

A GAME OF



H.O.R.S.E.

DAVE KING

A Game of HORSE

Life in Beatty

Dave King

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Also By Dave King

That Hoosiers Cap

The Bridge

Betrovia

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Maintaining a dry cleaning business is more than taking in soiled shirts and suits and kicking out pressed tuxes and sport coats. It takes shrewdness, intuitiveness and even a bit of luck. The McGuiley's had been in the cleaning business for over 70 years, starting with Greg's great-grandfather, Patrick Allen McGuiley, who got the business off to a flying start during the heyday of the dry cleaning industry on the East Coast. "I never can figure out why Grandad ever got stuck with that horrible mess of presses, steam machines and hangers," Greg said to his wife Arlinda one warm summer morning while sharing breakfast. "Uncle Jim always told me, in strictest confidence, that Grandad won the business from one of his less-admirable companions during an inglorious spurt for poker playing, boozing it up, and chasing painted ladies. Patrick Allen McGuiley would borrow a couple \$100- from anyone who'd loan him the money-run off to Toronto or St. Paul and invest that money in some foolhardy scheme... trying to make a million dollars with borrowed money and then coming home with his tail between his legs, drunk and broke. His excuse? He was blessed by Fate, with an uncanny gift. In a town chock full of honest entrepreneurs, he'd find the one who'd just as soon lie to you straight out about taking your money, laugh the comment off, look you straight in the eye, and then promise the moon. It's not that people didn't like

Grandad; it's just that he had some incongruous ways of looking at life."

As a teenager, Greg McGuiley didn't go into the plant very much, probably due more to his not liking the ammonia-laced air that permeated it than not wanting to talk to his father. One day after school, Greg—along with his close friends Tim and Jay—stopped at Racenstein's Quick Stop on the corner of 10th and Vine and picked up a couple of sodas. Jay assented and paid for them, saying that he'd buy only if the other two pitched in for gas. Greg and Tim opened their drinks before answering.

"Well, you scavengers, how about it? You gonna throw some in or what? Greg shrugged and Tim nodded.

"Tell me again: why are we going to your dad's place?" Tim asked, taking another sip of soda.

"I need to talk to him about gettin' that job from Theltenson. Jay, hit this guy for me, huh? He's gettin' on my nerves." Dodging the anticipated swat, Tim posed another question.

"If it's so important that you talk to him about it right now, how about dropping me off at Lou's Burgers? It seems like lunch was eons ago." Jay connected with a solid punch.

"You dummy. Don't you know that we, including the dry-cleaning boy here, all need this job. Greg's dad is buddy-buddy with Theltenson. If he can sweet-talk him enough, he'll do all the work for us." Jay then leaned out the driver's side window of the pickup and threw the empty can into the bed of the truck. It rolled around, bouncing from groove to groove, the tinny rattling interfering with

Greg's train of thought.

"That ain't why I want to head to the plant. I... I just haven't talked to him hardly at all the last few days. He is my old man, you know? It's a son's responsibility to talk to his dad once in a while, right?" Jay stopped the truck at the light. A neon-green '76 Mustang pulled up beside them. The driver of the Mustang revved the engine and it sputtered, exhaling a thick, miry black cloud. The light changed and the emerald ashcan pulled away from the intersection.

"Bad rings... probably needs a valve job, too," Jay commented.

"Yeah, I think I know who used to own that heap. Arnold Knealthabber ..."

"Naw, it wasn't Arnold the Agonizer. He used to have that fire-engine red '74 Cougar... the one that sat in front of Patty's house with a flat tire?" Jay interjected. The smoke from the Mustang had nearly dissipated, and Greg could still see its tail lights as it pulled into the motel parking lot. Jay turned on the headlights and, as an eighteen-wheeler flashed his brights, he kicked at his switch, finally hitting it before the diesel whizzed past. Tim then finished his soda, and flung the empty out the passenger window into the ditch below.

"Hey, throw empties in the back! You trying to get me pulled over?" Jay smacked Tim again. He winced for a moment and then hung his head out the window.

