

Heroes, Inc.

(Series edition)

By Kyle Crocco

Books in the Heroes, Inc. series

1) *Heroes, Inc.*

2) *Heroes Wanted*

3) *Heroes Divided*

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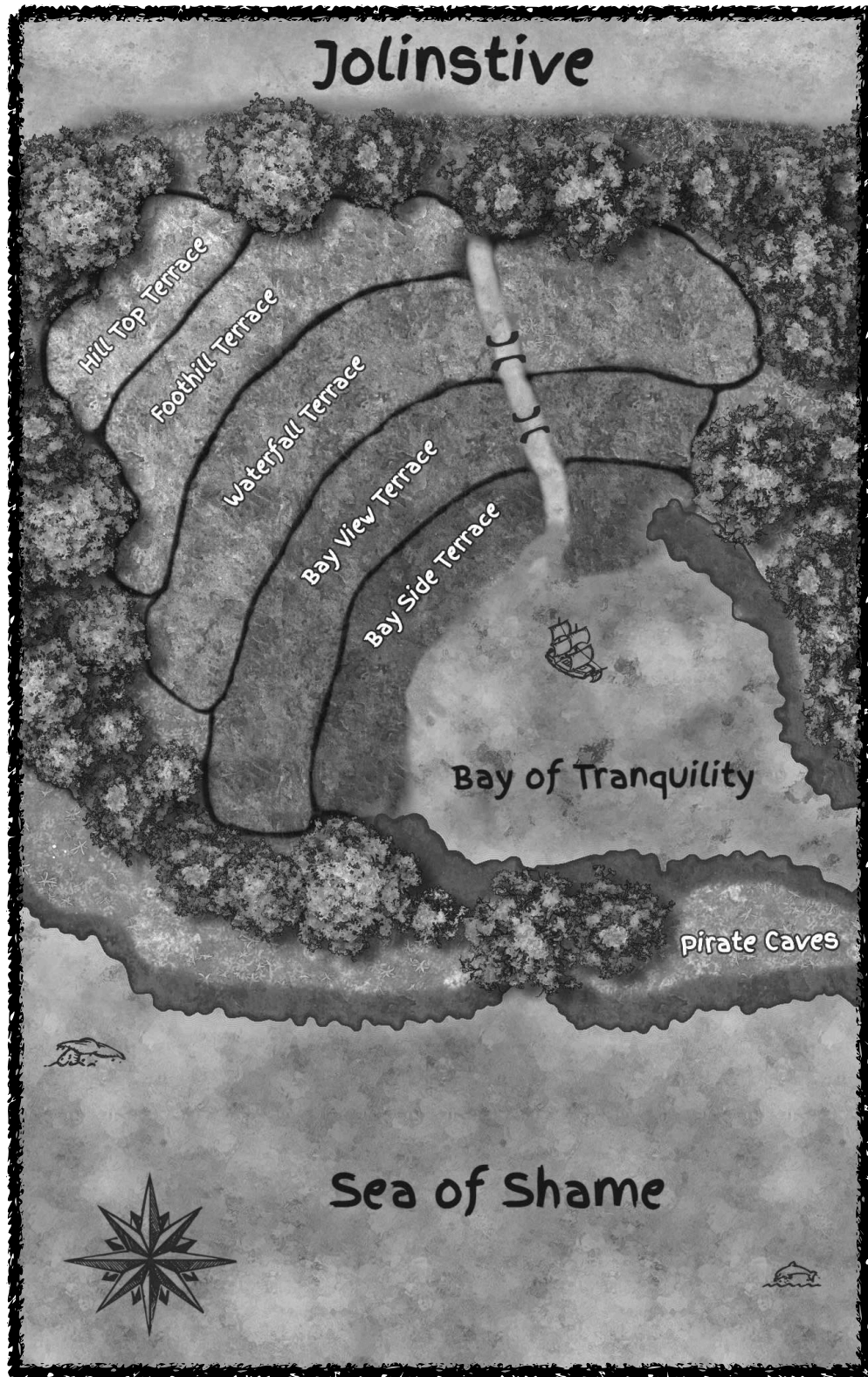
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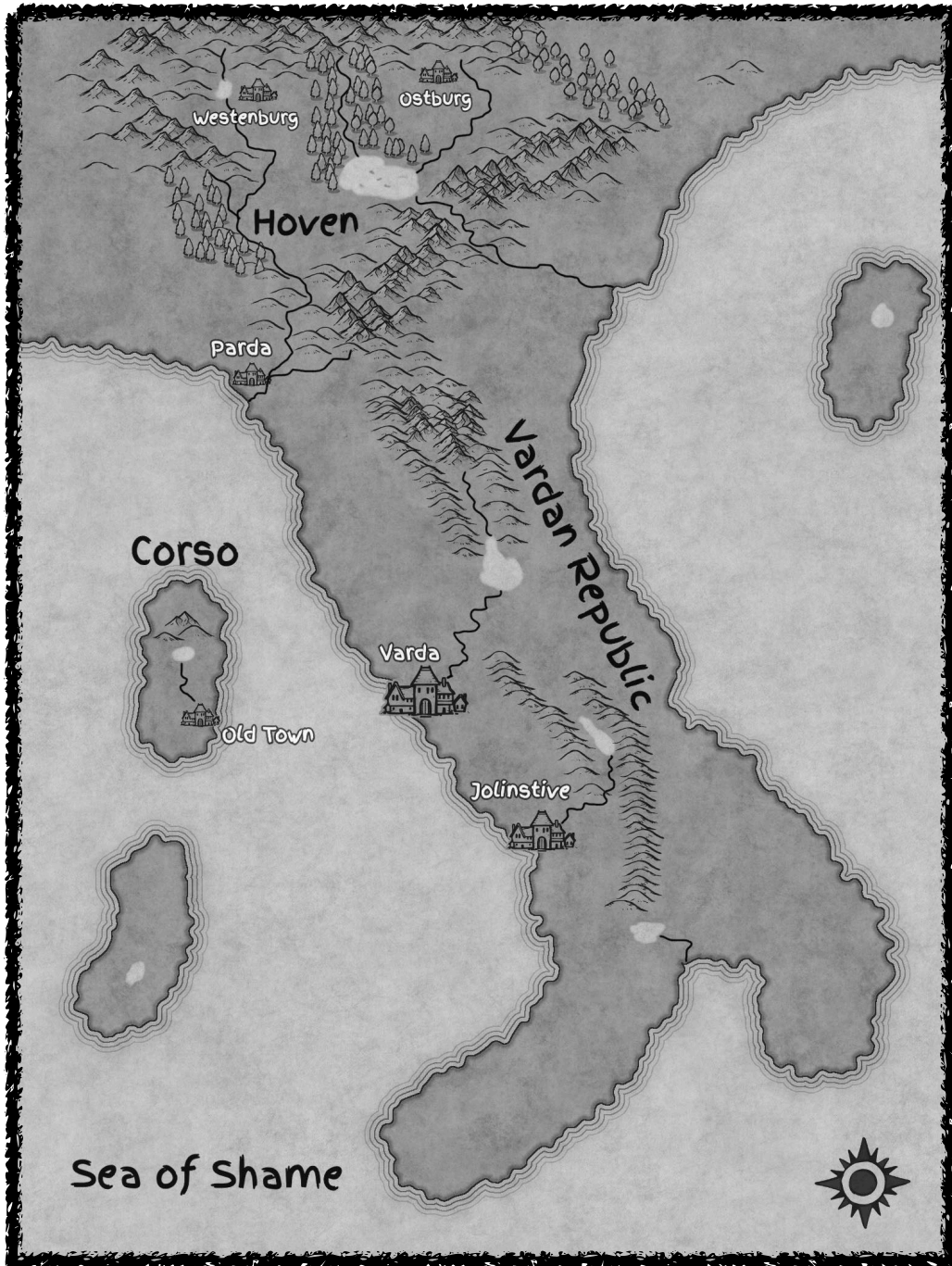
For Jenn.

