

THE QUARRY

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Fairy-Taledⁱ

The dawn light falls through the narrow window, across the thick woven carpet, and reflects off the leather encased feet of a man who paces.

‘Read it to me again!’

From the lacquered escritoire that borders the rug, the scratch of a quill abruptly stops. There is the light rustling of parchment before a tentative voice replies, ‘In the name of ___,’

‘No, no, it will never do! “In the name of”?! I am not a king!’ The soft fall of the boots halt, and, for a moment, eyes as cold as winter lakes expectantly peer across the surface of the desk. ‘Am I?’

A heavily pregnant pause is followed by an Adam’s apple bobbing. The voice holding the quill whispers: ‘...’

But the polished calfskins have continued across the room without demanding an answer, and their wearer chuckles loudly, ‘A king!? Ha!’

‘May I suggest “By the order of”, my lord?’ the scribe interjects.

Silence.

A bead of sweat forms along the scribe’s hairline as he holds his breath. His eyes dart to the spectre guarding the door. Relief is executed by the barely perceptible patter of small feet running in shag pile.

‘Read it to me again!’

The scribe clears his throat nervously as the excited face of his recently appointed liege appears at the height of his right shoulder.

‘By the order of Lord Maximus Farquaad, all creatures of a fairy-tale nature are forthwith revoked of citizenship in Duloc. I am authorized to place you under arrest, and transport you to a designated resettlement facility.’ⁱⁱ

The salty droplet begins a slow descent down the domed forehead. Inches before the scribe’s tired face, the thin lips of his ruler silently repeat the words that have been laboriously composed since the scribe had woken to a dark silhouette standing by his bed. The large man’s presence in his bedroom, as the moon rose, could only mean one thing: their lord had finally succumbed to his illness, and his successor had, as successors do, succeeded.

Knowing better than to mistake this guard’s silence for patience, the scribe had thrown back the covers, grabbed the worn leather roll of his station, and hurried to the study... still in his nightclothes.

The scribe cringes as the corners of the nobleman’s mouth twitch. ‘I can change it again, Milord,’ he begins, ‘we could try “proclaim” —’

He is startled by a low rumble from the corner by the door. In all his years in Duloc, the scribe had never heard Farquaad’s companion laugh. It chilled his bones.

‘Oh, Thelonious,’ Maximus’ cold blue eyes begin to sparkle affectionately. Gazing into the laughing shadows, the sharp crescent of his grin fills with manic chortling. ‘It’s perfect!’

‘Fark wad! Fark! Wad!’ The chant filled his ears as the faces merged into a blur of flesh and wood; fur and biscuit.

No one had prepared Maximus for his first day at the new school. Things were different since his family had moved to Duloc. At his old school, everyone knew each other. They played together before school, and walked home, toward the promise of cake, together. But, at Duloc Elementary, he knew nobody.

‘O’ look, it’s “Little Lord Farkwad”’, Bad had called across the playground.

Children who had been filing through the gate, avoiding eye contact with the grey wolf pup and his snickering friends, froze. Thoughts of freedom, home, and milky afternoon teas vanished at the prospect of a fight.

Max blinked in confusion, his lips moving as he silently repeated the taunt.

‘You have mispronounced my name, friend’, he responded cheerfully. ‘It is “Far-quar”. The “d” is silent, and there is a “kw”, like in “queen.”’

The wolf’s lip lifted slightly in response.

‘Far- quar,’ Max repeated, ‘and I am not a lord. Not yet.’

Gingerbread! That’s what Max could smell as the crowd of juvenile fairy-tale creatures swarmed him. A voice squealed in mirth: ‘FARKWAD!’ Max’s legs buckled. He found himself sprawled in the dirt, his perfectly pressed uniform ruined.

‘Fark! Wad! Fark! Wad!’

His eyes stung with tears, then the sun switched off.

In the darkness, there was a yelp, a scuffle, and a small break of ginger-scented wind. Max squeezed his eyes shut as he floated through the air, landing lightly on a nearby play fort. He risked a peek and caught the glimpse of a face, before curling up in a tight ball to await his fate.

