessica, I’m a princess. Do you think you can save me? I can’t go anywhere.”

“It’s up to Gwendolyn. She’s the one to help your

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rocker. They need to be introduced. Gwendolyn doesn't talk to strangers." Doeglen pet his rocker's mane.

"I don't know my rocker's name. I just took it out of the castle stables."

Doeglen lowered his head, deep in thought. "I don't know how to introduce someone to something without a name."

"Percival. My rocker's name is Percival." Jesse pointed to each rocker as she spoke their names, "Percival, Gwendolyn—Gwendolyn, Percival; now can you save me?"

"I s'pose. But I gotta get back to Andfro. So once you're unstuck, I'ma keep going the way I'm going."

Jesse raised a hesitant brow. "I want to go to Andfro as well."

"You're facing the wrong way," Doeglen informed.

"How about you hook Gwendolyn up and she and Percival can turn me around so I can go the right way?"

"Okay." Doeglen obliged.

* * * *

Having two rockers pull the small carriage made the going faster, yet Doeglen kept driving them with a sense of urgency. He would have gone all night, but Percival eventually stopped and refused to go any further. Jessica, feeling the comfort of having someone with her, had fallen fast asleep in the cabin. Doeglen unhitched Gwen and, using Jesse's carriage as a windbreak, fell asleep on the rocker's back.

* * * *

Moving at a solid pace the next morning, Jessica could tell something bothered the knight. “Hey there guy, what’s up? Would you like to stop and have breakfast?”

“No.”

“Did you sleep ok, are you sore or cold or anything?”

“No.”

“Would you like to tell me what the rush is?”

“No.”

“Would you...like to smack a cat with a piece of liver?” Jesse smirked.

Doeglen slowed down and turned his head towards her. “You’re goofy.”

She smiled at him, her beauty could turn even the toughest man to jelly. “Lovely loads of luscious liver!”

Though masked in the darkness of his helmet, the faintest of giggles could be heard. “I have to get to Andfro. I gave Galendor’s message to the lobothian and now I have to get back.”

Emotion flooded over Jessica. She halted the rockers to squelch all sound. “You know who Galendor is!? You actually talked to a lobothian!?”

Doeglen didn’t react to her heightened emotion, he simply answered, “Yes.”

“I slept at Galendor’s house, I know his stove, he’s supposed to be doing something that can save my father! Where is he, what is he doing, how do you know him?”

“He’s going to a farm, he’s searching for band members and we picked persimmons together.” Doeglen answered each question leaving only more questions.

Jessica took a few moments to focus and form a query capable of getting good information in return. “I know

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Galendor is on a mission to find band members. Who does he have so far?"

"He has himself, Wicket, Toots and me. There is also statue man and Lil' Red Wagon. I had to get Garoetoth so he could fix the statue man's wheel."

The names sounded like a jumbled mess of words to her, but it didn't really matter. She would take a jumbled mess over the apathy sweeping the kingdom. Realizing the mid-knight to have a simple view of social norms, she decided to keep quiet and spurred the rockers into motion.

* * * *

They came upon a charming little farm with rocker stables and clean, neatly kept grounds. An older gentleman wearing fine pinstriped overalls shooed chickens away from tree clippings he planned to throw on a burning brush pile. The incense of the fire reminded Jessica of her empty stomach. "Doeglen, we're not getting anywhere very fast due to the mud, and I need to eat. I don't know how long I'll be on my own and I need to conserve my rations. Seeing that I am your princess and you are a chivalrous knight, it shall be your charge to procure us some kindnesses from yon peasant." She made a regal gesture towards the farmer as she raised her nose in the air.

"Uuuuhhh, do what?"

Jessica leaned towards Doeglen and whispered loudly, "Go ask that man if he'll give us something to eat!"

Doeglen didn't fuss about wanting to move on, and did exactly as she asked. While he and the farmer talked, the farmer pointed to different areas around his property.

Doeglen returned. "He said if I help do chores, we'll

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have a grand feast. He saw your clothes and carriage and figured you were too important to work.”

Jessica smiled. “We don’t really need a grand feast. I wonder how much you’d have to do for just a nourishing snack? You know by doing the work we will be delaying our return to Andfro?”

Doeglen shrugged his shoulders. “The roads might be dryer later and we could go faster.” He let Gwendolyn run free to graze where she liked.

* * * *

The spry old farmer moved around like a much younger man. Still, loading hay, tending the animals and stacking firewood would have taken a good part of the day without help. He did well for himself; his home had cedar shake shingles and ornately carved storm shutters. His barn had a fresh coat of red paint and his livestock were clean and content.

Jessica walked along his porch and peeked inside. He had a long, heavy wooden table loaded with fresh vegetables and fresh, crusty bread. Something cooking in the stove smelled heavenly of onions and herbs. As the farmer drew near to enter his house, he immediately recognized her and dropped to his knees. “My lady! Forgive me! I didn’t know your highness was traveling this far from the castle. Please, come inside. I’ll have your servant stop laboring at once!”

She felt relieved to be recognized as the princess, but didn’t mean for the farmer to act so humbly. “Please, stand. It is only fair that we earn our meal. The road has been difficult and it is nice to be among people.”