“... we must be either lunatics or heroes, though there’s not much difference between the two.”

-

The Three Musketeers, Alexandre Dumas





Note to the Reader of *Heroes, Inc.* (Reboot Edition)

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing *Heroes, Inc.* (Reboot Edition) for your reading entertainment. If you are a fan of the original *Heroes, Inc.* published in 1991, please note 1) you are awesome and 2) this novel is not an electronic version of the 1991 print edition.

This 2023 Rebook Edition is an updated version of the story. While the first book begins and ends the same way as the original, the characters and world have been revised so they can serve as an origin story to a series.

Why did I do this? Well, when I wrote the original draft of the book (on pen and paper!) in 1989, I hadn't intended on writing a series. I was just trying to write a funny fantasy book. Then I got a call from Beth Fleisher from Ace Science Fiction and Fantasy. She said they wanted to publish *Heroes, Inc.* and would offer me a two-book contract. "Two books?" I asked. "We can do just one," replied Beth. *Heroes Wanted* quickly followed. I now had a series.

Years later, I decided to publish the ebook versions of the original novels on Amazon. However, while rereading the books to publish them as ebooks, I saw inconsistencies in the characters and the world. I thought, Why not correct those?

As a book lover and movie fan, it bothers me when characters and stories are inconsistent within the story or between sequels. These reboot versions are an attempt to fix those errors.

That being said, I understand if you loved the originals and just want to reread the same story.

Therefore, if you wish to enjoy the original version of *Heroes, Inc.* or *Heroes Wanted*, I will be publishing ebooks of the originals after the completion of the Reboot Editions.

Kyle Crocco

Part 1

Jolinstive

*In the Summer of 421**Two Weeks Before Grover's Point of No Return**Grover's Bed Chambers**Soovo Château**Jolinstive*

Grover wasn't normally suspended from the ceiling naked.

Nor was he normally found to be suspended from the ceiling clothed. In fact, he wasn't commonly suspended from anything, be it clothed or unclothed—except for the odd chandelier — and even then, not without a few double-dog dares. Rather Grover was known about Jolinstive, and the province for that matter, as a man who stood soundly on his two feet. Not the type of guy who would casually hang around the ceiling bound with leather straps just because his neighbors were doing it.

But he didn't have much choice in the matter. Not if he wanted to solve his ... uhm ... problem.

So instead of enjoying his regular afternoon nap, he was hanging from the ceiling.

It wasn't exactly comfortable up there, either.

Wide leather straps dug into his muscular body, affixed to the wooden beams. Each wrist was cuffed tightly. Each ankle secured with a twist. All to keep him still while the 'treatment' took place.

Unfortunately, it was summer, and it was hot.

Grover shifted uncomfortably. Beads of sweat formed above his eyes, slid down his nose, hovered above his lip, then fell to the ground.

He wasn't used to being held in bonds—even with a practiced safe word. That's not how he rolled. Instead, he was just a reluctant patient in a new form of “therapy.” Torture was more like it. A young (probably unlicensed) wizard had proposed the inversion therapy as a “sure-thing” treatment. At least, that's what his little brother, Ragnar, had told him.

Below him, a pretty woman worked a long goose feather up his naked thigh.

“How does my pooppy bear feel?” asked the woman.

“Please don't call me that,” said Grover.

“I'm not calling *you* that,” said the woman. “I'm actually talking about your—”

“I know,” snapped Grover.

“Awww,” crooned the young woman. “Don't be embarrassed.” She moved the feather up Grover's thigh, getting closer to his special area. “Is your pooppy bear feeling stronger now?”

“It feels ...” Grover concentrated for a moment but didn't feel the stirring of blood he hoped for where it mattered most. “Mirelda ... how much longer must I stay up here?”

“Like that nice young wizard said ...” Mirelda gazed between his thighs. “Not until we see some growth ... right here.” Her cool hand slid along his stomach, coming closer and closer to his ...

“Yes, please ... it's almost ...”

Her hand paused.

“Wait!” said Grover. “What are you doing? I was just about—”

Mirelda frowned. “Now, what did that young wizard say about stress?”

“Stress weakens the bear.”

Grover knew this all too well. The expectation of following the old inheritance law and producing a child within a year had made his bear weak. Very weak. Then again, hanging from the ceiling wasn't doing much for his bear either. “Perhaps if you could let me down from the—”

Mirelda gave him a sharp glance—a look that reminded him of his mother—which didn't exactly help matters in the bear department.

Why had he married this young woman? He was a strapping young man with great hair. He would have made an excellent match for any woman in the Vardan Republic, or at least the ones who lived in Jolinstive. Had he been stirred by love? The political possibilities? Or just because he'd been caught with his trousers down in front of her father, the general? Probably that last one.

Damn those loose trousers.

“You know we tried almost every treatment.” Mirelda ticked off the attempts on her fingers. “Toys. Stimulating scrolls. And, of course, role play ... slave girl, slave boy, slave sister ... the whole slave scenario, really. Maybe if I dressed like your moth—”

“No!” screamed Grover. Then he blurted out what had been on his mind for some time. “Maybe ... maybe this problem isn't *my* fault.”

“What!” snapped Mirelda. “Are you saying it's *mine*?”

Grover felt a sudden slumping in his bear.

Mirelda's eyes grew wide. “Awww. And we were doing so well. Did I scare your little bear away?”

Grover sighed.

Secret Anteroom

Soovo Château

Ragnar turned away from the peephole with a smile on his face.

Grover's treatment was going exactly as he'd hoped.

He turned to his friend Octavius, who had been named after an eight-fingered uncle.

The two men were dressed in the latest high-class finery of the summer: loose, flowing white blouses and billowy trousers with a maroon sash around the waist. They resembled the pirates who founded Jolinstive two centuries earlier. And whose blood still ran through their veins. Well, not so much Ragnar's veins. His blood was diluted. Thin and pale, he looked nothing like his older and muscular brother. His friend, Octavius, on the other hand, at least sported a tan.

"What do you say, Octavius? Will my brother produce an heir soon and gain the Soovo family fortune?"

Octavius glanced through the peephole. He watched attentively as Mirelda applied some lotion. "It's hard to tell. Or rather, it's *not hard*. But with your brother's past reputation as a bedroom champion, it would be foolish to bet against him ... or the Soovo line."

Ragnar's eyes gleamed. "Then you'd bet for him?"

"Aye," agreed Octavius, falling into the same trap Ragnar had set for his other friends—wealthy dilettantes with too much money and not much sense. But Octavius thought he was the wiser because, with some generous lotion application, Grover's fortunes seemed to be pointing up. "Aye, and I'll put two ... yes, two gold crowns on it."

“Two?” Ragnar paced the room. “Two? You know it’s difficult to bet against one’s brother. One’s own blood.”

“If it troubles you, we can bet on how quickly he’ll produce an heir.”

Ragnar held up one bejeweled hand. On each finger, he wore a gold ring with a precious gem. He had purchased none of them, gaining all by wit and enterprise (also known as deceit and trickery to the ones who lost them). “Conversely, I would win if my brother won our family fortune. And also win if my brother loses his ... well, you know ... enthusiasm in the bed. Some would say it’s a wise bet. For I can win either way.”