"Would you look at that! Old man Yount forgot to turn on his marquee again. How's anybody gonna know that he's open?"

“Forget about Yount, Tim,” Greg said, almost yelling. “Forget about that rundown diner... forget about washing ketchup and dried pickles off that old man’s 50-year old china.” He looked at Jay. “Can you believe this guy? Here we are, tryin’ to get him a real job, one that pays good money, and all he can think about is his burger-joint job. Whattya say we cut this dude out of the deal? Let’s just forget that we ever mentioned that we’d let him in on it?” Greg laughed and Jay chuckled along with him.

“What...? Cut me out? Ain’t I the one who thought of gettin’ the jobs in the first place? I called Theltenson and asked if he’d be hiring! You guys make me sick! Always treating me any way you want to. All I gotta do is call the old man and... and the whole deal would be toast!” The last few words were spoken directly out the window. But then Tim quickly leaned on the dashboard and turned back to face his best friends.

“Just let me off right here... stop the truck and let me out. You guys don’t know anything... I worked for Mr. Yount for more than two years and never called in sick or nothin’. Neither one of you ever worked an honest day in your lives, being supported by your rich daddies.” He continued to lean on the dashboard, waiting for a response from someone. Greg looked right back into his eyes—not angrily, not hatefully. He just looked at him like he was reading a sign on the side of the road. Then he said nothing. Jay stared forward, his hands gripping the wheel. Then he noticed the radio playing a song that was familiar; he reached over to turn it up. It was a one of Hank Walter’s

newer songs. Jay wanted to sing along with the country rock star, but resisted the temptation.

“Tim, if I dropped you off now, I’d have to pull off on a side road...”

“Man, forget it... I don’t want you to drop me off. I just want you to say you’re sorry for sayin’ what you did.” He sat back into the softer confines of the truck’s bench seat, crossed his arms and looked out the window again. Via the radio, Hank Walter’s continued to lament about losing his true love in a hotel fire; Jay compromised and casually hummed along. He then signaled a left turn, pulled onto a gravel road, kicked the brights back on, and then cleared his throat.

“Wanna grab some pizza or somethin’ on the way home from my dad’s?” Greg asked.

“Yeah,” Jay replied. But Tim silently continued to look out the passenger window.

“What you say, Tim, old boy? Is it pizza or what?” Tim only grunted.

“Great,” Greg said. “Over yon horizon lies our destination.”

The pickup moved into the nearly-empty asphalt parking lot with Jay encouraging the clunker to dodge the puddles. Tim was the first to exit the truck with Greg not far behind. As they walked towards the plant entrance, Greg grabbed Tim by the arm and spun him around.

“Hey, I’m sorry... about what I said...”

“Don’t worry about it,” was Tim’s reply. He looked down at one of the rain puddles.

“You guys are right. I really gotta start growing up.”

“C’mon, Greg! I can’t get inside until you unlock the stupid door!” Jay hollered as he rattled the handle.

“Get a life, Howser. Can’t you see that we’re talkin’ here?” He playfully smacked Tim on the shoulder and then ran to the door. “There, your highness. Don’t forget to wipe your feet, your eminence.” Greg ducked to miss Jay swinging his right fist in his direction, and the high school seniors then walked into the darkened outer office.

The exterior of the dry-cleaning plant gave little indication to the dilapidation and obsolescence of its interior. There were a half-dozen rusty metal desks used by the company’s sales staff, desks overflowing with memos, orders and back-orders, and accounts payable and receivable reports. “I just can’t figure out why Dad has so many people working for him. All I ever see them doing is reading magazines and drinking coffee,” Greg said. Tim walked over to a grungy stainless steel coffee machine that was probably installed the day the plant opened; it was adorned with a tattered hand-written sign that stated “Please Pay Sally Mae Before Pouring: the Management.”

“This,” Tim said, pointing at the sign, “has been here for at least 10 years.”

