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Warnings We Do Not Heed

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### Sister Bernadette at the Apostle of the Reeds

Sister Bernadette of the Irons was not as strong as her namesake implied. Nor was she particularly fierce compared to the rest of her Order. But she was brave. And clever. And she knew the value of keeping one's ego in check. Especially when dealing with a Donsby – a creature so sensitive they often felt maligned at the slightest provocation even when no offense had been offered.

Our arrival at the Apostle of the Reeds, Sister Bernadette and I, was not by coincidence. Nor fortuitous by anyone's account. We were sent by direction from the head of the Order to prevent a travesty of justice – namely keeping a Donsby from stealing sacred land from the Bellabee's who had lived at the Apostle of the Reeds on the Relend Front of the Veldt for centuries.

"When we arrive, young squire," Sister Bernadette counseled, "try your best to be as motionless and unobtrusive as your formidable size allows. I have been lead to believe you are quite gifted in this area. Or have I been mis-informed?"

"No, Sister, not at all. I mean, yes Sister, you have not been mis-informed," I explained, "The Discipline of the Statue is one of my specialties. I can remain in any position desired, motionless for nigh on eight hours without a flinch or a quiver. Would you like me to demonstrate?"

"No, that won't be necessary, young squire. It is enough you have said so. I trust your abilities, otherwise the Academy would not have sent you to me. But be on your guard - to a Donsby, your great size will be intimidating. Even downright challenging to the degree you tower over us all. I permit you to move as you deem best but be aware of your surroundings."

"Yes, Sister."

"And for heaven's sake," Sister Bernadette teased, "try not step on any of them. At least not unintentionally."

"Oh, Sister, I would never!"

"You may also offer silent prayers to our Lord and Savior but look to faster feet if I am unable to temper Donsby Black's pride and we need to move quickly to protect Tribal Elder McCrary and his people. These Donsby negotiations tend to be a pain and can be a true test of any saint's patience. So be at the ready, God preserve us all."

"Yes, Sister."

I knew little about the Donsby clans having overheard rumors here and there from the occasional traveler who visited the Academy. The consensus being the Donsby's were very short in stature, argumentative to a fault, and obsessed with land ownership.

"May I ask a question, Sister?"

"Of course. Seeking knowledge is a virtue."

"Is it true when a Donsby wants to purchase the land of another, they'll simply move onto that very land, set up camp, and remain, along with a detachment or two of their clan marines, till the negotiations are complete?"

“Oh yes. Not only do they move onto the land, but remain days, weeks, sometimes even months engaging in lengthy haggling over the slightest Cree to a shekel difference in asking price. Followed by even longer nights exhausting the benevolent charity of their host clan.”

“So they do take advantage of their host’s charity, then?”

“Very much so. It is a point of pride with them, getting so much for so little.”

“Why do landowners and clans tolerate them? Or even negotiate if they know how terrible the Donsby’s can be?”

“More often than not it is one Donsby clan trying to buy land from another Donsby clan, so hosting is within the family. The Donsby’s pass land back and forth like pieces in chess, using the negotiations to hone their skills, strategize, and test boundaries. But for those who aren’t related, when a Donsby comes calling, it is not generally a welcome sight. Most outside clans try not to negotiate at all.”

“How do they do that? Do they lock their doors and refuse to come out?”

“No, of course not. All clans know they are bound to treat everyone as honored guests, which is law on both sides of the river. No one refuses. It is the way peace is maintained. But clans can become exhausted, and their resources greatly diminished during Donsby negotiations. Most have learned it best to just agree to the Donsby’s price right away even if it means losing ownership of the land. The Donsby’s won’t evict them. And they are allowed to remain as stewards in perpetuity as long as they pay rent. For many, it is a better option than having years’ worth of their stored up winter grain, sundries, and water cut in half during negotiations.”

“Am I to also understand, there has never been a Donsby who has crossed the river for land negotiations in this regard before?”

“You are well informed. Yes, that has been the case. The Veldt has maintained its pristine qualities of ownership, under the Cathedral’s watch, till now.”

“And no one refuses a Donsby once negotiations begin?”

“That is correct.”

“So what happens when Elder McCrary refuses to sell?”