“Would your grace wish to bathe and have her

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clothes washed? It would be no trouble.” The farmer stood, but wouldn’t meet her eye to eye.

“That would be wonderful!” Jess accepted.

* * * *

She took her time in the warm bath until the farmer tapped on the door to let her know her clothes were dry. Freshly dressed and invigorated, she stepped outside to see both of Doeglen’s arms loaded with firewood. She smiled and ran towards him as an odd breeze blew by. The air stung, almost like a static shock, only all over. Jess didn’t think too much about it until Doeglen froze and dropped his load of wood.

“What!? What is it?” she asked, trying to see his face. He didn’t answer, but pointed behind her.

* * * *

The beautiful farmhouse was run down, with moldy thatch for a roof, and the yard just beyond was mired in filth and mud. Half of the barn was gray, filled with holes, and weatherworn, yet part of it shown bright and painted. Rockers near the bright half looked as they always had, but ones near the gray half were thinner, tired and had no rocker gliders, only small rounded points for feet.

Jessica felt cold to her bones, “Oh *Doeglen!* This is it! This is what happened at my castle and then in Yon. Heaven help us, it *is* spreading and getting stronger. Yon didn’t physically change this bad!” She couldn’t contain her tears. She tried to take comfort from him, but his cold armor matched his inability to empathize.

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He shook her shoulder gently. “Hey, look.”

Through her tears she saw a stooped and crooked old man in ragged clothes emerge from the house. His voice sounded grizzled and worn. “Well, what business have you staring at me like that! This is *my* land!”

“But sir, don’t you remember us? You offered us a grand feast in return for our help around the farm.” Her tender voice shook.

The farmer laughed a sarcastic cackle. “*Ha! A grand feast* you say!?” He went inside for a second then came out and threw them a molded old loaf of bread and a couple of potatoes whose skin had turned green with eyes budding all over. “There’s your grand feast! Now get off my land!” The barn and the rest of the farm turned dreary.

Doeglen grabbed the food and a couple of pieces of wood and made a *phhhbbt!* noise from inside his helmet.

Jessica ran to her carriage, bawling. Percival and Gwendolyn still had gliders, and Jessica wanted to flee as fast as possible.

* * * *

The terrain became rocky so they drove hard to make up time lost from mud. Stopping to rest the rockers, Doeglen built a little fire with the logs he’d taken and began picking the skin off of the potatoes. “These turn to poison when they go green,” he mentioned.

Jessica tore the moldy bits off the bread and soon they had nasty old roasted taters and toast.

Taken from gleefully happy after her bath, to horrified in an instant, broke her spirit. She fought to keep from crying. “So, do you think this Galendor fellow can really help?”

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“I don’t know. If not, maybe we’ll change so we don’t see the difference?”

She didn’t respond, instead she imagined her mother giving her words of encouragement.

They pressed on without further dialogue. The nearly full moon lit their way through the darkness as they left the prairie and headed into wooded lands. At their current pace they wouldn’t make Andfro until the next night. Jessica didn’t want to stop at any more houses or outposts; she just wanted to get to people, to Galendor. She imagined what he looked like, how he talked and acted. She dreamt of how he would charm and comfort her. He would be the knight in shining armor the kingdom needed!

* * * *

They traveled in near silence through the next day. Jessica’s dampened spirits couldn’t recover from the shock of seeing the ‘Apathy’ firsthand. However, things changed when a full moon cast bluish light in contrast to the orange glow of streetlights in Andfro. The city that grew upwards instead of outwards due to the fifty-carriage wide bottomless moat, shined like the promise of Heaven. Though late in the evening, the giant mechanical arms swinging people across the chasm worked non-stop.

Jessica’s sadness waned at the sight, replaced by giddy excitement and nervousness at meeting Galendor. Doeglen unhitched Gwendolyn. “I only have enough money to pay for her and me.”

“Please, allow me to pay for your swing across—for all your help these past couple of days.” Jessica opened the carriage strongbox.

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“No.” Doeglen handed his money to the toll man and stepped on the swing’s platform.

“Oookkkaaayy.” Jessica understood Doeglen to be awkward, but with a good soul. She was exhausted though, and felt guilty for wanting to be with normal people.

* * * *

After the thrilling flight of swinging to Andfro, Doeglen mounted his rocker and told Jessica very precise directions to Woody’s jewelry shop. He seemed much more aloof than usual, Jessica assumed it was because he was so close to completing his mission. She felt capable of finding her way and thought it odd that the whole crew were hanging out at a jeweler’s.

Her nervousness mounted as she careened passed the opulent buildings and alleys. She felt completely detached from her life at the castle and nearly forgot that technically she ruled over this entire magnificent city. Her muddy, simple carriage paled in comparison with many of the commoners’ wagons.

Entering the square Doeglen described, she saw the sign saying, “Woody’s.” She took a deep breath to calm her nerves and put on her best gray hooded robe. Nearing the entrance, three pirates of the cat-like race of miyehs walked out, one skinny and two very fat. They paid her no mind as they ducked around the corner. She clenched her fists and entered the door to the pleasant peal of a brass bell.