

The Fool

The girl and the boy dashed through the narrow street, dodging passers-by and ducking past the stalls and awnings that made the street seem even narrower than it already was. The long arm of the law pounded in their wake, in the form of a very large man. He was surprisingly agile and quick for his size, but, even though he passed through the mass of citizens with ease, the kids easily outdistanced him.

The girl ran into a rope which held up a large awning. The rope held and bounced her off with an impressive ‘twang’, but she recovered and raced on. Waving his fist, the stall holder yelled something after her.

The kids dived through a hole which was much too small to pass the very large man. He slowed to a halt, and stuck his head through the hole. As he expected, there was no sign of the two kids, but he nodded and strode off into the maze of small streets. He didn’t seem to be worried that he had lost his quarry.

The kids were sitting in a small green area, a small forgotten oasis in the middle of the city, sharing the sandwich that they had stolen.

“That was close, Gren. I thought that the watchman was going to catch us.”

“He wasn’t a watchman, Brin,” said the girl. “Well, not a city copper anyway. Wrong uniform. I don’t know what he was.”

The large man squeezed through a gap in the wall.

“He works for the Fool,” he said.

The kids leapt up, but a second large man squeezed through the other gap. He stood there with arms folded, and the kids backed away.

“Now, kids, we don’t mean you any harm. We have been sent out to round up all the feral kids and take them to the Fool.”

“Feral?”

“Wild kids. With no parents.”

“Oh.”

A lightly armed man stepped into the green area behind one of the large men, and a similarly armed woman stepped into the area behind the other large man. The two large men acknowledged the two newcomers but didn’t otherwise react.

“What’s going on here?” asked the woman.

“Afternoon, ma’am. As I said, we are employed by the Fool to round up all the feral kids. I’m Smith, and that is Jones.”

“I’m the Lady Lindis. This is my friend and associate, Evan. Who are you, kids? Do you have parents?”

“I’m Brin,” said the boy. “This is my friend, Gren.”

“Are you both orphans, boy?”

“I guess. I don’t remember my parents. Neither does Gren.”

“OK, what about you, boys? How come you are in the employ of the Fool? Who is he?”

“You don’t know? He is the ruler of this city and the surrounding area. The King went to war and left the Fool in charge, and he has not yet returned.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Two hundred years or thereabouts.”

“Two hundred years?”

“Yeah.”

Evan stepped forward. “Why does the Fool want the feral kids? Is he trying to clean up the city?”

Smith snorted. “Nah. In our opinion, no. Feral kids aren’t really a problem. Apart from a few stolen sandwiches and the occasional missing garment, they aren’t an issue. It would better if there weren’t any, of course, but this isn’t a purge. I think that the Fool just wants to help them. He doesn’t want them to grow up to become criminals.”

A look passed between Smith and Jones, and the Lady picked up on it. “Your mission is not to round up the feral kids is it?”

Jones nodded. “No, ma’am. But we need to question them.”

“Does everyone want to come back to our camp? We can talk in more comfort there.”

“Kids?” asked Jones. “Will you come along with us and the Lady and Evan?”

Gren and Brin looked at each other. “Yeah, OK,” said Gren. “Got any food?”

The Fool strode through the palace, looking for his majordomo. “Malvano? Malvano? Where is that man?” His bells tinkled as he walked, and the spiral tips of his shoes bounced. His fake hump forced his head forward and his ridiculous oversized hat threatened, as always, to slide forward over his eyes.

The corridors were empty of people, as word spread that he was on the warpath. He ducked his head into one room, and at the sight of the red and yellow of the Fool’s clothes, the cleaning staff in the room froze.

The Fool merely said “Hmmp” and slammed the door. The sigh of relief from inside the room was almost audible from the corridor. He approached the majordomo’s rooms, and burst through the entrance door and turned into Malvano’s study.

“Ah, Malvano, where have you been? I need to consult with you!”

“Why didn’t you send a servant, sir? You didn’t need to come down here yourself! I was just doing the books.” Malvano gestured at his desk.

“I rang the damn bell, and no one came! I’ll have them all tossed out of the bell tower!”

