

Lincoln poked agitatedly at the dead squirrel with the point of his bastard sword, as if to anger it enough that it might come back to life so he could kill it again. All in all, the squirrel had been the most dangerous thing he'd slain today. Aside from that, he had successfully detained three sticks, a rock, and a particularly hostile-looking bush.

Lincoln's sword shrunk to the size of a dagger as he returned it to its sheath. Absalon could think of seventeen different reasons why someone would want a sword that got bigger when unsheathed, and sixteen of them he had invented simply to avoid thinking about the first. It didn't help that Lincoln was a small man with a high-pitched squeaky voice. He had grown a beard since Absalon last saw him, but that just made him instead look like a small Abraham Lincoln with a high-pitched squeaky voice, hence the nickname.

Absalon couldn't for the life of him remember Lincoln's real name, which was odd, considering Lincoln shouted it along with some other gibberish whenever he unsheathed that damn sword.

“Blah Blah Blah! Bloo de blee, dee blah dee blay!” *Shiing!*

Absalon had to admit he was good with it, he apparently had knocked out a hawk mid-flight, which now rested in a heap on top of the squirrel. Absalon wished he had been paying more attention; he couldn't imagine Lincoln reaching high enough to get even the lowest-flying bird.

“Blah blah blah, bloo blee blah blo! Hee hee hee! ”

Lincoln attempted a hearty guffaw, but it came out more of a giggle. Hurriedly straightening up, he reached up and thumped Absalon on the back. In doing this, though, he had to stand on his toes, which made him look even more childish. Absalon scowled good-naturedly, and they continued deeper into the forest.

Now, Absalon was expert on forests, but this one seemed quite exactly like a normal forest. The ground was covered with dead leaves and pine needles, trees seemed scattered about the surface in the usual haphazard fashion, and-

“Blah!” shouted Lincoln, rudely derailing his train of thought. Ignoring him, Absalon continued

examining the forest, walking headfirst into a tree.

“You should be more careful.” said Lincoln, offering Absalon a hand up. Rubbing his head, Absalon decided to pay more attention to where he was going, and maybe even make an effort to listen to what people are saying. “That sycamore saved your life. You nearly fell into that death stream there.”

Lincoln chuckled, pointing a short, stubby finger at a pitch black creek in front of them.

The bones of various animals lined the banks of the creek, and all the leaves in it were brown and dried, but it wasn't a death stream. “That's not a death stream,” Absalon frowned, watching the reflections of the light playing on the surface. “This is a stream of thirst.”

Absalon pulled a healthy green leaf off the sycamore and dunked it in the creek to demonstrate his point. Just as he had expected, it shriveled and turned brown as the water left it to go who-knows-where. Lincoln pursed his lips agitatedly, “Fiddlesticks,” he mumbled, “I was sure I'd got it that time.”

“A death stream is blacker than black.” Absalon replied. “No light escapes a death stream. It all gets sucked in. Thus, these reflections,” he lectured, gesturing lazily towards a bright patch on the creek, “do not appear.”

Absalon jotted a little X on his clipboard and scribbled “Thirst Stream” in the adjacent blank. “It's really basic stuff. Did you even *look* at the handout I gave you?”

Lincoln didn't reply, but crossed his arms and looked stubbornly away like a defiant child. Absalon rolled his eyes and carefully stepped over the stream, thanking his long legs that he did not need to risk jumping. Lincoln was not so lucky and would certainly have to jump. Fortunately, as Absalon observed when he turned to look, Lincoln appeared to have become a large frog.

Before Absalon could ponder what part of the forest might have performed such a complex transformation spell so efficiently, something hit him squarely in the back of the head and he collapsed. He was vaguely aware of hitting his head on another tree before blacking out. He was pretty sure it wasn't a sycamore.

“I am the Frog King!” bellowed what was apparently the Frog King. He didn't look much like a king. He did have a crown, but it was clearly designed for someone much smaller than he; probably a real king. Other than that, he looked quite exactly like a gigantic frog. He *sounded* like a moron.

Moron or no, he was big. Absalon straightened up; he hated feeling short. He looked over at Lincoln, who, as it turned out, had never turned into a frog; rather he had simply been replaced by one. Absalon hated how magical pollution had made it completely reasonable to assume the completely preposterous. He didn't even know what people liked so much about that wand factory upstream. What kind of wands did they make? He couldn't remember. Something stupid, probably. Th-

“Who are you who enter my forest!?” thundered the Frog King, interrupting Absalon's train of thought. Absalon saw Lincoln's sword hand twitch, and decided that if one of them had to talk, it should not be him.

