

## CHAPTER TWO: A MOST UNUSUAL PROBLEM

There were, in fact, rabbits in East Kenting, although Pim had not seen one of them since entering the wood. But most other things seemed to be out enjoying the warm, evening air. Birds fluttered and chirped as they gathered their last morsels before dark. Squirrels gave chase one last time, chattering at one another as they leapt from one tree to another. The Pines were alive with crickets and fireflies waking up as the creatures of daylight prepared to settle down, and Pim enjoyed it all. Aunt Marion had taught him to identify every bird call, and most if not all of the other sounds of the woods. She claimed it was actual music, although Pim wasn't sure he would go that far.

The evening air was warmer than usual for early summer, and Pim was staying out later than usual to enjoy it, taking in the fresh smell of the Pines and pushing the pine needles beneath his feet with the tip of a great walking stick he had picked up at the edge of the wood. It was nice to get away and to be alone for a while, he thought, although a part of him hoped that Marshall might pass through the Pines on the way home from his hunting trip. He was due back any day now, and Pim missed the company of his friend. He sighed and moved on, trying to imitate the noiseless way Marshall moved about in the forest.

But the game soon lost its interest, as Pim began to feel uneasy. There's something different about the Pines tonight, he thought. The sounds are disturbed, and everything seems alert. "Is someone there?" A wave of panic swept him as he realized he had spoken aloud. Nervously, Pim looked around. The shadows were deepening, but there was still enough light to see that, if anyone was nearby, they were carefully hidden. He let out a small sigh.

But things did not look as clear as they had a moment before. As Pim watched, the pine trees began to blur, gradually taking the shape of strange people in places Pim did not recognize. Pim froze, a knot quickly developing in the pit of his stomach. He wanted to run, but his body wouldn't respond. Meanwhile, a definite form had taken shape in the trees. Pim tried to look away, the knot inside him getting tighter, but his eyes were as firmly bound to the vision as the rest of him was. There was nothing to do but look.

The image was a short stocky man, a man of some importance, Pim thought. He had a beard, neatly trimmed, and his eyes were merry. Pim's fear subsided a bit, and he somehow felt safe in the presence of this transparent image, despite the mighty axe the man held ready at his side. Pim was about to speak to the man, when man and axe began to fade back into the trees, another image taking its place.

The next was an image of a woman, tall and frail, who seemed to have learning beyond her years. Her eyes spoke of sadness and great loss, and Pim stood still before her, keenly aware that hers was a struggle in which he was powerless to help. He bowed his head in honor of her suffering.

When he lifted it again, the woman was gone, and in her place was a man of such power that the rest of the world seemed to cower before him. His eyes were black and cruel, filling Pim with dread, despite the shining gold cape that was draped around the man's broad shoulders.

Pim sighed with relief as this image, too, began to fade, swirling into a chilling, black mist. Pim wanted nothing so much as to get home; but as he turned to go, he found he could no longer see the way. The mist surrounded him, making him shiver despite the warm evening, and the smell of sulphur began to blur his thinking. In place of the crickets was a low, moaning, wailing sound from what creature he could scarcely guess.

"I must get home," he said aloud, and the mist picked up his words. Suddenly, swirling all around him was his own cry, "I must get home," words racing, blurring together into a mournful wail that made his mind reel. Pim stumbled, first in one direction and then another, but there was not a speck of light to be seen anywhere. The wailing became louder, and Pim sank to his knees, and then collapsed, still struggling for control of his mind. "Home, home, home!" it shrieked. Then, suddenly, there was light—brilliant light—and the mist was gone.

Pim was too weak to move, but he could see the source of the light from where he lay. It was his walking stick, now glowing like a red hot ember beside him. The stick quickly turned from red to white and finally caught fire, tongues of smokeless flame dancing across the stick in every color Pim knew of. It was odd that the flame was so colorful, thought Pim, rubbing his head and struggling to sit up. And it was odder still that he could see no smoke and, close as he was, feel no heat. But the thing that made Pim wonder the most was that only the bark seemed to be burning. No doubt about it—the bark was burning away—and when the fire at last died out, an exquisitely carved staff lay in the pine needles.

Suddenly, an icy wind hissed through the branches and an owl screeched from high above the spot where Pim sat. He looked up. A blue mist was spreading through the tree, and from the topmost branch there swung a golden cape filled with the same cruel presence that Pim had felt earlier. He could see eyes as well, eyes at once both as red and as black as coal, waiting to see what Pim would do. Pim fainted, never hearing the laughter that mocked the pines.

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The smell of hot wheatcakes was the only thing that kept Pim from sleeping until noon the next day, and he was still in bed when Aunt Marion's figure graced his doorway. "Pim? How are you?" Her soft voice mingled with the wheatcakes in Pim's sleepy head, and Pim wondered if his mother had been as beautiful.

"Uh, fine, I think," said Pim, trying to shake the sleep, and more importantly the bad dream, out of his head.