“Ah, I see. That would not be advisable, sir. There would be riots.” Malvano’s employer didn’t rate a ‘sire’ of course. He was the Regent, it is true, but he wasn’t a noble. On the other hand, Malvano did have noble blood.

Malvano considered. The Fool would not have anyone tossed from the bell tower, Malvano knew, and the Fool was not a bad ruler, but on his worst days, it was advisable to keep away from him. Fortunately, because the majordomo was selected by the Council of Nobles, and not by the Regent, the Fool could not sack him.

“What did you do, sir?” the majordomo asked.

“I may have shouted at someone,” admitted the Fool. He sounded embarrassed. “I’ve done it again, haven’t I, Malvano? Had a tantrum.”

He slumped into a chair and a bell jingled. He removed his hat, looked at it disgustedly, and ran a hand through his sandy hair. He was about forty, Malvano knew and quite tall, though his hat and hump kept his head bowed and made him look smaller.

“Yes, sir. Apparently. Have you been taking your medicines?”

The Fool sighed. “No. I will do. They do keep the tantrums under control, but I feel so sluggish. Maybe I’ll go and see my doctor.”

Malvano frowned. The Fool and his doctor were close and this worried Malvano a little.

“I’ll go round everyone and assure them that you have calmed down, sir. They’ll understand.”

“Thanks, Malvano. Give them all a bonus, too, please.” The Fool sighed. “I hope that they do understand. I’m not sure that I understand myself. I haven’t always had these spells.”

The Fool turned to go.

“Sir, what was it you wanted me for?” asked Malvano.

The Fool stopped. “Oh, yes. I forgot. I’d like to accelerate the rebuild of the orphanage. It’s taking far too long, though the reports show that it is going to plan. Thankfully no one was killed or injured when it burnt down! I think that we can delay the Memorial Garden. Why build a Memorial Garden when I’m not even dead yet! When I’m dead you can decide whether I deserve a formal garden, or whether I only rate a potato patch. Mmm. I’d be happy with the potato patch.”

“That’s an excellent idea, sir. I’ll put it forward at the Council’s next meeting.”

The Fool laughed. “The potato patch idea? Thank you, Malvano.”

“No, sir, the Memor...” He realised a second too late that the Fool was joking.

Malvano smiled and watched the man walk away. He pitied the Fool, but was also fond of him. He was the last of his line, because he had not married, and Malvano was pretty sure that he had no illegitimate heirs either. Malvano cast his mind back over the Fool’s line. The present Fool was the fourth, he thought. When he died there would be a constitutional crisis, but eventually someone would be selected for the job. Naturally, the new Fool would also be a commoner.

Malvano walked into the next office, where his secretary was busy with Malvano’s correspondence.

“Georgie, the Fool’s had an idea, and I think it’s a good one. Can you add it to the Council’s agenda, please? He wants to delay the Memorial Garden and accelerate the orphanage rebuild.”

“Sure,” said Georgie. She made a note. “He’s never liked the Memorial Garden, has he, sire? This move will be popular with the people, too. Will the Council go for it, though?”

“I’m pretty sure that they will. It actually makes a lot of sense, and I think he’s been working up to it for a while, now I look back. Talking to people. Floating the idea.”

“Yes, sire. He’s pretty smart.”

The Fool made his way down to the doctor’s office.

“Sir,” said the doctor. “What can I do for you?”

“Hello, doctor. I’ve just had another tantrum. I suppose it’s my fault, because I haven’t been taking my medicine.”

“Hmm. Let me take a look at you? Have you been feeling tired? How have you been sleeping?”

The doctor had the Fool remove his ridiculous hat and his shirt with the fake hump. The Fool stretched. He rotated his shoulders and moved them forwards and backwards and sighed.

The doctor and the Fool went over a range of symptoms and tests. Then the doctor held his chin in his hand and looked at the Fool.

“Hmm. Well, sir, you need to keep taking the medicine. That’s the bottom line.”

“But it makes me feel so sluggish! What about the erm, experimental medicine?”