“And the house of Soovo could have an heir.”

“A legitimate one, at least.” Ragnar frowned, thinking of all the maids his father had paid off in the past few years.

“So it’s a wager?” asked Octavius.

Ragnar paused for a moment to build up the suspense. “Five gold crowns are what I call a wager.”

“Five!” That was more than Octavius had in his purse.

Octavius rechecked the peephole.

Grover’s fortunes seemed to be looking up, so to speak. It was a safe bet. Money in the bank and all that. Well, not the bank, exactly. Octavius had designs on spending that money. He would buy an excellent new Argh rapier. With that rapier, he would surely raise his dueling rank to gentleman-class dueler. “Five it is, Ragnar. And will our bet be on producing an heir or just on Grover’s performance this afternoon?”

“One would think a successful performance would produce an heir.” Ragnar wiped his brow with a silk kerchief. “Dreadfully hot in this secret anteroom.”

“Yes,” agreed Octavius. “Not much ventilation in here. So ... on performance then?”

Ragnar didn't answer right away. Instead, he walked over to a small table. There, a basin of water and some chilled wine had been set. He splashed the water on his face and dried off slowly, careful to take his time. “Let's make two wagers, Octavius. One on performance and one on producing an heir.”

Octavius opened his purse and caressed the last few coins of his monthly allowance. “Two wagers?”

“Yes,” said Ragnar. “Two. Let's do five on Grover's performance this afternoon. And another ten on producing an heir.”

“Ten crowns!”

Octavius raced to the peephole, taking another look.

He would be indebted to Ragnar for a long time if he lost both wagers. But if he won. That was a different story. Then he could afford the Argh rapier, a fine monogrammed and jeweled scabbard, and the attentions of a certain woman whose company did not come for free.

Octavius licked his lips. “A male heir?”

“Is there any other kind?”

“And you said that you gave him your special protein shake today?”

“Of course.”

Octavius glanced again through the peephole.

Grover and Mirelda had finally retired to the bed. While Grover was down to earth, everything else was ascending. Octavius would have to get some of that magic lotion. “Done. Five on performance. Ten on an heir.”

“A male heir.”

“Male, certainly.” Octavius smiled. He would soon have the rapier, the jeweled scabbard, and the high-priced woman. Even better, he would have beaten Ragnar for once. One of those rings Ragnar was currently sporting had once been a family heirloom. One his mother kept asking about. “I hope we both win.”

“So do I,” agreed Ragnar with no emotion at all.

There was a soft knocking at the door. Ragnar scowled, then opened the secret entrance. Outside, his manservant Varus was waiting. His clothes were covered in red dirt. And his face was scratched and bleeding.

“You look disgusting. What is it?”

Varus held out a cloth sack. “The powder you asked for.”

“Not now. I’m busy spying on my brother.”

Varus stepped closer. “You know, I almost died climbing to get your—”

Ragnar scowled. “And that’s what you get paid for. Now leave the powder in my chambers. And if you have a problem with risking your life . . .”

Varus turned pale. “No, Ragnar. I didn’t mean to imply—”

“I’m sure you didn’t.” Ragnar closed the door in the servant’s face.

Octavius arched an eyebrow. “Powder?” He had heard rumors of Ragnar poisoning those who did not have the wisdom to settle lost bets quickly.

Ragnar offered a cup. “Some wine, my friend?”

Octavius felt more sweat forming on his brow. “No, thank you. I never take wine in the afternoon.”

Ragnar gestured to the peephole. “How are they doing?”

Grover's Bed Chambers

Moments Later

“Not again!” swore Grover.

He slammed his fist into the headboard with an audible crack.

Mirelda cooed at Grover's midsection. “Awww, Grover-rover. Did I frighten your bear away?”

“I don't understand why this keeps happening to me.” Grover reached for his slightly out-of-fashion black trousers and red blouse and threw them on. “I knew this treatment wouldn't work. It's too weird and too dirty. But not in, you know, the good way.”

“Maybe your body is telling you something. Something you can't admit to yourself.”

Grover glared at Mirelda.

She lay on her side, showing off her generous hips and curvy thighs. The same sixteen-year-old thighs he had been caught fondling with his belt loose not but eight months ago. Back in those good times, nothing could stop his libido except a cold bath or an angry father. Now everything stopped his libido. Was his body really trying to tell him something?

“We'll try again later,” said Grover.

“Are you sure you don't want to try now?” Mirelda lay back, exposing her full glory.

Grover cinched his belt tight, barely glancing at her. “I'm sure.”

Then he saw Mirelda's crushed look. It wasn't like he was the only one with something to lose here. They would both be poor if no child was produced. Then where would they be? But Grover didn't want to think about life as a poor man.

Instead, he stood up.

“Maybe after dueling practice, I’ll feel up to it.”

Secret Anteroom

Moments Later

On the other side of the wall, Octavius handed over the contents of his leather purse, coin after coin.

Ragnar stared at the small pile of gold crowns. “That’s only three gold crowns, my friend?”

Octavius upended the purse. “That’s all I have, Ragnar. I swear. Not until my next allowance.”

Ragnar considered for a moment, then tucked the coins away in his own purse. “That will do ... for now.”

Octavius put a hand on Ragnar’s shoulder. “You’re a good man, Ragnar. I’m sorry your brother wasn’t able to plant the seed today. I know how you love him and want only the best for him. Maybe next time.”

“Yes, Octavius. Maybe I’ll be paying you those ten crowns soon.”

“Let’s hope so.”

Ragnar lifted a cup of wine. “You sure you don’t want some?”

Octavius stared at the red liquid. Would Ragnar kill him over two gold crowns? Was he that petty? That cruel? “Wow, look at that hourglass. It’s almost empty. I must be going. Political strategy meeting with the Augustos, you know. I’ll pay you soon.”

Ragnar stared at him coldly. “I know you will.”

Octavius hastily departed the secret anteroom, thinking about which friend would loan him the two crowns.

When he was gone, Ragnar turned to the peephole.

Mirelda was lying seductively on the bed, smiling in his direction.

Practice Yard
Soovo Château
Afternoon

Out in the practice yard of the Soovo château, Grover found his dueling second getting warmed up.

Cataract, named after his father's eye disease, was against the wall, stretching his calves. Grover found a clear space of his own near a pine tree and stretched also.

When they had finished, Grover picked out his favorite Pointu rapier from the sword rack and did a few initial thrusts. His dueling second did likewise.

Then they both moved to the sandy area in the middle of the practice yard. Their rapiers met in a flash of sun and steel, crashing into each other, then falling away.

Grover caught Cataract's blade and turned it aside. "So, how is my dueling schedule this week?"

In addition to being a dueling partner, Cataract also handled Grover's scheduling and scouting of opponents. Like many of the idle rich in Jolinstive, Grover only amused himself with combat. You would never find him battling the barbarian hordes at the edge of the republic. Instead, he fought the sons of the wealthy families to raise his duelist ranking. After years of duels, he had reached neo-master status.

"It's light this week, Grover. Only two scheduled duels." Cataract launched a new attack.

Grover nimbly fought off Cataract's quick combination. "With whom?"

Both men circled each other, considering their next move.

“One with Darius Quintain.”

Grover raised an eyebrow. “Of the Quintains who are running for the senate this year?”

“The same. Darius is the youngest. Wants to make a big splash. You should have no trouble. He’s an awkward lunge.”

Grover nodded, then made his own lunge. Cataract countered the thrust and stepped back.

“And the other?”

“Someone called Raven.”