“We will see, young squire, we will see. That appears to be the subtext to our assignment at the Apostle of the Reeds today. The Cathedral has made it clear no land will be sold and no Donsby ever allowed a foothold across the river on the Veldt. Not only that, but we are to ensure they are fully removed from the land,” Sister Bernadette explained. “Let us pray we may accomplish our task without too much difficulty.”

“I will do my best to assist you in any needs you may have, Sister,” I said, “On that I vow.”

“Thank you, young squire. I will hold you to your vow. I see that we have arrived.”

On a dais in the center of the village at the Apostle of the Reeds sat Donsby Black and Tribal Elder McCrary. McCrary sat alone with several villagers nearby ready to provide food and drink as required. Donsby Black, for his part, sat across from the Elder flanked by two full detachments of clan marines, all in full gear, ceremonially lined up behind him on both sides in battle formation. Sister Bernadette approached silently and simply took her assigned seat between the two.

I thought the whole scene, for all its unique disparities between clan, villager, and Sisterhood, looked almost anti-climactic. Still I took my place several paces behind Sister Bernadette and held myself still in *The Tree that Shades* pose, feeling it best under the circumstances.

After the customary pleasantries were completed, Donsby Black wasted no time resuming negotiations where he left off the previous day.

“I have given my last decree on this matter,” Donsby Black thundered at Elder McCrary standing to his full four feet of height and pounding his fist on the table in front of him.

“Thirty Cree is more than ample payment for those few flinty fields. And still you demand sufficiency of purpose? You are a thief if you think I will pay more just because you continue to question my motives like I was some young schoolboy indecisive over which girl he prefers. I assure you, I am no child, and you will not negotiate a higher price, nor delay us here at your village any longer with your impudent delay tactics.”

“Sir Donsby, I in no way impugn your honor. I offer my most sincere respect when I reaffirm, the land is not, nor has it ever been, available for sale. The land will remain as part of the Veldt’s Relend Front of which my clan are the stewards.”

“If you wish no insult, then why have you have summoned a Sister of the Order to interfere with our otherwise peaceful negotiations? If you think you can intimidate me into lowering my price, you are sorely mistaken. I will complete my business transaction with you and be done with the lot! In this, I have the authority of protection and the confidence of my Baron to act when threatened unjustly.”

“What possible threat have we provided?” questioned Elder McCrary.

“As I said, the presence of a Sister is truly insulting,” Donsby Black continued to rage, “And one I take as a hostile and aggressive strategy on your part to force me to lower my asking price. Therefore you will be held responsible for what happens here, as I am forced to protect myself from such aggression.”

And with that Donsby Black raised his left hand and six archers stepped forward from the rank of two dozen clan marines facing the dais. I did not move, as I had been

instructed, remaining still as a tree stump. But I did quickly estimated how fast I could cover the ground and stomp down on all six archers before they notched any arrows. If need be by the order of Sister Bernadette, of course.

“But Mr. Black,” lamented Elder McCrary looking from the archers to Sister Bernadette then back to Donsby Black, “I do not mean to question you, but why would you offer payment for something that is not for sale if you did not have ulterior motive? I am at a loss to your true intentions.”

“Elder McCrary is entirely correct,” Sister Bernadette interrupted standing slowly to her full six feet of height. “Mr. Black, I know you are a man of....vision. And you see much where we mere humble servants do not. And if it were up to me, I would thank you for such a resplendent offer on the south fields. But in this matter, I’m afraid The Cathedral has given specific orders. There is to be no sale of Veldt land along the Relend Front. And no tribal leader or Sister of the Order will acquiesce to any demands by any persons for their sale. No matter how...generous the offer. So you see I am at a loss. It is Cathedral Law.”

“Come now,” grumped Donsby Black, “Why would you invoke such antiquated religious law when you know I am within my rights to force a sale. By the tip of a sword or flight or arrow if need be. It is the current law of the all the lands united under King Leopold VI, is it not?!”

“I see,” Sister Bernadette replied giving me a side glance which I knew meant be prepared for either combat or protection, whichever was required. “Mr. Black, I do not question your knowledge of current kingdom law under your king, but only its applicability in this case. Veldt land, as the Apostle of the Reeds is, is under Cathedral sovereignty governed under Holy Cathedral Law, which the south fields are solidly part of. They have never been under King Leopold’s scope of authority on this side of

the river. Which is purposeful for keeping the peace between our two nations. I believe even your own Baron acknowledges this fact.”

“If he has, and I am not saying he has, I do not recall such a thing. Since it is an insult to say I would cross my own Baron, and my own king’s ruling.”