“You know that you can’t mention it to anyone?”

“Yes, yes. Because it’s not approved and patented. Yes, I know.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure...”

“Doctor!”

“OK, OK. First take some of your usual pills.” The doctor passed them over with a glass of water, and watched the Fool take them.

“One moment,” he said. He turned to the fridge and brought out a small tray with three small phials in it. “Roll up your sleeve, please, sir.”

The doctor loaded a syringe from one of phials and injected the Fool. He put the two remaining phials of the medicine back in the fridge.

The Fool rubbed his arm. "I'm feeling better already," he said.

"Well, you still need to take your usual medicine regularly," the doctor reminded him. "And I will need to make some more of the experimental stuff."

"Right, doctor. I'll be off then. Thank you."

The doctor watched him walk away and sighed. Then he took a key from a chain around his neck, and unlocked a door at the back of his office. He passed through the door and locked it behind him. The Fool knew about his laboratory, but he had never been in it, because the doctor had convinced him that he would not understand any of it.

"Welcome to our camp, gentlemen and kids. Make yourselves at home. Coffee?"

Evan fussed around stirring up the coals of the fire and putting some water on to boil.

"Yes, please," said Smith.

He looked around. The camp was neat and tidy, and he nodded in approval. Military tidy, he decided, not knowing that Evan was once a professional soldier and the Lady herself was not unused to the military life.

Two horses trotted over. One was a big chestnut stallion with white socks, and the other was a skewbald mare.

"Gully and Rosie," said the Lady. "Shall we eat, gentlemen? Kids?"

"We'll eat when we get back to the palace, ma'am, but thank you. We'd love some coffee though."

"Smith and Jones, you didn't need any persuasion to give up the kids and come along with us. You say that you work for the Fool, but you don't seem very, um, invested in the role."

She fed the kids, who wolfed down the bread, the cured meat, and the cheese.

"Yes, ma'am, We defer to you, ma'am, because this milieu is very rank oriented, and you outrank us, and for that matter you outrank the Fool himself. We have been called in by a third party."

"This milieu'? So you know of others. We should have a talk, boys, but not now. Can you tell us the name of your employer?"

"Certainly, ma'am. You outrank our employer, but if you could keep his name to yourself? He is the majordomo, Malvano."

About a month earlier the Fool had greeted the two big men.

"Smith and Jones, welcome. Malvano has told me all about you. Has he told you what he, or rather, what we want you to do?"

"Yes, sir," Jones answered. "As we understand it, you want us to investigate some suspicious deaths?"

"Yes, that's right. Two bodies were found in the river downstream of the city. Kids. They were both were naked and both had surgical wounds on their bodies."

"Surgical wounds?" asked Smith. "Organ harvesting?"

"No. A doctor said that it looks like someone had inserted a drain tube deep into their bodies, but he couldn't tell what was being drained. The tube had been ripped out, probably after death. Nasty."

"So, sir, what will be our cover story?"

Malvano answered. "Some time ago the orphanage burned down. The kids were saved but some of them took to the streets. The Fool already had a project in place to help the street kids, so you can be part of that. It's probable that the victims were street kids anyway."

"That is excellent, sire."

"Scuse me, Smith. Are you a watchman? You don't have a watchman's uniform?" Gren had been quietly listening.

"Yeah, girl. We're policemen, me and Jones. We just work for the Fool. Not the Police Department."

"Our friend Zeph was dead. Paulie saw her pulled out of the water. Down by Willowside Park."

"That's interesting." Smith looked at the girl. She looked upset but composed. "Can you tell me, Gren, do you know what happened to Zeph? Before she was found?"

Gren pondered. "She wanted to go back to the orphanage. She was hungry, she said. I think she was going to go to the people who were looking for the kids."

She looked at Smith and Jones. "Not you."

"Where did these other people take the kids? Do you know?"

"Yeah, Marty said that she saw some kids being taken into the palace."

Evan and the Lady looked at each other.

"Do you kids want to ride on a horse?"

"Is this OK, Gully?" said Evan in his head.

"Yeah, no problem, Evan. Set the bigger one on first and the smaller one in front."