“Just Raven? No family name?”

“He requested you. Thought you knew him. Or that you had offended his little sister’s honor.”

“I haven’t offended any sister’s honor since I got married.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Cataract ruefully. He used to tag along with Grover and would often offend the honor of some servant girl while Grover was wooing a wealthy debutante. Ever since Grover’s forced political marriage, it had been chaste days and lots of time alone, polishing his own sword. “Maybe Raven’s one of those duelists who go from city to city, looking to raise their reputation.”

Grover nodded, then renewed his attack. Even though he felt some fatigue from his ‘treatment’ with Mirelda, he wasn’t so tired that he couldn’t defeat his second.

In a moment, it was over.

Cataract’s sword lay in the sand, gleaming. Grover’s own blade was caressing his second’s cheek.

Cataract smiled nervously, eying Grover's blade. "I let you disarm me. To build up your confidence, you know."

Grover snorted, pulling away his rapier.

Cataract retrieved his own sword. "Would you like me to lose again? I have time to fake another loss."

Grover shook his head. Then stopped smiling.

"Treatment didn't work today?" asked Cataract.

"Gods! Does everyone know about my condition?"

"You told me. Remember Grover? We were at the Waterfall Bridge. You said, 'Cataract, my equipment isn't working.' And I thought maybe your Pointu grip was loose ... when what you really meant was your—"

"Okay, I get it! I told you. Can we drop the subject?"

Grover picked up a cloth to polish his rapier. But the conversation had so irritated him his hand slipped, and he cut a finger.

Cataract offered him a towel to stem the flow of blood.

Grover took the towel and pressed it to his finger.

"I know you told me to drop the subject," said Cataract. "But seeing as the treatment didn't work today, I thought you would like to hear something I overheard from 'a friend.' It's about a place. A place where they have a potion guaranteed to help with ... you know ... equipment issues."

Grover's hand absently slid down his thigh.

“But it’s far. At least four days by sea. Risky travel. You could die on the way. Or while you’re there. Lots of places, really.”

Grover considered the possibility of death. Then he weighed that possibility against the reality of another session with a therapy wizard. And having to talk about his relationship with his mother.

“How far did you say it was?”

Balcony

Soovo Château

Later That Night

After some serious thought, Grover made his decision to leave.

Things just weren't getting any better with the therapy.

The evening session with Mirelda had gone even worse than the afternoon treatment. Not only was his bear still in hibernation, but he had also strained a back muscle doing one of the recommended positions by the therapy wizard—who, for some reason, was required to watch their intimate sessions and take notes.

But he wasn't thinking about the session or the creepy wizard as he gazed down from his château balcony at the red rooftops of Jolinstive.

Nor was he thinking about the thriving metropolis full of trade, dueling, and politics. And he gave no thought to the coming elections, what they meant for the political families, or what the oddsmakers were saying about the chances of certain politicians.

Instead, he was thinking about the same thing as always.

How to cure his *problem*. His *condition*.

"Nice night," said his brother, stepping out on the balcony.

"If you say so, Ragnar."

"You left the dinner rather early. You missed our political discussion." Ragnar leaned on the railing, holding two cups of wine. "They say the Quintains are going to run for that open senate seat. I give them a seven-in-ten chance of winning unless the Augusto family gets

involved. Then the contest could get really dirty. The dirtier, the better, I say. What do you think?”

“It’s possible. One never knows . . .” Grover’s words drifted away into the evening.

Ragnar chose a different tactic, closer to his heart. “The term of the Primus will be ending soon. And whoever wins the senate seat in Jolinstive will be able to sway the election for our governorship. And that governor, with all the wealth available from this port, is likely to be the next Primus. Jolinstive’s port is a treasure trove, especially with these barbarian wars going on in Hoven. Lots of taxes. Lots of income. If a Quintain takes the senate seat, they can determine the fate of the republic. Which is why I was thinking—”

“I don’t want to discuss politics now.”

Ragnar nodded. “As you wish, my brother. Care for a cup?”

Grover shook his head.

“You still think red wine may be affecting your . . .”

Grover shifted uncomfortably.

“How did the inversion ‘treatment’ go this afternoon? That Albinus really is a promising young wizard.”

Grover turned abruptly. “Albinus is a sadist and a pervert. Not that there is anything wrong with those things in general principle, but—”

“So no pop-goes-the-weasel?”

Grover hung his head. “No pop. No weasel.”

Ragnar took a sip of wine.

“And none of the treatments you recommended worked either,” said Grover. “In fact, I might even have pulled a muscle tonight. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were sabotaging me so you could get the inheritance.”

Ragnar choked on his wine.

Grover slapped his brother on the back.

Ragnar tapped his chest. “Wrong pipe.” He took a few breaths until the color, what little he had, returned to his face. “That’s absurd. I love you like a brother.”

“I am your brother,” said Grover.

“Exactly.” Ragnar turned away to hide his guilty body language. “Besides, you still have two months to the inheritance deadline.”

“Two months to the deadline for a pregnancy. But I really only have two weeks left to get Mirelda pregnant. And if I don’t manage that, I’ll lose everything. My time is too short, Ragnar. Too short.” He looked at his brother. “It’s not that I want the inheritance, you know. I’d let you have—”

Ragnar whipped around suddenly. “You would? All of it? You would give me the six-hundred thousand scepters? The château? The seat on the merchants’ board? The right to spank servants for no reason at all? Everything?”

“Why, yes,” said Grover as if the idea was the most obvious in the world. “You’re my family, after all. Even if you are a little on the pale side and don’t look much like me. I would do anything for my family. It’s just that I don’t want this ... uh, situation ... to be permanent.”

Ragnar considered. “I see. So you’ll just give up the inheritance rights, no question? Sign it all over to me? All legal like?”

Ragnar signaled to his manservant. Varus had been waiting in the wings with a contract scroll and a ready quill— prepared for a moment of weakness like this.

Grover sighed. “If it were only that easy. But I don’t want to burden you with having to produce an heir.”

“It would be no burden.”

“It wouldn’t be right.”

“But would it be so wrong?”

Grover shook his head. “I know you can’t understand this right now, but wealth brings terrible responsibilities. It doesn’t make you smarter or a better person. In fact, wizard studies show it might do the opposite. I’m doing you a big favor.”

Ragnar looked offended. “I don’t need favors.” And then, under his breath, “I need money to run for political office and take over the world, you jackass.”

“What was that?” asked Grover.

“Nothing,” said Ragnar. “It’s so nice of you to look out for me.”

“Besides, father hinted to me that terrible things would happen if I didn’t inherit our fortune. Something about the fate of empires and our destinies. And someone taking over the world. You know, that kind of crap he was always talking about. He promised to say more but died before he could explain.”

“Probably a coincidence,” suggested Ragnar.

“Probably. You know how father was always going on about how people were out to get him. Then he died suddenly and mysteriously.”

“As do so many in the capital.” Ragnar waved at Varus to stay in the shadows. Grover wouldn’t be signing over the inheritance tonight. “Any new plans to fix your ... uh ... condition?”

“In fact, yes.” Grover gestured to the port. “I’m sailing in two days to find a ‘sure-thing’ cure.”

“What sure-thing cure?” asked Ragnar.

“Cataract told me about it. Some curative up north. Only sold in the city of Parda.”

Ragnar turned away and hid his smile. This was going way better than he’d hoped. “Then you better go there and find it, my brother.”

“But there’s one thing that worries me,” said Grover.

“What’s that?”

“Mirelda,” said Grover. “Could you look after my wife while I’m gone?”

“My pleasure,” said Ragnar. “I’ll make sure she’s well taken care of.”