“As such,” Sister Bernadette spoke while removing her great cross held sword, *Vengeance*, from its scabbard pointing it tip down to the ground between them, “I will offer into consideration a different execution of Cathedral Will if you feel the situation to be...shall we say, untenable. I am well within my rights to invoke the necessary adjustments of holy order law to end this charade.”

The Donsby’s love for land, mainly because of the power it provided, was notorious. They craved it. Sought it in all its forms. And took it when, wherever, and from whomever they could. But not if it meant facing a Sister of the Order in combat. That was a curse and the reason The Cathedral had sent us out to the Apostle of the Reeds in the first – to block Donsby Black from intimidating Elder McCrary into handing over any deed to the south fields. Because a Sister of the Order, once her weapon was drawn, was easily the most formidable force any clan could fear facing. Even if their superior numbers suggested they could assure victory.

“I, er. Well, I see. That is...well...I can see you will not see reason. It has always been a burden to deal with religious zealots. And since I am too benevolent a man to see this transaction turn ugly, I remand my generous offer for the time being and will no longer subject myself to such irrationality. But this matter is far from over, I assure you! I will have my land. And your affront will not stand. Good day all!” Donsby Black turned on his heel, left the dais with as much pride as he could muster, and climbed back into his carriage. “We will away immediately!” he yelled, signaling the driver to drive off while his two dozen clan marines following in suit.

Sister Bernadette and I stood at the dais watching till we were assured Donsby Black and his clan had packed all their belongings, moved off the south fields and were solidly back across the river.

When they were finally out of range, I sat down with a breath of relief. "Well, Sister, that seemed a narrow escape. Could we have managed so many marines without casualty, just you and I?"

"I am glad we did not have to test our limits," Sister Bernadette replied, "I took a risk, but felt the temper gauge was to our advantage. Plus, I'm not quite convinced the whole point to Donsby Black's land grab was nothing more than a deception to test our response. And our mettle. No Donsby has tried to cross the river with such a purpose before. And once I tipped my hand, Donsby Black too quickly relented and was far too willing to leave. He is not particularly intelligent enough to orchestrate such a tactical maneuver either. Not on his own at least. But Baron Donsby Stanmore is. He may well have set this whole affair into motion just to see what The Cathedral would do. And we may have un-intentionally signaled our intent by allowing ourselves to be goaded into confrontation too easily."

"The Veldt remains united and Donsby Black is in the wind. Is that not a victory and how we are to see it?"

"Sadly, I do not know entirely. A small victory does not mean the war is over. But whether this is a failure on my part for showing force too readily or a legitimate land grab on Donsby Black's part to establish a beach head on this side of the river, the next time a Donsby comes, there will be far more of them to contend with."

"But it seemed necessary. Donsby Black all but signaled he would use force to enact the sale when he called forth those archers. You were only doing what was right."



"Listen young squire, and heed the wisdom of my advice, any time you have to rely on your sword to accomplish what your words should mean you've failed to achieve some best course of action. Violence is a language, no doubt, and courage to speak it a virtue when used against evil to protect the innocent. But for those who only speak violence for power indiscriminate have a finite understanding of God's Will and will nary see heaven."

"I'm afraid I don't see it, Sister. A show of force seemed necessary, I think."

"Then I have much more to explain, young squire. You are young. And you have size and strength enough to feel limitless. But, trust me when I say that will not always be the case. And you do not want to be caught a lion in winter. Now let us gather to leave and head back to the Order. We've much to report to the Sister Abbey."

"Yes ma'am."

On the journey back to The Cathedral, as I led the elephant mule, Sister Bernadette inquired, "Do you know your history, young squire? Do they still teach the geopolitical origins of The Cathedral?"

"They must, but I am embarrassed to say I do not recall, Sister. I apologize."

"Apologizes are not necessary between us on this matter. It is not a sin to be ignorant of your host history. But it does leave you at a disadvantage. Far more than strength of muscle, knowledge is the great accomplishment and can defeat even the toughest of enemies if applied correctly."

"I am not sure I understand completely, Sister."

“Do you not know what began the animosities between the Donsby’s of Lark Kingdom and The Cathedral of the Veldt? Do they not teach such at the Academy?”