“Yeah, and the coffee stains on it have to be at least 9 years old,” Jay quipped.

“You guys wait here while I head upstairs and find Dad. And for God’s sake, don’t start diggin’ around in anything!”

“Surely you don’t want us to take you literally, do you? A couple shovel-fulls pitched into the dumpster may be just

what this pit needs, don't you think so, Tim, old boy?" Tim wasn't paying attention; he was leafing through a calendar which adorned a section of the wall close to the coffee machine. "Hey, Tim, I'm talking to you, man. What say you?"

"Did you guys ever see anything as beautiful as this 1954 Chevy coupe? I can just picture me and Justine Silverman riding around in this baby..." Tim stopped leafing and began staring.

"Impossible," Jay responded. "You and Justine? Never gonna happen, dude."

"Look here, you nut-jobs! You want me to let the guard dogs loose on you? Keep your grimy mitts off everything in this office... including that calendar!" Greg's voice revealed both frustration and anger as he slammed the door into the inner offices behind him. Tim let the calendar pages fall back down, and the blast of air produced by the cascading pages sent a few coffee liners off the top of the coffee maker onto the floor. Then he sat down on one of the chairs by the window and put his feet up on the closest desk. Across the room, Jay shook his head, grabbed a metal folding chair and tried to make himself comfortable.

"Throw me one of those Sports Enumerated," he said.

"Which one?" Tim sat up then fumbled around with the magazines that were on the desk in front of him.

"Man, it really doesn't matter." Jay pointed. "That one. There. The one with the baseball player on the cover. Toss it over here."

"Why do you want to read about baseball? It's still the

middle of basketball season, don't ya know?"

"Just throw me the lousy magazine!" Tim picked up the one Jay wanted, stopped momentarily to look over an article entitled "Where's the King of Swing now?" then flung it underhanded to Jay. It hit the floor and then slid smoothly underneath Jay's feet.

"You dunce! That was too low for me to catch!" Jay said. "And I think you should pick up those coffee liners before Greg's dad sees them."

"Don't worry about it... me and Mack and like this," Tim replied, holding up two fingers touching each other. He then picked up a copy of Newsworld. Just above his head, snowflakes began to hit the glass of the window; but neither Tim or Jay noticed them. Without looking up from the magazine, Tim said: "How long is he gonna be?"

"Who knows? And be quiet I'm in the middle of this article, and I don't want to lose my train of thought!" As they continued to read, the snow came down a bit harder. Leaving his teammates to fend for themselves, Greg walked up the narrow staircase that led to the inner offices. When he reached the top of the stairs, he was startled by a burly man dressed in denim coveralls carrying a large cardboard box.

Oh sorry... have... have you seen my dad?" he managed to blurt out. The worker backpedaled a few steps and placed the box of wire hangers on the floor.

"Your dad? Yeah, he's over there... talking to Paluggi."

"Thanks," was Greg's reply. Before picking the box up, the man pulled a red handkerchief out of his back pocket

and wiped the sweat from his upper lip. He had it back into his pocket before Greg reached his father.

"I'm telling you, Mack, we gotta get tough with Brownie. And you know it ain't my job to sell him more cleaning and... and at the same time beg him to pay the invoices that are 90 days overdue! You need to call that deadbeat yourself!" The man speaking at that moment was pushing 5' 4" and sported a graying and pencil-thin mustache. Greg smiled as he remembered the recent Christmas party where Samuel Paluggi bragged about his grandmother who, according to his father's favorite salesman, also sported a pencil-thin mustache. Sammy turned to greet Greg and said:

"Ah, Gregory, my boy! What brings you here at this time of the night?"

"Uhm... a '76 Ford 150?" Sammy laughed.

"Funny kid you got here, Mack... should be majorin' in slapstick comedy once he gets to college..."

"I ain't going to college... gonna join the merchant marines and see the world!" Greg said. Sammy laughed again, this time with a slight cough. Mr. McGuiley didn't look up and continued to scratch something onto the clipboard he was holding "So, Dad... how's it going?"

