

MS Fiction Presents...

ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 99-05SE



Castle 2

Return To Domum

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Castle, book two
The Return to Domum
By J H Wear

Lord Perry stared at the messenger. "Say again, there's some sort of disturbance of the ground and air?"

The messenger wasn't fond of giving difficult news to powerful lords but he was obligated to relay the information as quickly as possible. "Quite so. There's a front of something that is moving through Horstruff."

"I better have a look at that." Lord Perry got up and rushed by the messenger, who quickly followed him. Sir Perry went down a corridor and entered a small dining room that had a grand view of Horstruff. The room opened to a balcony and there he stood, now with several servants and the messenger behind him, staring at the distant landscape and buildings that made up Horstruff.

"What the devil..."

The area close to the castle looked normal enough, though there was a hurried movement of people all in one direction. Lord Perry had seen that sight before, just before major battles when sometimes a whole village disappeared into the roads and woods beyond. Those who had horses used them to either carry themselves or their possessions. The wealthy used carriages to transport themselves as well as their valuables. Those on foot carried what they could, including crying infants.

He looked behind the scurrying movement and saw the border between what Horstruff was, and now a conglomerate of strange looking plants. The boundary itself was a blurred line, bending and curving like a wave on a seashore, rushing forward with the speed of a man's fast walk.

"Horse and carriage, immediately."

* * * *

The driver stopped the carriage as close as he dared. Normally it would be difficult to travel against a hoard of humanity trying to leave Horstruff but the town people were accustomed to giving way to nobles and to Lord Perry, in particular. There were cries of "Turn back! Turn back, Lord Perry!" but instead the driver continued his hurried race down the street. As they approached the border there became less and less people until it was all but deserted except for those too weak to run. Some of those were praying, others begging Lord Perry for help.

After the carriage stopped Lord Perry ventured towards the disturbance.

"It looks like chaos Lord Perry." A corporal in Lord Perry's personal guards stood slightly behind him.

"Chaos?" He watched the edge of the border, as series of bubbles varying from smaller than he could see to almost a foot in diameter. The bubbles were almost transparent, their outline seen as a distortion of the air and ground. The surface of the ground looked like boiling mud as it reshaped to a new configuration. "Perhaps, or maybe a new order. Those plants you see, and look at that creature over there!" He pointed at a green and yellow spotted medium dog-sized animal carefully eating some plant leaves. "Have you seen that before?"

“Nay, Lord Perry, I can’t say I have. Perhaps we should be getting back to the carriage?”

“Yes, in a moment. Those plants used to live all over Domum until Earth plant life forced them out. They still can be found in the more remote areas of Domum. I suspect that plant eater was at one time a common habitant here as well. It looks like the natural life of Domum is trying to push us out.” He pointed out a nearby stone structure, half of which used be a small home. The other half had disappeared as the bubbles of distortion simply ate it away. “The problem, corporal, is that we may well find that there isn’t any place to run.”

* * * *

Lord Perry’s carriage rumbled down the road leading out of Horstruff. They had been traveling for two days, passing many that were traveling on foot. Lord Perry sat in the bouncing carriage and pondered at what was happening, wondered what happened to all those who were caught behind the distortion. That included Lord Troy and he felt as if his uncle had died. Lord Perry wondered how far and long they could travel before the distortion caught up with them. Sooner or later they would have to choose to head towards to the mountains or towards the sea.

Travel over the mountain would be difficult and slow, faster if he left the carriage behind and just used the horses. The sea would be a dead-end except he could commandeer a ship and continue on with their escape. He wondered if their flight was only delaying the inevitable, that eventually they would be caught no matter how fast or far they went. He rubbed his forehead, thinking that if only he knew how the distortion came into being he might be able to stop it. So far he heard via the messengers that several warlocks, witches and wizards had perished as they tried to stop the advancing wave.

He tapped on the roof of the carriage. “Driver, head to coastline. Corporal Jennings, send one of the guards ahead to procure a ship for us to travel in.”

* * * *

“Really Gilbert, I do dislike asking you do to do this but what other options are there?” Lord Troy spread his hands.

“Do nothin’.” Gilbert clutched his tankard of ale with both hands and looked back at the six people watching him.

“But Gilbert, we could be stuck here forever if we do nothing,” Patricia softly retorted and then gave him a smile.

“Maybe better here forever than Gilbert gettin’ killed.”

Lord Troy closed his eyes for a moment before speaking. “Gilbert, I can’t leave the perimeter of the grounds, as you know, and these ladies are not well versed in journeys without roads. Eventually we’ll have to leave the castle to get food as our stores will not last forever. So far we haven’t seen any evidence of hostile wildlife and we’ll equip you the best we can.”

Gilbert took another big gulp of his ale but didn’t say anything.

Gwyneth tried to convince him. “All you have to travel to is to where the gate to Earth would be located in what used to be Lord Bennett’s castle. Once you slip through there you’d be safer than you’d be here.”

“If. Maybe gate not there, maybe it goes not to Earth from here.”

Marisa stood up and put her hands on her hips. “Fine, stay here and do nothing and wait until we run out of food. Myself, I think I’ll travel to where that gate is. Maybe I can borrow some crystals to try to cross over to Earth to get some help.”

Gilbert shook his head. “That dangerous. Need special crystal to travel to Earth and you might be too big.”

“Nonsense, you weigh about the same as I do. If you can travel there, so can I.”

“Earth different from Domum, you be lost there.”

“Better than waiting here to slowly starve to death.”

“We not starve. We cans hunt for food here.”

“Isn’t that dangerous to hunt for food out there?”

“Not if we prepare...” Gilbert blinked and then slowly released his breath. “You try to trick Gilbert.”