Part 2

Parda

9 Days Until Grover's Point of No Return

Market Square

Parda

Five days later, Grover arrived in Parda to find his cure.

He knew little about the city, except it was chiefly known for its inhabitants' pursuit of the game of marbles. What had started as a children's amusement had evolved into a high-stakes pastime for adults. Spectators wagered on game outcomes, marble trajectory, and uncommon occurrences such as tornado-force winds, earthquakes, and amphibian invasions. It was a 10,000-to-1 return on the amphibian invasion bet—if you're curious.

Many wagers were paid in ale because drinking establishments provided most of the playing areas. In less common circumstances, bets were paid off in coppers, or so it said in Grover's copy of *Let's Go Vardan Republic, 10th Anniversary Edition*.

Other than the game of marbles, there appeared to be nothing remarkable about Parda. It was just a small city located on the northern coast of the republic, consisting of a trading port, five temples, a magistrate's office, a downtown market, some ancient mystic ruins, and one haunted house that may or may not have been built atop an ancient alien temple complex, or so the guidebook said.

Other than that, Parda was nothing to write home about.

Grover's manservant, Amletus, was supposed to have preceded him the day before to set up accommodations for the evening. And to ascertain the location of a certain apothecary shoppe

reputed to sell the cure for Grover's condition. But Amletus had not greeted him at the port on arrival. And there was no map in his guidebook to show him the way.

Being embarrassed by his special condition, he didn't want to ask anyone where the apothecary shoppe was. So instead of asking for directions, he trod back and forth across the dusty streets, glancing here and there while the inhabitants followed him with long, lingering glances.

Maybe they all know, he thought, while he squirmed uncomfortably in his trousers.

After walking for what seemed like hours and seeing no sign stating, *If we had an Apothecary Shoppe, you would be here right now*, he decided to ask for directions from a well-endowed young woman selling fruit in the local town market.

"Goat day," said Grover, following the suggested greeting from the guidebook.

The well-endowed woman looked up from her stack of melons, taking in Grover's mane of blond hair and well-muscled physique.

"And goat day to you, good looking. You'd be looking for the apothecary shoppe, I take it?"

Grover blushed. "It's for a friend."

The young woman smiled knowingly and leaned forward. "My melons would help you better. Do you want to feel how ripe they are?"

Grover put out his hands. "They feel just right. Not too soft. Not too firm."

"Would you like a taste?" She leaned forward.

Grover set the melons down. "As much as I'd like to sample your melons, the apothecary was highly recommended to me."

The woman pointed her long arm.

Grover turned and saw the shoppe was right behind him. He wondered how he could have missed it.

The sign on the building was bright red and boldly stated, *All Things Perverted: A Fine Apothecary Shoppe. Even My Mom Said So.*

On the side of the building were various painted signs. They advertised the goods inside: *Love Potions, Poisons, Antidotes And More.* At eye level, a sign stated, *Impotence Is Our Specialty. Get a Preferred Customer Card. That Means You.* A painted sign pointed straight toward Grover's groin.

Grover winced and turned back to the woman. "You've been very helpful."

"Come back for a tasty melon when you're cured," said the woman. "It's on me. Both of them are."

*All Things Perverted**A Few Moments Later*

Grover hurried over to the shoppe, trying not to be conspicuous.

Fortunately, no one seemed to take any special notice of him. No one that is except for a small, ragged boy about eight to ten years of age. The young boy sat in the shade of the shoppe's awning. As he scrutinized Grover's approach, he shifted marbles slowly from one dirty hand to another.

Grover reached for the brass knob of the shoppe.

"It's closed."

Grover glanced down at the boy.

"How long is the shoppe closed for?"

The boy shrugged.

"You see, it's important I buy ... I mean, a friend of mine needs ... Do you happen to know where the owner is?"

The boy nodded. "Every afternoon, he likes to play with his marbles."

"You don't mean he's touching his—"

"No! What kind of boy do you think I am, anyway? And I don't know what you're talking about either."

"I didn't mean to suggest—"

"Next thing, you'll be asking me to sit on your lap and call you Uncle."

"I would not!"

“Maybe I should be calling the constable. Weird man, asking young boys to sit on his lap and call him Uncle.”

“I only asked about the apothecary.”

“Minor details.” The boy waved a hand dismissively. “Minor details that might get overlooked if I was in the wrong frame of mind.”

The boy held out his hand, palm up.

Grover recognized a good shakedown when he saw one and handed the boy a copper.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” said the boy, pocketing the coin.

“Disgusting,” an old woman hissed at the two.

Grover turned around. “I wasn’t ... we weren’t ...” He scowled at the boy. “You tricked me.”

The boy winked. “Just remember who has something on you, pervert.”

“Is this man pestering you?” asked the old woman. “Did he ask you to call him Uncle?”

The boy waved the woman off. “Move it along, grandma. Nothing to see here.”

“That wasn’t polite,” said Grover.

“She’s my grandma.”

“See you at dinner,” said the old woman. Then she walked away, chortling.

Grover shrugged, respecting a good con. “So where’s the owner then?”

The boy pointed down the street. “At the Ragged Wurm, of course.”

“Where’s that?”

The boy shrugged.

“Could you show me?”

“Perhaps.”

Grover knew this game. He pulled out another copper from his pouch.

“Not so fast,” said the boy.

Grover pulled out the coin slower.

The boy shook his head. “No. I mean, you can’t pay me for work. What kind of boy do you take me for?”

“But I paid you before.”

“That was a con. You’re proposing a task. Do I look like a working stiff to you? I only gamble for my coin. We’ll play a game. If I win, I get your soul. If I lose, I’ll guide you for free.”

“What?”

“I mean, I get double,” the boy added hastily. “I’m not an agent working for the demons of hell or anything.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.” Grover eyed the boy, looking for telltale signs of being a demon. When he saw no evidence of hidden scales or horns, he asked, “So what do we play?”

“Marbles, of course.”

“Marbles?”

“Did I stutter?” snapped the boy.

Grover shrugged.

The boy then knelt on the ground, drawing a circle in the dirt with a diameter of about five feet. “Let’s play.”

“But I don’t have any marbles.”

“I have an extra set.” The boy reached into his trousers.

“Hey! Don’t do that in public.”

The boy produced two pouches of marbles.

“Oh, my mistake.”

The marble game appeared simple to play.

The first person to pitch a shooter marble closest to the opposite side of the circle would get to start first. Naturally, the boy’s shooter landed right on the edge of the line while Grover’s marble limped halfway there, kind of like ... no, he didn’t want to think about it.

After winning the right to play first, the boy quickly placed thirteen marbles or ‘mibs’ in a cross shape in the circle and went to work. Each time the boy shot, a mib would exit the circle, and his shooter marble would rest in a perfect position to make another shot. No sooner had the boy begun playing than seven marbles were outside the circle. Grover didn’t even get a turn.

The boy picked up the marbles. “Not bad.”

“I didn’t even shoot.”

“I meant not bad for me. Definitely bad for you.”

The boy held out his hand, palm up.

Grover passed over two copper coins.

The boy hid the coins and marbles in his garments, then indicated Grover should follow.

Grover dusted himself off and followed casually, shortening his pace to accommodate the boy’s. In a few short moments, they were standing in front of the Ragged Wyrms Tavern and Inn.

“There it is,” said the boy, pointing at the door. “The apothecary should be drinking inside, playing with his marbles, or both. He hails by the name of Sujeck. The pub owner is Fortunato, like it says on the sign.”