"Fine... did you enjoy school today?" the owner of the dry-cleaning plant asked, still not looking up at his oldest son.

"Yeah, sure... of course!" Greg said. "Jay and Tim and me... well... they're downstairs in the outer office. They aren't doing anything particular there... just waiting for

me.” Mack finally looked up, letting the clipboard fall to his side.

“Sure. That’s fine, son,” he said then walked to the largest desk in the office and Greg followed. “And basketball...? Is Johnson going to start you Tuesday against the Raiders?”

“He better! Even though my stomach hurt again today, I didn’t say a thing. And he had Coach Weinstein work with Jay and me on our jump shot. We work well together and... and Jay’s fade-away jumper is...”

“Greg, did your mother say where she was gonna be this evening? I called the house trying to get a-hold of her, but there was no answer.” With his left hand he pushed his graying hair off his forehead. For a man nearly 55 years old, Dad sure has a bunch of hair, Greg couldn’t help but think. “I thought Brad at least would be home. Might you know where he is?”

“Brad? Haven’t seen him since this morning. Is he in trouble or something?”

“No. I just wanted to talk to your mother, that’s all... just wanted to find out how her day was going. When I left the house this morning, she seemed preoccupied... like something was bothering her.” Just as the words left his father’s mouth, Greg remembered about his mother’s hair appointment.

“Don’t worry about Mom. She’s probably runnin’ one of her errands, you know, takin’ Brad somewhere, some-thin’ like that, you know?” He sat down behind the oversized dark wood desk that was adorned with only a black

phone, a chrome stapler and a pair of reading glasses. Greg remained standing.

“Uhm... you’re probably right... that would explain why Brad wasn’t home to answer the phone either.” Suddenly, Mr. McGuiley smiled. “Would you look at this... here I am, takin’ up the entire conversation and there you are, after that long drive in from town, waitin’ for me to shut up so’s you can ask me something of great importance. Speak up boy! Spit it out! What’s on your mind?” He reached behind him, grabbed a pen out of a ceramic coffee cup and began to tap it on the desk. “Pen in hand and ready to take notes!” Greg then sat down in a dusty leather and chrome chair that was close to the office door. Before responding, his attention was captured by a solitary fly that had landed on the top of the lamp a few feet to his left.

“Dad, I... I want to ask you about working...” The black telephone on the desk suddenly rang. Greg stared at it as it rang again. Then it rang a third time. Mack McGuiley smiled at his son.

“I’m not going to answer the phone... don’t want whoever is calling to know I’m here,” he said.

“But what if it’s Mom?” Greg asked. The phone rang five times before it stopped ringing. “Our signal. When your mother calls, she lets it ring twice then hangs up. If it rings again right after that... well, that’s our signal.” Greg scratched his head and forced a slight grin. “What were you wanting to talk to me about again?” Greg cleared his throat and without thinking, stood up.

“Dad, I want to work for Mr. Theltenson,” he blurted

out. Then he sat back down as quickly and as unconsciously as he had stood up, Mr. McGuiley continued to tap the pen on the desk but with a different cadence than before.

“Uhm... Theltenson. Funny that you’d mention him. Got a call from his secretary just a few days ago and told myself that I should return it ASAP. Funny that I totally forgot about that call.” Greg forced out another polite grin and wondered what was really going on in his father’s head.

“Mr. Theltenson has at least 5 openings at his factory. And as far as I know, he’s willing to work around basketball...”

“You do know that the tool and die factory is a very hard place to work, Greg. It’s not like working here at the dry-cleaning plant. The dies have to meet specs. If they don’t, someone will lose his job.” Mr. McGuiley leaned back in his chair and returned the pen to its cup. “So tell me... why don’t you want to continue working here at the plant?” Greg’s smile was much larger at that moment, and he knew it. He silently swallowed, forced himself to return to the polite but less-admirable grin, and stood up once again.

“I’ve worked here at the plant for as long as I can remember... and I’ve learned everything there is to learn about dry-cleaning and...”