“No, Sister. I am sure they do. But history was never my best subject. I focused more on the practical arts in school – combat tactics, weapons maintenance, navigation, and the healing arts in preparation to serve the Sisterhood as a squire.”

“Pragmatic subjects to be sure, and quite valuable in their own right. But not as valuable as history. Though you may not consider this so. I am definitely in the minority among the Sisters there as well. But knowing history gives you more than just knowledge of dates and events, it gives you understanding of entire clans in action over spans of time. Knowing such, and how often people will follow the same patterns as their ancestors before them, gives valuable insight into the future actions of those same clans.”

“How can that be? How can you say the past will be the same as the future when we’ve evolved so far, Sister?”

“Have we? We may have greater technology and improved grids of social influence. And we may no longer live in isolated, nomadic bands of few people. But can you really say we still don’t want the same things as our ancestors did? To be happy, to have our desires fulfilled, to apply meaning and purpose to our lives? Even our efforts to gain power, status, money, women, wine, and song are the same, are they not?”

“Well, when you put it like that, I don’t really know, Sister. Does everyone wanting the same things really not make us different? I think we are much more enlightened than our ancestors. We no longer rely on superstition. We are much more spiritually attuned to our Lord and no longer live in the forests worshiping trees like common animals.”

“Young squire, the only thing that makes us any different from the animals are that we have tools, symbols, and gods. One true God in our case. The same could be said is true between our ancestors and the animal kingdom. But when it comes to being human, we are no different. We want the same wants, feel the same desires, and, as is often the case, make the same mistakes we once did. History tells us this is true. It plays out across generation after generation no matter how advanced our technology becomes. And we can predict the future. If we pay attention to the past.”

“If that is so, Sister, then can you tell me what the Donsby’s will do next.”

“I can. They will return to the Veldt with new demands. And if those fail, then again. Till either war breaks out or they get what they want. Possibly both.”

“But why? Even in the entirety of their warrior clans, I do not believe they could withstand the Sisters of the Order in open conflict. Especially along the Veldt. God gave grace sufficient for The Cathedral and His people to protect this side of the river. Or is that not so?”

“True, but they have their pride. And their pride is wrapped up in their desire for land. To deny a Donsby one is to insult the other. Do you not know that Pride is the gravest of all sins among all the clans this side of heaven? Pride will keep the Donsby’s returning again and again. Pride will even keep us from withdrawing.”

“How so, Sister?”

“Since we still have a few hours left to travel till we reach the Cathedral, young squire, I will tell you a story. A story that starts simply enough with a rabbit walking in the woods.”

I generally did not delight in stories. Nor did my people. We were a literally minded clan who delighted more in the practical analysis and critique of our day’s activity rather than any bedtime story involving moral relativism. But since it was Sister

Bernadette, and she a wise women whom I had a great deal of respect for, and it being a squire's job to assist where needed, I gave reign to my elephant mule to guide itself and listened to the tale Sister Bernadette told.

"In the oldest tradition," Sister Bernadette began, "once upon a time, there was a Fox and a Hound who lived in packs on the very land we currently find ourselves on. They were not of the same clan, but did work together, cooperating in order to feed their families and preserve the safety of their homes. But, Fox and Hound discovered a new enemy. Rabbit. Rabbit, who moved onto the land just before winter to homestead, bringing with him a large family who ran everywhere, trampled their orchards, ate heavily from their gardens and dipped into the stores they laid aside for the winter months."

"Are the Donsby's the Rabbit?" I interrupted.

"So it would seem young squire. Now, may I continue?"

"Yes, of course Sister."

"Fox and Hound tried to reason with Rabbit, but Rabbit would hear none of it.

'This is the way of things now,' Rabbit told them. 'We all have a right to the land.'

When Fox and Hound protested explaining how not only did they own the land first, but the land had finite resources which could only support two families and not three – not at the rate Rabbit and his clan consumed. Furthermore, they were the rightful stewards of the land who sought to preserve balance. But Rabbit rebuffed their assertions.

'Just because you arrived before I did does not give you precedent. Nor do your reasons stand scrutiny. The land is plentiful and can support everyone. I think you are

just set in your ways and don't like to share what God has blessed you with all these years. You are quite selfish to be so dogmatic.'

Fox and Hound were angered and resolved to get revenge. Not just because Rabbit refused to see reason, but because he had insulted them as well for their good stewardship of the land. They determined then and there to capture Rabbit and force him from their lands. But Rabbit was too fast for them and no amount of their chasing could capture him.