“No, I wouldn’t do that to our friend. I’m just saying someone has to try to rescue us and if you won’t go, I will.”

Gilbert squeezed his hands into fists. “No, I’ll go. Leave in morning.”

* * * *

Morning came and a persistent knocking on the door woke Gilbert. Grumbling, he made his way to the second level dining room to have breakfast where he slumped in his chair and stabbed at slices of pork with his fork off a large oval plate. He then scooped eggs on to his plate and began to eat.

Gilbert eventually looked around the table and nodded at the others who were just finishing up their own meals. Gilbert felt like he was being sacrificed to save the others on the possibility the gate to Earth still existed. He didn’t want to go, risks of any kind were to be avoided unless there was a potential of reward. To Gilbert the risks of going to the gate were higher than the possibility of the gate existing. Still he knew the others would see him as being selfish if he didn’t and eventually force him to go. Thus he reluctantly agreed and now sulked as he ate his breakfast.

Lord Troy and the women were dressed casually for breakfast, save for Marisa who not only was wearing her usual long skirt but also a blouse and a leather vest.

She noticed he was staring her and gave him a grin. “I’m going with you.”

“You is?”

“I wouldn’t ask you to go all by yourself.”

Gilbert looked visibly happier. “That good. More fun, safer that way.”

Both Marisa and Gilbert carried swords, knives and a backpack. Lord Troy also gave Marisa some special crystals to aid her traveling through the gate to Earth. Gilbert wanted to fill a sheepskin with brandy but Lord Troy nixed that idea and he had to settle for water.

They left via the front door and made their way through the maze of six-foot high hedges Lord Troy had planted to discourage casual visitors. Guards protected most castles but Lord Troy found that a maze to his front door was an effective deterrent. Unwanted visitors that did make their way through the maze were then greeted by magic spells from Lord Troy himself if he didn’t want them.

After they made their way out of the maze, they were confronted by a proliferation of plants of various colors. Some of the plants reached more than a dozen feet in the air

using thick tree like trunks made of leaves intertwined with stems. Odd flowers and fruits hung from some of the plants and Marisa stopped to sniff at some of flowers. Gilbert grumbled at her, complaining she was delaying their journey.

“Hurry ups. We must keeps moving.”

“We can spare a few minutes now and then. Do you think the fruit would be safe to eat?”

“Safe if yous want to die.”

He plodded on ahead of her and she had to hurry to catch up.

Marisa had worked hard to convince Lord Troy that someone, such as herself, should accompany Gilbert on his journey. She cited safety in numbers, making sure Gilbert actually went through the gate to Earth and how it wasn't fair to send him out on his own. Lord Troy took his time deciding but eventually told her she could join him. Marisa wasn't too worried about any danger. The thought of freedom, however short, was too enticing.

She had been a slave since she was fourteen and had become an orphan. She had been sold from one household to another, to taverns and eventually she ended up in Lord Troy's castle. She had had more than one chance to get out of slavery, after she had spent five years working in a tavern and had fulfilled her contract she became a free woman. Unfortunately she managed to get herself in difficulties with the law a short time later and ended up back in court. Lord Troy purchased her and she resigned herself to another five-year contract as a slave.

He was different than most owners and he made it clear what he expected of her. He offered her a choice to go back to the court and be purchased by someone else if she desired. But she had both seen and been in far worse situations and decided living in a castle was better than working in a tavern. She also seen people like Gilbert, and though he was a freeman, he didn't live as well as she did.

For now, she was happy to follow Gilbert out into the strange world of colourful plants and odd animals. So far, there wasn't much in the way of predators, just the occasional wolf size creature covered with green and yellow scales. She also observed a group of small dragons flying overhead. Dragons were often creatures to be feared but to Marisa they were a moment of familiarity in a strange world.

They worked their way among the foliage, brushing away stray leaves, insects and a few times birds smaller than a humming bird. Gilbert didn't do much talking and it was up to Marisa to carry the conversation. She chattered away and he responded with reluctant grunts before he turned around and admonished her.

“Could ye quitcha jabbering? There might be somethin' out here tryin' to eat us.”

“Nothing big lives here. Every animal we've seen is small. No trees, just these oversize plants.”

“So far.”

She sighed and took to just looking and plucking the odd flower as they made their way to where a gate was suppose to exist. She glanced back behind her to look at a green flowered plant with red leaves. A blur of something black and furry ducked behind a bush a hundred feet behind them.

“Gilbert?”

“What now?”

“Something is following us.”

“I knew it. Ye talkin’ has done us in.” Gilbert turned around and crouched on one knee, raising his sword in the process.

“It’s just one small animal.”

“Could be more. Surrounding us.”

“Don’t be silly. Why would they do that?” She walked past him to continue the journey.

“Hey! I’s suppose to be leadin’.”

Whatever that was following them was keeping a safe distance. Occasionally Marisa and Gilbert would look around behind but the creature was quick to hide behind a large plant or bush.

“Whatever it is I don’t think we have to worry about it. It seems only curious about us.”

“Maybe. Me thinks it might be a gnant.”

“A gnant? I guess they could be in this strange world...what did Lord Troy say? An alternate world?”

“Yeah, he says that. Me don’t knows ‘bout that. But it has something to do with that Dacron Gem. Me don’ts know why he was so keen to use it.”

“Him? I thought you were the one trying to get him to look up spells to activate it.”

He waved his hand at her. “Sure to learns about it, not to actually use it.”

“Gilbert, that’s nonsense and you know it. You’re at as much fault as he is for this mess.”

“Fine thing, blame me while I risk me neck to go to Earth.”

“Gilbert,” she whispered, “I see two of those creatures now. They’re gnants.”

“Getcha sword ready, they gonna attack!”