“That, son, is not far from the truth,” Mack said softly but sternly. “You have shown me that you know enough about this place to basically run it. I have no doubt that I can retire and turn the whole shootin’ match over to you!”

“Retire? You... you aren’t going...”

“Ha! Caught ya there!” Mack laughed and then stood up. “Of course I’m not retiring. There is no way that I’m gonna turn this place over to you... or to anybody. But, Greg, back to the issue at hand. I’m still wondering what’s gotten into your head to make you think that you don’t want to work here. Ah, boredom? Is that it?”

“No, Dad, the plant isn’t boring... it’s just that...”

“The work is too menial?”

“I suppose that’s what you could say... it’s menial.” Greg walked towards one of the three windows in the upper office and for the first time that evening noticed the snow.

“It’s snowing.”

“Yes, of course it is. The weatherman has been talking about it all day.”

“So, Dad... can I? Can I tell Mr. Theltenson... I mean... ask Mr. Theltenson for a job?” Greg poised the question while he was still looking outside at the snow. He then slowly turned around to wait for Mr. McGuiley’s response.

“A game first,” Mack said. “You win the game, then you can seek that factory job. If I win, you agree to continue working with here... with your dear old dad.” Greg groaned.

“Not a game of horse, Dad. You can’t be serious. And it’s snowing, by the way.”

“Ha! Now you’re starting to reconsider. it don’t matter if it’s snowing for us to play some horse... don’t need to dribble for horse. Now do we?”

Right outside the receiving dock door was a half-court basketball court. The backboard and rim were mounted on

the brick wall with a steel I-beam that jugged at least 4' from the wall. Mack had it installed when Greg first expressed interest in playing the game. "Your dad can't be serious, Greg," Jay said. "Your set shot is one of the team's best... and you are the horse champ two years running." Greg dribbled the ball in the snow while he looked at his father; even though Mack was a few inches shorter than his oldest son, that new pair of court shoes he put on before going outside made him look a foot taller. Tim looked at Greg and then back at Mr. McGuiley, He then said:

"I'm wagering a buck on Greg winning this before he even gets an 'O'." Mack scowled playfully in response.

"You best keep that buck in your pocket, Timmy," he said, motioning to his son that he wanted the ball first. The snow continued to fall and nearly an inch had already covered that part of the parking lot. Greg passed the ball to his father who then bounced it once, twice, three times before holding it tightly in front of him. "And Timmy...,you and JayBird there can make as much noise as you want... it ain't gonna affect me in the least. I've been practicin'..."

The End

Excerpt from Betrovia

“Good morning, beautiful Tamara! Did you bless us with this royal feast of a breakfast?” Kristof asked as he came into the dining room from the kitchen. Tamara didn’t even look up. “Did you close the back door?” The other way to enter the inn was through the south door that led into the kitchen. Kristof, nineteen years old, a few inches shorter than Patrik but taller than both girls, slipped off his coat, draped it over the back of his chair, and sat down next to Galena. “Well, did you close it?” “Why yes, dear Tamara, the door is effectively shut. No bears, wolves or other wild creatures will be invading this domicile from that access point. However, Galena – from the look on her face – doesn’t appear to believe me.” “Don’t get me involved in this! I have to work with her all day. You can rile her up and then saunter outside to escape her wrath.” The grin on her face revealed sarcasm. But Tamara still had not made eye contact with the young man. “Do you want me to get you anything from the kitchen? There’s a bit more potatoes.” “No, no... unless Tamara wouldn’t mind frying a few eggs for me?” “Stop it! Just stop it. What are you so glib about today? Can’t you see that breakfast has been prepared and served already. Stop being so rude and eat what’s on the table!” The elder daughter looked up at him, her dark brown eyes framed by her glistening black eyebrows. She pointed at the half-full plate of food and