"If you're feeling up to it," she continued, "I need you to run an errand before this afternoon."

"Sure thing, Aunt Marion," he said, waking more fully. "I'll be up in a minute."

"Good," said Aunt Marion, "and take that old stick outside when you go. It's probably full of beetles."

Pim sat up in alarm. "What?!" he asked, almost shouting.

"It's not that big of a job, Pim," said Aunt Marion. "Just put the thing outside—before breakfast."

She held it up for him to take.

"Eeek!" cried Pim as he huddled into the opposite corner of the bed.

Aunt Marion laughed and put the stick on the table. "Really, Pim. Are you a boy or a man? It's a stick, not a snake. Are you sure you're all right? Breakfast is served when you're ready." She curtsied and went out, leaving Pim sitting on the bed with the sheet pulled up to his chin.

Rats, he thought, it wasn't a dream. Slowly he reached a shaky hand toward the stick, touching it briefly before jerking his hand back under the covers. Nothing happened, so he tried it again a bit more slowly. Still nothing. A scraping, knocking sound outside caught his attention, and Pim slowly pulled the curtains, finding only a starling, pecking bugs from the windowsill. The ray of brilliant sunlight that fell across the bed made the night before seem a little more distant, and Pim crawled out from under the sheets.

"This is stupid," he said at last, picking up the stick and getting out of bed. "I just had a bad dream. So what if the stick is still here? I did have it with me after all. That's probably why I had the dream." He wasn't a boy anymore, not really. So what was he doing letting nightmares get the best of him like that? Pim got up and dressed, disgusted with himself. Aunt Marion needed a man around to help, not a boy who was afraid to get out of bed in the morning.

"Pim!" Aunt Marion called from the kitchen.

Pim's stomach growled as his nose reminded him that there would be blueberry compote to go on the wheatcakes.

"This is stupid," he said again, and he broke the stick over his knee and threw it out the window, barely missing the starling. "There," he said, brushing his hands together in what he thought was a manly fashion. "And now to breakfast."

Aunt Marion was a superb cook, and soon a full breakfast was joining with the morning sunshine to convince Pim that his fears were nonsense. He laughed at himself.

"Do you ever have nightmares, Aunt Marion?" Pim asked.

She thought a moment. “I don’t much anymore. I used to have them a lot after the tragedy, but I don’t have many now.” She opened the kitchen shutters wide and breathed deeply, her long, ebony hair seeming to float on the summer breeze.

“Did you actually see the King and Queen murdered?” he asked, pouring thick cream on his second helping of wheatcakes.

“Thankfully, no,” said Aunt Marion, turning back from the window. “If I had, I wouldn’t be here now. Your parents were less fortunate. Being the King’s personal attendant, your father, slept close by and your mother with him. They heard the commotion and came running. Loyal to the end.” She was quiet for a moment. “Never were two sisters closer than your mother and I. It hurt a lot to lose her.” Aunt Marion turned back to the window, but Pim had already seen the tear on her cheek.

He looked down at his empty plate, sorry he had made her think about those days once again. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s only natural to want to know, Pim. It’s hard to talk about. Normally in Telen we wouldn’t tell such a tale. We would sing.” She looked at him and smiled. “Your father was a tall man, but at the rate you’re growing—and eating,” she added with a wink, “you’ll be taller yet. Look at you. Easily the best-looking young man in the land—in all of Erdgarth.” She tussled his thick, curly hair. “Your skin may not be as dark as your father’s, but there’s no question at least part of you is of Melnir stock.” Pim sat up a little straighter. “They’re a proud race, and you wear their color well.”

“Ok, ok,” said Pim with a grin. “Flattery will get you everywhere. What is it you want?”

“Honestly, Pim. The things you accuse me of.” Marion smiled. “Do you think such a handsome lad could put on some shoes and get to the market before lunch? That noon curfew is such a nuisance.”

“Why do you suppose they have it,” asked Pim, clearing the table.

“Just to show they can make people do things,” said Aunt Marion. “It used to be better.”

“When you were at the castle?”

“No, even before that. Long before either of us was born. Back when the Light ruled Erdgarth.”

“But there were laws then,” said Pim. “I read about it in history. That’s why the people revolted—there were too many laws.”

Marion sat back down at the table and invited Pim to join her. “That’s what the government history books say, and, in one sense, it’s very true. There were a lot of laws in the days of the Light. But the Light didn’t create laws just to control people. The laws of the Light were put there so that we could live safely together and so that everyone could have peace with justice. But I guess it’s just our nature to dislike being told what to do. When Sindor instigated the five races to rebel, the Light gave them their wish and departed.” She sighed.

“Then there was chaos. Millions of people took the law into their own hands. Oh, it wasn’t long before they realized how necessary it was to have laws.”

“Couldn’t they see that before?”