Grover glanced at the sign. There was a painting of a Wyrn, which looked pretty limp. And a slogan that said *There's Only One Way to Cure the Wyrn*, with the owner's name, Fortunato, beneath.

While he looked at the sign, a woman with her back against the wall looked at him. She wore black trousers, a white blouse, and had a knife strapped to each thigh. Her hair was short and dark. She glanced at Grover, then looked away. Then she looked back again, frowned, and looked down the street.

"Ignore her," said the boy. "She's always lurking about."

Grover nodded. "Are you absolutely sure Sujeck is in this tavern?"

The boy shrugged. "Are we really sure anyone is anywhere at any given moment? Or are we all just on a journey passing through this thing called life?"

"I don't know. Is that some sort of trick question?"

"You should read Kinskay's *The Transformation of Being*."

Grover's face went blank.

"Philosophy," explained the boy. "It's all the rage these days."

"I don't understand."

"The older generation never does." The boy shook his head and walked off.

"I'm not old!" shouted Grover after the boy. "I'm only in my twenties. I'm still young and hip, even if people in our times have an average lifespan of forty years. And I like to read action scrolls. Something with a fast plot and cool dialogue. Maybe even a little romantic comedy if I'm feeling lonely. But that doesn't mean I'm out of it. Or uncool. Or old."

But the boy was already gone.

Grover eyed the name Fortunato on the sign. Perhaps this man would be good luck for him.

He took a deep breath and reached for the door handle.

He didn't even notice the woman was no longer standing outside.

The Ragged Wyrn
Common Room

The Ragged Wyrn wasn't much for décor.

The common room was dark, and it smelled of dirty straw, stale beer, and other unsavory odors, which didn't seem to bother the patrons. Despite the smell, or maybe because of it, the place was filled with laughter, eating, drinking, and marbles clinking.

It took Grover's eyes a few moments to adjust. When they finally did, he noticed a man groveling before him. A rather portly man with unkempt long hair and a dark grizzly beard. The man was dressed in dirty trousers and a stained shirt on which he was wiping his hands.

"Goat day to you, groveling man," said Grover.

"Thank the gods, you've finally arrived."

"Yes," said Grover, wondering how bad business was that he was greeted so.

"Someone told me they saw you in town, but I wasn't sure."

"They did?"

The man laughed. "And, of course, we heard stories."

"What stories?" asked Grover.

"Oh, not about you. I mean, we only heard good things about you. But, you know, about others like you."

"What do you mean, others like me?"

The man put a greasy hand to his food-stained beard. "Of course, stories circulate about your kind."

“My *kind*?”

“I know things can get distorted.”

“My *things* aren’t distorted.”

“And villains make things up.”

“Why would villains make things up about me?”

“You can’t believe half of what you hear these days. And the other half, well, you suspect that being like the first half, if you get my drift.”

“Not at all.” Grover stared at the portly man. “Are you the town drunk, by chance?”

The man burst into laughter. “Very funny. But, no. I go by Fortunato, and the Ragged Wurm is my place. I’m sorry for the unsavory condition of the tavern, but good help has been hard to find. But that’s why you’re here, right?”

“I’m not applying for a job if that’s what you mean. I came here for the apothecary, Sujeck.”

“But why would you want to see him? Oh ... but of course. You have your reasons.” Fortunato gave him a knowing wink. “Sly dog. Heroes and your ‘methods.’ Some sort of potion or antidote, I take it.”

“Something like that,” said Grover, thinking it might also be a salve or a lotion. Cataract hadn’t been too clear on the delivery method for the cure.

Fortunato nodded. “I understand. Hush-hush, under the table, and the like. But Sujeck isn’t here.”

“What! But the boy told me ...” Grover looked back at the entrance, but the scoundrel of a boy was not to be seen. “Do you know where Sujeck is? I really need to ... uh ... consult with him.”

“Of course, of course.” Fortunato bobbed his head. “Consult. I get you.” He winked. “Nothing wrong with a little consulting between consenting parties, mind you. I’ve been known to consult myself from time to time. I’ll send someone right away to find him.” Fortunato clapped his hands. “Valeria. Valeria.”

A young, attractive woman with pleasing hips scurried over, a tray tucked under her arm.

“You clapped, Uncle?” Valeria stared at Grover, her eyes growing large with amazement as she drank in his form. She almost dropped her tray. “Is he the one?”

“He is. And he’d be wanting the apothecary for a consultation. So I want you to find whatever gutter Sujeck is lying in and drag him back here. And get this man anything he wants. Even lay with him if he asks.”

“Yes, yes, of course, Uncle.” Valeria’s eyes darted once again to Grover’s physique. “Shall I lay with him now?”

“Really, that’s not necessary,” protested Grover. “Maybe if you have a good action scroll I could read while I wait, that would be fine.”

“As you wish.” Fortunato clapped his hands again, and Valeria scampered out of the pub.

Grover watched her depart. “Will she be discreet?”

“Sorry. I didn’t know you wanted the discreet service.” He clapped his hands once more and waited. Nothing happened. “Must be out of clapping range. Anyway ... is there anything I can do for you since you’re doing so much for me? One hand washes the other, right?”

Grover studied his hands for a moment, trying to puzzle out Fortunato's riddle, miming the action of washing. "I suppose it does. Unless you get feet involved."

Fortunato smiled. "Funny. I like your sense of humor. That must come in handy in your line of work." He took Grover by the arm and guided him to a table. With the back of his hand, he brushed off the excess food and wiped down the surface with a dirty towel, which only seemed to smear the grease more. "There. My best table for you."

Grover stared at the greasy surface. "Best?"

"Second-best. I had to reserve my best for ... you know?"

"No. I'm not familiar with 'you know.'"

Fortunato laughed, clutching his sides. "You jest again."

"Do I look like I'm laughing?"

Fortunato studied Grover's serious face. "On the inside, maybe?"

"Not at all!"

A sudden realization came over Fortunato. "You're not Horace, Horace the Hero, are you?"

Grover shook his head. "No, I'm not Horace, Horace the Hero. I'm Grover. Grover the Soovo, and I'm looking for the town apothecary."

Fortunato shooed Grover away from the table. "Get. Get away from my best table."

"You mean second-best."

"Whatever. I thought you were Horace the Hero. And now Horace the Hero isn't here, and it's almost time." Fortunato paced back and forth in front of the little table and then turned.

He gave Grover the once over. "Wait a moment. You're big, strong, got a long blade."

“Thanks,” said Grover, patting the scabbard. “People seldom notice the length. They all think it’s about how sharp your blade is. Like sharpness is so cool. It’s all about the length. Length allows you to poke people in all the right places.”

Fortunato rubbed his hands together. “I think you may be able to help me.”

“How so?”

Fortunato sat at the table, plucking a chicken bone from under his chair and tossing it to the floor. He gestured for Grover to do the same. Grover wiped his chair clean of bones and sat down also.

Fortunato leaned forward. “There is a man. An evil man.” Then he stopped and gazed about the room.

Grover looked about also. That’s when he noticed the woman from outside, the one who had been standing underneath the sign. She was now sitting at a table by the fire and looking in his direction.

Before he could ask about her, Fortunato continued speaking, lowering his voice to a stage whisper. “This man has been terrorizing all of Parada, especially my inn. He’s been extorting monies, using our daughters, sometimes our wives—well, the wife part isn’t so bad. But he also kills people in the tavern, and that isn’t good for repeat business. A tavern needs repeat customers. And you can’t come back if you’re dead. I know what you’re thinking.”

“That you haven’t taken my drink order yet?”