The kids were nervous at first, but Gully was as stable as a table and Evan rode alongside on Rosie.

"That's it, kids. Hold on tight!"

Gully sped up and soon he was slowly trotting around the field. He went around the field twice and then returned to the campfire.

"That was fun!" he said in Evan's head.

"Good one, pal. Thanks," replied Evan, silently.

Gren looked at Brin. "Why does Gully look brown, Evan. He should be white, shouldn't he?"

Evan looked at the Lady, then whispered to the kids. "Shh! He's in disguise! Don't tell anyone!"

The kids solemnly nodded their heads.

"Evan, get them to look at me," said Gully's voice in his head.

"Look, kids!"

As the kids looked Gully turned white, and seemed bigger somehow. He tossed his head and his ivory horn gleamed.

As he reverted to his usual colouring, the kids went "Wow!"

"I hope that you can keep a secret, boys," the Lady said to Smith and Jones.

"Sure, ma'am, we know how to do that. But we saw nothing anyway."

Evan wasn't sure if that was literally true or not. They hadn't moved a muscle.

Smith and Jones left the kids with people that they trusted, then they and the Lady and Evan headed to the palace.

"Let me pass, please," said the Lady to the guards. "I'm the Lady Lindis, and I and my friend Evan have business with the majordomo, Malvano. Smith and Jones you know."

One of the guards was going to let them through, but the other one first checked with Smith and Jones.

“Good lad,” approved the Lady. “Don’t take anyone at face value. Thank you.”

Malvano was in his office, and Georgie showed them in. The majordomo sat back and regarded them.

“May I present the Lady Lindis and her associate Evan, majordomo Malvano? Ma’am and sir, the majordomo Malvano.” said Jones.

“Greetings, ma’am and sir. What can I do for you, ma’am?”

“We’re here to assist Smith and Jones. Not that they seem to need much help. Smith?”

“Sire, we tracked down two of the street kids, and asked them a few questions. They told us that one of their friends had been pulled out of the river, dead. They also told us that kids had been seen being taken into the palace.”

“Into the palace? I didn’t know that the Fool was getting them brought here!”

“May we go and talk to the Fool, sire?” asked Smith. “He should know what is happening to them, where they go next.”

“Sure. I’ll come along and introduce Evan and the Lady.”

“Yes,” confirmed the Fool. “They are brought here. I get my doctor to give them a medical check, and then he takes them to a friend of his who finds them homes.”

“Have you met his friend, sir?”

“Ah, no, but I’ve got his address somewhere. Ah! Here!”

“Do you mind if we check him out, sir?” asked Smith.

“Sure. Sure. Go ahead.”

“Are you sure it’s the right address, Smith?”

“Yes. It’s not in the best of areas is it, Jones?”

They looked at the row of houses in front of them. They seemed to be holding each other up.

“Let’s go, Smith,” said Jones and knocked on the door.

“Yes?”

The individual who opened the door squinted at them under long greasy hair.”

“Excuse me, sir, are you Izak?”

“No!” He tried to slam the door but Jones was ready and stuck out an arm, blocking it.

“Damn you! Go away!”

“Don’t worry, Izak. We just want the answer to a few questions. That’s all.”

“I know nothing! It was Gwyn’s idea to steal the lead off the chapel roof. I just drove the wagon. Bastards didn’t pay me!”

“We don’t care about that.” Jones looked at Smith. They would pass the unsolicited information on, of course.

“What?”

“What do you know of feral kids? An acquaintance at the palace gave your name and address.”

“Mine? Oh, yes. The doctor mentioned the fact that the Fool was looking for kids. But I don’t know anything about that.”

“You know the doctor?”

“Yes, I get him, erm, supplies. Things that are in, um, short supply.”

“You never actually saw any kids, did you, sir?”

“Kids? Nah. What would I want with kids?”

The Fool, the Lady and Evan went down to see the doctor.

“What can I do for you?” asked the doctor cheerfully, after the introductions.

The Fool looked at the doctor. “Oh, nothing much. I wondered how those kids we rescued are getting on?”