motioned for him to help himself. Franck chuckled with amusement. “Oh, what a riot, what a wonderful scene! Kristof, it never ceases to amaze me how quickly you can get her dander up. Do you practice this between my visits?” The purveyor of both common household wares and antiquities divine, pushed himself away from the table, signaling that he had finally reached his limit. “Oh,” he continued. “Did you remember to brush down Fairchild this morning? Or at least last night? Like I asked you?” “Of course, Uncle Franck, and your steed is much more attractive because of it. You know, I don’t understand why that old horse hasn’t bolted out from under your portly frame and taken refuge somewhere in the forest.” Franck immediately roared with joy. “Ho, ha, ha! You are quite the jester, you son of a Haarigoian! I never do tire of coming to this wonderful hovel of tasty delectables and spry humor! Yes, this is one of my favorite places between the Plains and Lycentia!” He laughed, standing in the process, and belched one more time. “Oh, ladies, please excuse the rudeness of a fat old man. But I’m sure you understand. Unlike Kristof, I have no one in the world to impress, to appear suave and sophisticated in front of. Oh yes, Kristof, you have the whole world before you, you do!” “Uncle Franck, might it be advantageous for me to join you on your journeys someday? I’m sure that I’d be able to gather more material just by being with you!” Patrik shook his head and smiled. “Uncle Franck and Kristof... now that would be quite a pair. Yes, indeed... quite a pair,” Tamara mumbled. Since Franck had already moved away from the table and waddled over

to the east side of the room to chat with the other guest, Tamara and Galena began to clean off the table. “Now wait just a minute! I’m not done with that!” Kristof said, grabbing the bowl of cobbler back from Tamara. “Stop, boy-hired-to-work-outside! Breakfast is over and it’s time to go back to work. Go outside!” “Can’t I have just one more spoonful?” Both young people held tightly onto the bowl. “Let go of the bowl so I can clean up this mess!” She successfully yanked it away from the scruffy young man. “Good. Now go outside and do whatever you were supposed to do before disturbing our breakfast.” Kristof leaned back in the chair, putting his hands behind his head and stretched. “Why are you always so mean to me? When are you going to realize that you’re seriously in love with me and are just upset that I haven’t asked your father for your hand yet?” He successfully ducked the spoon that had been in the cobbler bowl; it landed at Franck’s feet. Tamara’s spare hand immediately covered her mouth, and she rushed into the kitchen. “Here’s the spoon,” Franck said. “Suppose you won’t be taking this to her directly, eh?” “Is that a challenge? You don’t think I’ll walk right in there and demand an apology?” Kristof cajoled. “No, I am thinking just the opposite. I envision that you’re considering sauntering in there, picking up something left over from our meal and dumping it on directly on her head!” “No, that wouldn’t work... too forceful. I would need something more subtle...” “I’m kidding,” Franck said. “Listen a moment... before she comes back out.” Franck then proceeded to summarize how he had successfully

convinced his wife to marry him. Patrick had heard the story too many times before, and – staying out of the tussle between the two young people – felt impelled to interject in the middle of the summary. “Kristof, this conversation has to conclude. You need to head back out to the barn. Did you forget that we are scheduled to go to Noran today? Even though it’s not snowing or raining now, I think it might be later. We need to get started very soon.” “Patrik, give me a few more minutes with the boy. If he’s going be your son-in-law someday...” “What? Uncle Franck! He has work to do! And I’m sure you do, too!” Tamara picked up the last of the breakfast dishes. “Kristof works for us. And that’s it! The sooner he wakes up to that reality, the better!” Franck scratched his nearly-bald head. “Tamara, sweet Tamara. I can retire tomorrow if I so desired. However, I enjoy traveling too much – visiting wonderful friends like you – to hang up my leather overcoat quite yet. Whatever work you believe I have to do can wait.” Tamara didn’t hear him since she had already scurried back to the kitchen. “Kristof, give the horses a larger portion of oats today. We will leave for town within the hour.” “An hour? And more oats? Yes sir! I got it!” With that, he put on his coat. “Should I use the kitchen or the front door?” “Front door, please. Leave the girls alone. They have things to finish in there and don’t need any more distractions. Now go on outside. I’ll bid Uncle Franck goodbye for all of us.” “Goodbye? That sounds so definite... so final.” Franck headed for the front door, following Patrik’s lead. He left the warm confines of the dining room so Tamara and