‘Milord?’ The voice was deep and slow. ‘’R you a’right, milord?’

Thelonious had been quietly keeping an eye on Duloc's newly discovered scion since he had been delivered to the school gate that morning. He was easy to spot. Apart from being the smallest human at the school, and giving off the slightly petrified vibe of the new kid, he also had that air of arrogance only found on those truly favoured by fortune.

When Bad (later known as Big Bad) Wolf had invented the nickname, Thelonious silently laughed along. But, when Gingy—the anthropomorphised cookie with precious candied amulets—had snuck in under everyone's gaze, and sharply pushed the small boy in the hollow of his knee, Thelonious felt compelled to act. His mother had taught him that part of his role as a big, strong person was to help those less robust than he. And, left to his own devices, Thelonious thought Max would be destined to end his days in a gingerbread house; happily bubbling away in a cauldron, a warning to silly little children everywhere.

'I am not a lord.' Max opened his eyes, squinted, and could see a halo of light encircling a large black shape. As his eyes adjusted, the shape slowly formed into an exceptionally large boy, whose face was hidden in a black homespun hood.

'They only do it because Father was summonsed, and now,' Max sat up and sighed sadly, 'I am destined.' He closely inspected a small graze on his knee. In a smaller voice, thick with shame, he confessed: 'And because I am so little.'

Max turned his inspection to his rescuer. 'They call you "Ugly Der-loneliest"'. But I saw your face, and you are not ugly.' He peered into the hood. 'And I don't think you're stupid either, Thelonious.'

Thelonious reeled in panic, spinning around to make sure Max's observation had not been overheard. 'Please milord, you must never say that again.'

'I'm not a lord. Why do you let them call you those things?'

'Type casting, milord,' Thelonious replied softly, still alert. 'If the writer finds out my true nature, I will get cast as a soldier. Or a hero. Or worse, a hypermasculine antagonist, always wearing a muscle tunic, stalking some icky girl and singing in third person. Much better to be a smith, milord. Or a ploughman.'

'I'm not a lor—wait,' Max's brow furrowed. 'Did you just say that everything here is written?'

'C'mon, I'll tell you on the way home.'

They were well along the shadowed path when Thelonious spoke again.

‘We live in a Fairy Tale.’ He shook a nearby tree, releasing an apple. ‘An apple! There is no sun in these woods. Apples would never grow here.’ Thelonious looked both ways and then dashed into the forest. ‘Fairy Tale creatures protect the fiction,’ he said, tearing off a leaf. He raced back to present it to Max. ‘Stray from the paths, and it’s just paper. See? We’re in a Story Book.’

Max walked in silence for a few minutes, stopping occasionally to inspect the piece of delicate paper or examine a fallen fruit. Thelonious plodded beside him, listening to the familiar sound of his heavy boots, and just enjoying the company.

‘Or,’ Max began to chuckle, ‘a henchman?’

‘Milord?’

‘I’m not a — never mind. By tomorrow, the whole school will know you have saved your Lord’s son. You won’t be able to hide from the writer anymore. But...I think that I am an important part of this story. Otherwise, I would have stayed where I was and not become,’ Max waved his hands toward the scenery, “‘Fairy-Taled.’”

Thelonious gaped at the smaller boy’s insight.

‘Just as big, stupid, and ugly don’t always go together, nor do little and meek,’ Max teased, pleased with himself. ‘So, here is my plan. You will become my bodyguard, ensuring the fairy-tale creatures leave us alone, and you never end up in a musical. Father already has plans to turn the manor into a castle. And when the school year is out, I start with my tutor. You can live in the castle, so you are always close...’

Thelonious smiled to himself. Max’s incessant chatter was almost soothing, like night-time rain on a thatched roof. But he also hoped the castle would have a nice dark dungeon, for when he needed some quiet.

‘... and then, I will officially become the Lord of Duloc. And I can say: Thelonious, summon the scribe!’

Works Cited

ⁱ Based on characters from the animated motion picture, *Shrek*

ⁱⁱ From the *Shrek* script: imsdb.com/scripts/Shrek.html