“No. That the undead can come back. But the undead never order main entrees, Grover. They just order one drink, then sit at your best table all night, drooling and moaning about brains.”

“Anyway ...”

“Anyway, I hired a freelance hero to kill this evil man. But Horace the Hero hasn’t arrived. Now I need someone to do his job. Someone big, strong, fearless, maybe even a little stupid. Someone a lot like you. For you see, I have to give the villain money today. And I can’t afford to pay, what with the economy these days. And the fact I already paid a huge advance to Horace. So I need you, you see?”

“No.”

“I need you to fight for me. Is that clearer?”

“I’m not a hero, Fortunato. I’m a duelist.”

“Maybe you could try it out? You might like it.”

Grover shook his head. “Maybe Horace will come. Aren’t heroes always coming at the last moment to save the day? That’s what happens in my action scrolls.”

“I suppose,” said Fortunato glumly, then eyed Grover. “I’ll double your pay.”

“You haven’t paid me.”

“I’ll triple it!”

“Triple what?”

“You drive a hard bargain, Grover.”

“I’m not bargaining.”

“Quadruple. It’s my last and best offer.”

“Quadruple what?”

“Fine, then!” Fortunato stood up abruptly. “If you’re not going to bargain reasonably, then the least you could do is order a main entree so I can have some money to pay the extortion fees.”

“That I can do,” agreed Grover, suddenly feeling hungry. “Bring me a warm plate of today’s special and a mug of your finest ale.”

Common Room

Moments Later

As soon as Fortunato departed, there was a loud crash.

A blue-caped figure swept through the front door carrying a large burlap sack, which moved and made mewling sounds. The man was about as tall as Grover but less bulky, his black hair pulled back in a ponytail. He walked with a swagger that either meant he wasn't afraid or had enjoyed a few too many happy-hour drinks. One hand clutched the sack while the other rested on a wicked-looking axe hanging from his belt. Grover wondered if this could be the aforementioned Horace.

"That's him," said Fortunato, returning with a mug of ale.

"So Horace has arrived?"

"No. That's Brutus the Brute. He's the villain."

"Doesn't look evil," said Grover, sipping his ale.

"You don't think he's evil? Just look at that blue cape and pretentious ponytail. I mean, would any self-respecting hero have a stupid, pretentious ponytail? I bet it just makes you want to slay him on the spot, doesn't it?"

"No, not really," said Grover. He had actually been admiring the man's rope-braid ponytail and thought of doing his own blond hair that way. He glanced at the other pub patrons as they eyed Brutus. "Why don't you ask one of your other customers to do it? You have strong folk here."

Fortunato shook his head. “Strong in body, but weak in will. Not to mention, Brutus is mean with that axe.”

“As I said before,” said Grover. “I’m a duelist. Not some hero. We like to lunge, parry, and riposte. We don’t fight axe-wielding madmen as a rule.”

“No one said he was mad.”

“Still, I don’t want to—”

“You don’t want to get him mad. Oh no.” Fortunato crossed a finger over his throat.

“Sorry, had an itch there. I mean, he’ll kill you.”

“So don’t anger him then, Fortunato.”

“Of course, he’ll also kill you when he’s not mad.”

“All the same, it’s not my problem. I just want to drink my ale in—”

Fortunato yanked the mug of ale away from Grover.

“I’ll quintuple your fee.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“Free it is then.” Fortunato stuck out his greasy hand. “Let’s shake on it.”

“No, I meant ...” Grover studied Brutus, who was now sitting directly across the room at a very large and clean table. His face was red, smiling, jovial even. Was this man evil? Was he really a villain?

“Anyway,” said Grover. “He looks nice enough. Maybe you two just got off on the wrong foot.”

Fortunato stuck out a wooden stump. “He cut off my foot.”

“Oh.” Grover took back his mug.

Meanwhile, Brutus placed the mewling sack on his table.

“What’s in the sack, Fortunato?”

Fortunato shuddered. “You don’t want to know.”

“Snakes?”

“I said you don’t want to know.”

“Fortunato,” barked Brutus. “Bring me a clean plate, some hot sauce, and a pitcher of ale.”

Fortunato pleaded with Grover. “Will you please kill him?”

Grover shook his head. “I’m just here to see the apothecary. I have no quarrel with Brutus, no matter how cool his hairstyle is or what kind of snake he carries in his sack.”

“So you’re saying the money isn’t enough?”

“Fortunato!” screamed Brutus. “Get your engorged *gluteus maximus* over here right now.”

Grover shook his head. “I’m sorry. I can’t help you.”

“Now, Fortunato!” screamed Brutus again.

Fortunato glanced at Grover. “Think about it.”

Grover watched as Fortunato waddled over to Brutus. When he reached the table, Brutus leaned across, still smiling, and said something too soft to hear from across the room. Fortunato hung his head, then trudged over to the kitchen. A moment later, he returned with a small leather pouch, which he handed to Brutus.

Brutus dumped the contents of the pouch on the table. A pile of copper and silver coins spilled out. Even one gold crown. It was a tidy sum. A year's return for a small farmer. A nice month's profit for a good inn.

Brutus counted the coins, smiling, and shouted at Fortunato. "And don't forget to bring that clean plate and my hot sauce."

Fortunato hurried back to Grover.

"I had to give him the money," explained Fortunato.

"I'll give you a bigger tip then," said Grover.

"That's not the point! Though I will take the tip since you're offering. The point is I have to continue giving him more money. With the bad economy and fewer customers coming in because of all the patron killing and drooling undead, my profits are down. I had to take out a loan from a second villain just to pay this villain. If this goes on, I'll have to take out a third loan from a third villain to pay that second villain to pay Brutus."

"Sounds horrible for you." Grover sipped his ale. "So, are you going to bring my meal or what?"

"Is there any way you could see past your scruples and kill him?"

"I have no score to settle with this Brutus. He seems a decent sort. Even if he uses medical vocabulary to refer to your fat ass."

"It only looks fat in these trousers," said Fortunato, pulling at the fabric. "But while I get your food, just watch Brutus. Perhaps you'll change your opinion of him."

"I doubt it. But as you wish, fat ass."

Fortunato waddled to the kitchen and hastily returned with a clean plate, bowl of hot sauce, and a pitcher of ale for Brutus.

Grover slammed his fist on the table. Outraged. “Where’s my meal? I was here first.” He rose from the table in anger, ready to storm out in a fit of pique.

That’s when Brutus opened the burlap sack.

With one beefy hand, Brutus plucked out a kitten. The kitten was tiny, nothing more than a ball of orange fur in the large man’s hand. It meowed, yawned, and licked Brutus’s finger.

Brutus smiled and let the kitten crawl up his arm.

“You see,” said Grover to Fortunato, who had just returned with Grover’s meal. “The man likes kittens. I could never have a quarrel with a man who likes kittens.”

“Oh, he likes kittens, all right.”

Just then, Brutus plucked the kitten from his arm, kissed its nose, and wrung its little neck with a sudden snap. The kitten let out one strangled yelp and fell lifeless onto the clean plate.

Grover stood up and stuttered, “He’s not going to ... he couldn’t be ...”

Across the room, Brutus dribbled hot sauce all over the kitten’s dead body.

Grover looked around the silent tavern. He noticed the strange woman was staring intently at him. Almost expectantly. But everyone else was looking away, pretending not to see.

“Won’t anyone do anything? That man killed a kitten, for gods’ sake.”

“No one will,” said Fortunato sadly.

Grover watched in horror as the villain grabbed a dirty knife and fork. “And he’s not even using clean cutlery.”

Fortunato whispered in his ear, “So will you kill him?”