“Oh, fine, sir. Fine. My friend tells me that they are all settled in their new homes, sir. I could give you the details, sir, but I don’t have them to hand.”

“Hmm,” said the Lady. “We have someone checking with your friend right now, doctor.”

“Really?”

Suddenly the doctor brushed the Fool aside and ran up the passage that led to his offices. The Lady and Evan started off after him, but the doctor had a head start. He dived through a doorway and slammed the door behind himself.

“He’s locked it.”

The Fool came puffing up behind them. “Down there. Turn right, then at the end turn right again.”

“Is your bow cocked, Evan?”

“Yes, Lin.”

“Stop him any way you can. OK?”

“Sure ma’am.”

They raced off, while the Fool jogged along behind them.

“Stop! I will shoot!” shouted Evan, knocking the safety catch off.

The doctor was hurrying down the steps to the water-gate, and he was ignoring their calls to stop.

“He’s probably got a boat down there, Evan. We’re going to lose him! Drop him!”

Evan loosed his bolt and the doctor fell.

“Sorry, Lin,” he said, as they looked down at the body.

“Don’t worry, Evan. You had no other options.”

The Fool caught up with them, gasping. He looked down at the body. “Oh dear, oh dear. I guess that you had to shoot, Evan. I wonder why he ran?”

The Lady turned to him. “Well, the dead kids were found in the river, he knew we were checking up on him, and he headed straight for the water-gate. I think we can join the dots.”

“I think we need to look at his laboratory,” said the Fool. His voice was grim and shook a little.

“He keeps the key on a chain around his neck.”

Evan leaned down and came up with a key.

“Here,” he said.

The Fool gestured at a waiting page. “Come here, boy. Please find Malvano and tell him to meet us at the doctor’s office. Right, let’s go.”

Back at the doctor’s office, the Fool pointed to the locked door.

“His laboratory is at the back there. I’ve never been in there. Oh, the little gods.”

Evan inserted the key into the lock and turned it. The door opened and revealed steps descending into a lower level. Evan led them down.

“You didn’t know that this was here, sir?”

“No,” said the Fool. “I signed off on it when the laboratory was built, of course, but I didn’t actually look at the plans. I trusted him! Oh, the little gods.”

“He would have had an explanation, sir. Don’t worry.”

At the bottom of the steps was a short corridor. There were three doors to the left, and three to the right, and another at the end of the corridor. The Fool opened the first door to the left, and they entered a room filled with what he thought of as 'scientific apparatus'. At the end was a standard desk, with a filing cabinet to one side of it. A small fridge was on the other side.

"I'll get another doctor and an investigator to go over this stuff. Let's move on," said the Fool.

They opened the next door.

"Oh the little gods," said the Fool. "Oh. I've been so stupid. All under my own roof!"

The room was dim, but the lights in the corridor showed a grim scene. Several small children in dirty clothes sat on dirty mattresses. They seemed apathetic and moved sluggishly. They didn't try to get out of the room. The smell was appalling.

The Lady shut the door.

"But..."

"We'll get someone to see to them, sir. They will be fine in there for a while. Well, 'fine' is the wrong word." Tears were streaming down the Lady's face.

The last door on that side also held a number of children, and this time the Fool shut the door himself. "Soon, soon," he muttered. "We'll get you help. We will."

Evan opened the end door and looked in. He swore. "I'm sorry I killed the doctor with a single shot. He deserved much worse."

In the dimly lit room they could see an operating table. Bound to the table was a small boy. A tube exited from the boy's abdomen and carried a liquid from his body into a collection jar. The boy moved slightly as the light from the corridor hit his eyes.

The Fool turned and raced along the corridor and up the stairs. He met Malvano heading into the doctor's office.

"Malvano, we need doctors down here, and some specialist nurses. Paediatricians."

"What's wrong, sir? I was told that someone had killed the doctor. Is that true?"

"Yes, but that doesn't matter! Get those doctors and nurses now! Oh, and the police too. And warn them that they are going to find something horrific here!"

"Right away, sir." Malvano picked up the phone and started issuing orders.