Galena could finish without any more interruptions. Once outside, Patrik stopped at the top of the porch steps. “So, tell me again where you’re heading? East? Back to Lycentia?” “No, no. I left the capital city a few days ago. I’m heading for Dreut.” “What? I thought you’d given up going that far west? Too dangerous for an old merchant like you... isn’t that what you’ve said? What are you planning to buy or sell there that you can’t proffer in a safer environment?” “Oh, don’t misunderstand, good friend. I’m not going to the front to make any gold. My motives are much more juvenile than that!” he said, laughing. “I heard that there’s this Haarigoian named Ulek.... quite huge and quite ugly... with a temperament akin to a wounded wolverine... only twice as mean. He’s challenged the commander there to a duel of some kind and....” “A duel?” Patrik asked, looking up at the clouds. Small patches of blue stood out behind much larger areas of gray and white. “What kind of duel? That doesn’t sound like something any Haarigoian could conceive on his own.” “Ha! I can’t agree more,” Franck continued. “Since I was headed for a Rigarian village but a few miles from the border....” “Eh? Rigarians? What has gotten into your head lately? Haven’t you been warned to stay away from those traitors?” “Yes. And then again... no. Why do you keep interrupting?” By the time Kristof had led Fairchild to the porch – to be burdened once again with the weight of the rotund businessman and his belongings – Franck had summarized all he knew about the most recent skirmishes between the Lycentians and the Haarigoians. While the two friends finished their conversation, Kristof

brushed the horse one more time. “Kristof, you pamper that horse like he’s your own. If I only had a few gold coins, I’d give one to you.” “Oh, not to worry. My wages here more than compensate me for my efforts,” he said, his words ending on a higher pitch. “Ha! That is highly unlikely! If I were to ask Tamara, I’m sure she’d say that you’re grossly overpaid!” Even with that taunt, he reached into a pouch hanging from his right side. “Here... add this to your bank account.” Franck said and winked. It was a silver coin. Kristof nodded his head. “Thank you, fine sir. You are always welcome at The Lonely Fox,” he said, bowing much too deeply for the occasion. “Kristof! Come back to the barn! Hurry! I need your help with something!” Galena yelled as she headed for the modest structure the family courteously referred to as “the barn.” The hireling, leaving the two men to see what Galena was so emphatic about, waved good-bye but said nothing more. “I suppose it’s time for me to go, my white-haired friend. Please express my sincere gratitude to your lovely daughters for another fine stay.” “I will do that. When do you think you’ll be heading home to Lycentia?” “Can’t say for sure. You know the life I lead now – with Sereal wishing I were dead! Ha!” Patrik thought about the last time he had seen Franck’s red-haired Knaesin wife. “Can’t say I regret her temper, though, knowing that I’d probably behave much the same way if there was any Knaesin blood flowing through my veins.” And with those being the last words that the innkeeper thought he would hear from the portly traveler for many months, Patrik stepped back onto the porch, smiling as he

looked up at what had turned into a nearly blue sky. A solitary cloud caught his attention for a moment, then he opened the door of the inn. “Innkeeper, may I have a word with you?” Patrik was startled and looked for the source of the voice. It was the other guest. “Yes sir, what may I help you with?” “Before arriving here last night, I met two trappers on the road west of here who said they knew you.” Patrik’s eyes became large and lively as he talked to the man. In the course of that short conversation, Patrik learned that the traveler had sold a trap to the trappers. He, then, sensing that this was an opportunity to illicit some comments about his inventions, asked the guest to look at a trap that he’d been designing. The merchant politely declined, emphasizing that he, like Franck, needed to be going. Patrik thanked him for the information about the trappers, and the conversation ended as abruptly as it began.