“Maybe,” said Grover, stepping away from the table. “Maybe for free.”

“For free?”

“I said, ‘maybe for free.’”

Brutus pressed his dirty knife into the kitten’s lifeless body.

“Yes, I’ll do it,” said Grover, grabbing the hilt of his rapier. “How much to settle this score?”

“Well ...” muttered Fortunato, hesitating now fees were being discussed. “Cash flow, as I mentioned, has been tight.”

“Never mind,” said Grover, sweeping Fortunato aside. “We can discuss an installment plan later.”

The Ragged Wyrms
The Next Moment

Grover stalked over to Brutus's table, drawing out his finely-balanced Pointu rapier.

"Drop the knife and fork, Brutus!"

Brutus snorted, his fork and knife hovering above the dead kitten's neck.

"You talking to me, rapier man?"

"Are there any other kitten-killing freaks in here?"

Several hands went up from the back of the room.

"Who are evil people?" asked Grover.

A few hands went down.

"Who are about to eat a kitten?"

Only Brutus's arm stayed up.

Brutus set his knife and fork down, then casually placed his hand on his axe. "My agent said someone might be sending a freelance hero to this town. Said I should be ready for my title shot."

Across the room, Grover noticed the strange woman suddenly reach under her table. Was she going to intervene? But then she pulled out a scroll and began to make some notes.

So Grover turned back to the villain. "I'm no hero, Brutus. I'm just a regular guy who doesn't like to see kittens killed and eaten raw in front of him while he's enjoying his lunch."

Brutus stood up. “Okay then, ‘regular guy who doesn’t like to see kittens killed and eaten raw in front of him while he’s enjoying his lunch.’” Brutus caught his breath. “Do you have a shorter name, perhaps?”

“Some call me Grover.” Grover paused for a moment. “Actually, all call me Grover.”

“Well, Grover. For people who interrupt me during lunch, I like to play a little game called ‘catch my axe.’” Lightning quick, Brutus tossed his axe. Grover stepped aside and watched as the axe flew into the skull of a man playing marbles.

“Why?” the unfortunate patron gasped before he fell to the ground dead.

“Any other games you’d like to play before I teach you a lesson with my rapier?” Grover gestured with his Pointu blade and slashed a patron attempting to run out of the Ragged Wyrn.

“Hey!” that patron cried out, blood spilling from his bicep. “I just washed that arm.”

Brutus dashed over to retrieve his axe. “I don’t like lessons, Grover. That’s why I quit school as a young boy to become a danger to my community. I’d rather play games all day.” He yanked the axe out of the dead man’s skull with a pop. And, as an afterthought, he swiped the man’s winnings into his pouch.

“These patrons don’t like your little games, Brutus. How about we play another?”

Brutus stalked forward with the axe. “Okay, then. How about we play: I kill you?”

“How does that one go?”

“Allow me to demonstrate.” Brutus swung his axe.

Grover jumped back, but not before the axe cut through the fabric of his scarlet silk shirt.

All the pub patrons backed away, overturning the dining tables to give Grover and Brutus more space to fight in the middle of the common room. Marble games stopped, young children stared. Finally, the local bookie calculated the odds.

“I’m paying 10-1 that Grover guy wins. And 5-4, Brutus the Brute wins.”

“How much for a maiming?” someone cried out.

“Or for an emasculation? Nothing beats a good, old-fashioned emasculation.”

“How about a severed limb?”

“Or a disembowelment?”

The bookie called out more odds, and people placed more wagers. They were mostly in favor of Brutus. Not because the patrons liked Brutus or thought he would win. But if Brutus won and they wagered against him, they would be next in line to play one of his little games. A few people did place their bets on Grover, but they were the village idiot and the town fool. And a few people who knew they would be gone by dark. As for Fortunato, he wagered his last coins on Brutus, seeing the outcome as a win either way. Grover noticed the strange woman by the fire made no bets but kept watching him intently, making notes on her scroll.

“You hear that, my friend,” said Brutus, swiping with his axe. “They’re wagering on your death.”

“And also dismemberment,” cried out a patron.

“And don’t forget emasculation,” shouted another.

Grover sneered. “Long-shot bets.” He then sidestepped Brutus’s next attack. In the process, he slammed into a table, sending a pitcher of ale spilling to the floor.

“I’m going to make it a sure-thing bet,” said Brutus. “I hope you made your funeral arrangements. A nice will and testament.”

“I’m a notary,” someone cried at Grover. “If you need one for your will.”

“I don’t need any notes, thank you,” said Grover. Then he began to worry.

He had gotten up from the table in the heat of the moment, and this Brutus guy was actually trying to kill him. Maybe even dismember or emasculate him. Perhaps he had been too hasty about this whole “kitten-killing” thing. Perhaps this was some culturally acceptable practice where Brutus was raised. Maybe everyone in his town ate kittens raw and covered in hot sauce. How could Grover be so ethnocentric?

Grover turned to Brutus. “Maybe we could talk this out.”

Brutus laughed and stopped his attack.

Grover lowered his blade. “Oh, thank the gods. I was just about to—”

Brutus ran to the fire, pulled out a flaming brand, and screamed, “Burn, baby, burn!”

Then he jumped for Grover, axe in one hand, flaming brand in the other.

Grover stepped back, slipping on the ale-covered floor, and fell to the ground. The axe bit into the wood beside his head. It was so close he could see his face reflected in the blade of the axe. Then the flaming brand came toward his face. Grover quickly rolled away and grabbed a bench to pull himself up.

“Are you ready to take this up a notch?” asked Brutus.

“You mean upstairs?”

Brutus screamed, yanking the axe from the floor. Then he swung furiously with his brand.

Grover retreated toward the wall and ripped down a tapestry, flinging it at Brutus. Despite the awkward throw, the tapestry landed on Brutus's head, blinding him.

While Brutus struggled like a kitten under a blanket, Grover stabbed his Pointu rapier through the fabric. Seven or eight times, just to make sure.

Brutus cried out in surprise, then pain, then anger, and finally fell to the ground with a long groan. He lay there unmoving while the tapestry turned red with blood and began to smolder.

Grover waited for the applause he expected for vanquishing the town villain.

“Boo!” cried the pub patrons. “Boo!”

“Totally unfair!”

Another pub patron rudely bumped Grover's shoulder as he walked by. “I thought heroes were supposed to be honorable.”

“I'm not a hero!” snapped Grover. But the crowd still glowered at him. “Besides, all's fair in love and ...uh ... whatever we just did there.”

Fortunato waddled up.

Now at least, some thanks, thought Grover.

Fortunato touched the tapestry and peered slowly at Grover with tears in his eyes. “You ruined my favorite tapestry of dogs playing poker, you insensitive bastard.”

“Sorry. So about that payment . . .”

The tapestry suddenly burst into flames. And Brutus, not quite dead after all, screamed, rolling into a pile of old straw next to the wall. The straw quickly caught ablaze, and the flames

spread to the dry timber of the inn's walls, which had been made drier by the summer weather.

Soon the entire room was engulfed in flames.

All the patrons fled, screaming for the door.

Grover grabbed the sack of kittens and followed after.

The fire spread quickly to a barrel of lamp oil, which had been left out by the cellar. A moment later, there was a loud explosion. And the roof of the Ragged Wurm collapsed, completely demolishing the inn.

Fortunato crawled out from the flaming wreckage, his body covered in soot and second-degree burns, crying out, "You ... you ruined me, Grover!"

Thank you for reading the sample chapters of *Heroes, Inc.* If you would like to read more, please go to [Amazon](#) to purchase a copy.