"Most of the kids will be OK, sir. Physically anyway. The poor boy who had the tube in him died, unfortunately."

"Thank you, doctor. Now, did you make any sense of the doctor's laboratory? Do you know what he was draining from those poor kids?"

"Was he crazy?" added Malvano.

"First, sir, before I answer that, can you please tell me if he was giving you any medicines?"

"Yes, he was. One was a vitamin supplement, the second was to stop my, erm, tantrums. And the third, was to lift me out of my lethargy, which he said was caused by the other medicines."

"Can I see them, sir? Thank you."

The doctor looked at the vitamin pills. He sniffed them. "These aren't vitamins! How many were you taking? Three a day! No!"

"Is it poison, doctor?"

"Not exactly, sir. In that dosage, it will cause agitation, irritation, and probably bursts of rage. You said that you had 'tantrums'? That is what I would expect from that dosage of those pills."

"The medicine caused the tantrums?"

“Yes. Let me look at the second medicine, the calming one. Hmm, this is a strong sedative. No wonder you were feeling tired. It would certainly have stopped the tantrums, but you would be very lethargic.”

“And the third medicine? The one he injected?”

“Ah, that would be the one that we found in his fridge and in his laboratory, Well, that’s an interesting one. It was mostly a strong simulant, but with an added component. He was manufacturing the added component in his laboratory from the liquid that he was extracting from the kids.”

“What! He was injecting me with the stuff from those poor kids? That’s horrible! Revolting!”

“Why did he do that?” asked Malvano. “He **was** crazy, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, sire. I’d agree with that. He was crazy. From the notes he left in his laboratory, he believed that he could develop a treatment, an injection, that would confer immortality. He was, sir, experimenting on you, and, at the same time, making you dependent on him. The first two medicines would leave you feeling tired and the third would undo the effects of those, and allow him to introduce his experimental immortality drug.”

“So what do I do, doctor?”

“Just stop taking all the pills, sir. So far as I can tell the experimental drug is useless, and you don’t need the others. The effects will wear off in a few days.”

They sat immersed in their own thoughts for a while.

“I feel so dirty,” said the Fool. “So dirty. But Malvano, we really need that orphanage as soon as possible.”

“I agree, sir.”

Smith and Jones were drinking coffee with Evan and the Lady Lindis around the campfire.

“So, boys, how did you know that we were on the same side?”

“When you took the kids off us.”

“Hmm?”

“You didn’t want them to fall into the hands of the authorities, and we looked like we belonged to the authorities.”

The Lady and Evan both laughed.

“So, boys, you have experienced different ‘milieux’, I’d guess?” asked the Lady,

“Yes, ma’am, we have,” answered Jones. “Some call them spaces, some call them Universes. Or you could call them different times, I’d guess. If there is a problem, we turn up where we are needed.”

“A bit like Evan and me, then. Do you want to link up with us?”

“No thanks, ma’am.” He looked at his partner. “We are happy to have worked with you, ma’am. I can’t say that I’ve enjoyed it. Those poor kids. We’ve had a hand in stopping that, and I’m glad of that. But we need to remain independent.”

“I understand.”

“Yeah, I understand too,” added Evan. “I was a simple mercenary when I met the Lady, wasn’t I, Lin? We’ve seen some interesting things, haven’t we?”

“Yeah, we have. But people form teams, don’t they? You’re a team, Smith and Jones. And we are another team, aren’t we Evan.”

“Yeah, but don’t forget Gully.”

“The Unicorn?”

“Yes, Smith. How did you know about him?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. We just do.”

Gully trotted up. “It’s because you are special people, Smith and Jones.”

“Thanks, pal.”

Smith and Jones were long gone, and Evan and the Lady were travelling down a road with trees on either side. The trees met overhead and the tunnel that they formed disappeared into the distance.

“Did I mention that Rosie is in foal, Evan?” said Gully’s voice in his head. He seemed a little embarrassed.

“What? No, you didn’t!”

“Yeah. She’s going to give birth to a Unicorn colt.”

“What?”

“Yeah.”