Fox and Hound used their superior technology and set a trap. They gathered honey, and with twig and berries, fashioned a decoy rabbit out of the material knowing Rabbit could not resist. Then they set the decoy rabbit under a tree with a net hanging above.

"Did it work?" I asked. "Did they trap the Rabbit?" I was surprised how invested I had become so quickly.

"It so happens," Sister Bernadette continued, "Rabbit did happen upon the decoy and did become stuck to it. And Fox and Hound did drop their net on Rabbit, successfully capturing him. But now what to do with Rabbit?"

'Oh you terrible beasts,' Rabbit scolded. 'Who gave you the right?! I have done nothing to harm you, yet you try to harm me. How is that fair? Or just or righteous. I think you are hypocrites.'

And while Fox and Hound were figuring the best way to rid themselves of Rabbit, Rabbit noticed a briar patch and got an idea to use their own psychology against them. If he could get them to throw him into the briar patch, he would be free because Rabbit's loved briar patches.

'Oh, brothers, I get it. You believe me to have done harm. And so I understand you want me and my family to leave. If you release me, then I will do just that. I will gather

my family and go. But please, I have done nothing so harmful to you that you should harm me in return. I ask you not cause me injury. Such as throw me in that Briar Patch over there. For the thorns look sharp and I would surely be cut to bits.

Fox and Hound smiled not realizing Rabbit was tricking them.

'That is a good idea,' Fox said.

'Indeed,' Hound replied, 'Briar patches are dangerous. I have stumbled across them a time or two and they can cause serious injury if not careful.'

'Then it is decided. For the good of the land we will throw Rabbit into the briar patch and watch him till he dies.'

'Yes, then we will certainly be rid of him and his nuisance of a family.'

So Fox and Hound picked up Rabbit and threw him into the briar patch. Rabbit landed and easily slipped past the thorns and into the briar patch were neither Fox nor Hound could follow.

Rabbit laughed. 'Oh, you aren't so smart! And you have no power here. My family and I are safe. And since you mean us harm, my family and I will continue to live on this land making our home in the briar patch so you cannot follow. We will flourish and be a reminder to you how selfish your ways. And how you cannot outwit a superior Rabbit.'

And so it remains to this day. Rabbits proliferating, using the briar patches and underground burrows for protection. The Fox and the Hound enemies of the Rabbit, struggling to survive in small numbers, and hunting Rabbits with animosity ever since."

"I don't like the Rabbit," I said.

“Why?” Sister Bernadette asked. “What wrong did he exactly do?”

“He ate too much and took too much without asking. That wasn’t fair to the Fox or the Hound.”

“But that’s not how the Rabbit saw it. Rabbit thought he deserved the same access to the land as Fox and Hound. Even if he didn’t follow their rules concerning it.”

“Yes, but the Rabbit was wrong.”

“Not according to the Rabbit. And there you see the dilemma.”

“I don’t Sister. Please explain.”

“To the Rabbit, he was just doing what came natural. Trying to live. More so, he believed he had a right to live any way he choose, just like the Fox and the Hound. Even if it wasn’t in the fashion Fox and Hound preferred. Even if detrimental to the other’s way of life. And there you see the problem with the Donsby’s.”

“They believe they have a right to the Veldt?” I gasped. “And will take without conscience. But we must not let them! We must strike them down!”

“And did the Rabbit and the Briar Patch not give you pause? If we use force, there is always the likelihood we will lose. Or be outsmarted if the Donsby’s take refuge in the proverbial briar patch. We don’t want to fall victim to the same predicament Fox and Hound found themselves in. Casting the Rabbit into the Briar patch so to speak. Which I suspect is what Baron Stanmore Donsby was trying to do.”

“So what do we do, Sister, if force is not the answer?”

“I cannot speak for the Order, young squire, but I suspect we must outsmart them at their own game.”

“How do we do that?”

“Simple. Give them what they want. Or what they think they want. Then use reverse psychology by making what they want so disagreeable, so unprofitable, they will beg for us to take the land back. Use their desires against them till their burden is too great to continue and they will never want to cross the river again.”

“And how do we do that, Sister?”

“Ah, for that, young squire, I must tell you another story.”

And so Sister Bernadette continued my education as we returned to the Cathedral of the Order hoping to preserve the Veldt.

The End.