“I am Absalon Cartel, and this is my associate ...” it occurred to Absalon that he couldn't remember Lincoln's real name.

“James Bartholomew Kesling.” finished Lincoln after a short pause, shooting Absalon a queer look, “We are here in response to complaints regarding thefts of livestock and various comestibles. Also you are residing in a public forest. As sentient beings you should register yourselves with the Bureau and purchase land of your own.” Absalon saw a smile slide across Lincoln's face as the Frog King's eyes narrowed suspiciously. If Absalon knew anything about Lincoln, he liked a fight.

“You are, of course,” Absalon blurted diplomatically, trying to silently urge Lincoln to note the legion of man-sized frogs surrounding them, “welcome to declare yourself as the caretakers of this forest. As magically altered beasts, you have the right to inhabit your forest of origin.”

“But,” retorted Lincoln, shooting Absalon another look, “You still should send someone to the Bureau to *declare* yourself as such. Also, you should stop stealing sheep.”

“If you have been”

“Which you probably have”

“Not that we have any evidence that it was you”

“Except that you're the only beings in this forest clever enough to do something like that.”

“They're not *that* clever-”

“**Enough!**” exploded the Frog King. “This is MY forest! I will fill out no forms!”

Absalon suddenly realized he still had his clipboard. He scratched out another X next to “hostile inhabitants” and was just about to scribble “frogs” when his pen suddenly left his hand.

“There, see!?” whispered Lincoln triumphantly, “they *are* thieves!”

With that, the diplomacy had ended. The Frog King's tongue shot out again, but, *SHIING!* With a flash of Lincoln's blade, instead of yanking the clipboard away, simply hung limply off of it, gushing blood. Gross. Absalon moved to pull the thing off his clipboard, but Lincoln seized his arm and tugged him away as the Frog King roared in pain, screaming incoherent gibberish (which, it later occurred to Absalon, was probably related to the fact that his tongue had just been cut off).

Fortunately, the other frogs also seemed to have trouble understanding their king, for they stood with stupid looks of incomprehension on their faces as Lincoln dragged Absalon away from the circle. Unfortunately, the King apparently finally managed to get his meaning across, as a wave of frogs came leaping after them after only a couple minutes' running.

Absalon suddenly realized what was happening and wrenched his hand away from Lincoln. He could run himself. Lincoln didn't mind at all. Rather, he immediately used his now free hand to pull a rainbow-colored ball-bearing which Absalon immediately recognized as an unusually large mage bomb, out from his inside coat pocket. Whispering to it, he chucked it behind him. A massive explosion of color blasted back the wave of frogs, sending a few small trees flying in the process, but the legion was not long stalled. As the sugary-grape smelling wind from the explosion ruffled his and Absalon's clothing, Lincoln glanced furtively at Absalon and plunged his hand into a small sack on his belt.

With a little effort, Lincoln withdrew another mage bomb, this one the size of a baseball, the

iridescent colors shifting wildly on its surface. Absalon opened his mouth in protest, but before he could say anything the bomb was sailing through the air at the frogs. It hit one in the head, sinking into its rubbery face before rebounding back out and landing on the ground.

“Are you crazy!?” asked Absalon in a strained whisper.

“Don't worry,” assured Lincoln, “we have about three minutes to escape.”

Absalon lost count of the seconds after only one minute, but they did manage to get barely outside of the blast radius, being only knocked over and covered in grape-flavored frog guts. Absalon didn't know exactly how bad dead frogs smelled, but as far as which was less pleasant he decided it was a pretty close call between it and the candy-grape smell of a freshly detonated mage bomb.

Absalon didn't need an alarm clock. Lincoln would always call him at 6:30 AM on the mark with the day's new task. Absalon's novelty phone (“issued” to him by Lincoln a few weeks ago) vibrated above its stand like the ones in the cartoons. Little black parentheses and bold-font “Ring! Ring!”s encircled it as it blared “The saints come marching in” on two-bit stereo. Absalon could never figure out why it didn't just use an illusion to conjure some real music. He pondered this groggily as he picked up the receiver.

“Hi, there, Absalon!” rang Lincoln's voice, distorted to sound like two-bit stereo, “Today, we've got to go check out the Everwood Forest!”

Absalon blinked. “Didn't you blow that up yesterday?”

“Yes!” chirped Lincoln, ever the morning person, “but it grew back! See you at 8:00!”

Absalon groaned. And people wondered why he hated magic.