“Not with Sindor running the show,” said Marion. “Remember, the people of Calut are masters of the mind, and Sindor is chief among them. He could play with their minds like we would play the strings on a harp. By the time they realized what was happening, the deed was done and the Light was gone.”

“So, did they ask the Light to come back?” asked Pim.

Marion smiled. “No, Pim. They hadn’t learned all that much. The races each thought they could rule themselves, and each went to work selecting a ruler and establishing laws.”

“And that wasn’t smart?” Pim was confused.

“It was smarter than living with no laws, but there was much they had forgotten. To begin with, once the races were separated, each race lost the gift of the other four. Together the five races provided balance for each other, but separate each one was prone to go to its own extreme. They also forgot that the Light is unchanging. As a ruler, it was fair and benevolent, not affected by the power it held. Others are not that way. Sometimes there have been good rulers, who have made good laws. But other times there have been very evil rulers, who made thousands of people suffer.”

Suddenly Pim's mind was filled with the image of the sad woman he had seen the night before, and, again, he felt helpless. "Are there evil rulers today?" he asked, knowing somehow that there must be.

"I'm afraid so." Marion stood up. "And then there are rulers like the governors here, who like to show off their power by enforcing stupid laws like noon curfews. Speaking of which..."

"Oh, right," said Pim, getting up. "Sorry, I'll get my shoes. My fee is small."

"Your fee?" said Aunt Marion with a laugh.

"Just the price of the baker's butter sticks, Ma'am," said Pim.

With a good-natured slap to the seat of his pants, Aunt Marion gave him the money, and Pim went back to the bedroom for his shoes. But as he reached under the bed for them, his hand felt something else. Slowly, he drew out the object where he could look at it. His breath caught in his throat. It was the stick he had thrown out the window, and it was in one piece. Pim got his shoes on faster than he thought possible and bolted back out to the kitchen.

"Well," said Aunt Marion. "You can certainly move this morning. After last night, I thought you'd be stiff as a board."

"What do you mean?" asked Pim, trying to conceal the alarm in his voice.

"The forest floor isn't the place you usually choose to sleep, Pim. We were afraid you might be ill."

"We?" asked Pim in a daze.

"Don't you remember anything? Marshall came home last night, found you asleep in the Pines, and carried you home." Aunt Marion shook her head. "You woke up and said you were fine, and he went home. He said he'd drop by this evening, after his hunt. You don't remember that? Are you sure you're all right?"

Pim just shrugged his shoulders. "I think I'll see if Bubot wants to go with me to the market," he said at last and left, breaking into a run as soon as he was out of sight.

Bubot's house was just around the corner, and Pim burst into his friend's room looking as if he had seen a ghost. Bubot did not wait for the ghost and ran into the closet with a shriek. There was a splash and a groan, and soon a puddle of water oozed out from under the closet door.

"Bubot!" cried Pim. "What are you doing?!"

A wet Bubot came out of the closet. "Perhaps that's what I should be asking you," said Bubot somewhat irritated and very soggy. "You scared the daylights out of me!"

"You're soaked!" said Pim, now only barely able to contain a snicker.

"What if I am!" Bubot looked embarrassed. "It was a trap for that brat of a little sister of mine."

"Annar?"

"Who else? She's always snooping through my things, so I thought I'd catch her with this water trap if she went in my closet. You scared me though, and I forgot all about it."

"Sorry," said Pim, who really was, although Bubot did look frightfully funny.

"So?" said Bubot as he sloshed to the other side of the room.

"So what?" asked Pim.

"So there must have been some reason for your charging in here like a runaway horse." Bubot was still a bit put out.

"I'm sorry," said Pim again, and quickly told him the story.

"That's spooky," said Bubot.

"I'll say!" said a small voice in the doorway.

"Annar!" cried Bubot. "How much have you heard?"

"Lots," said Annar. "Why are you all wet?"

Bubot was about to throw the nearest object, when Pim caught his arm. "We had a water fight," said Pim. "Now stop your bickering and tell me what to do."

With effort, Bubot turned his thoughts back to Pim's story. "I think we should go look at the thing."

"Oh, yes, let's do!" squeaked Annar, quite excited.

"Not you," said Bubot. "This is man's work." Bubot stuck out his chest and popped a button. Annar giggled.

"It's already too late," said Pim. "If we don't let her come, she's likely to blab about it to everybody. She had better come with us."

“Well, I guess it’s OK,” said Bubot, not really meaning it, and the three of them prepared to leave.

“We have to stop at the market first,” said Pim. “Aunt Marion needs some things. Now remember, not a word about this to anyone.” And with that they set out.

It was the first really fine day of summer, and all of East Kenting was out to enjoy it. Street vendors sold their wares with a song as children darted under the carts and through the streets, playing games of tag and hide-and-seek. The aroma of baking bread wafted into the streets, mixing with the smells of horses, fresh fish and the slight fragrance of pine. The sun shone brightly, and as its rays warmed his back, Pim tried to sort out his thoughts.

Life at home was mostly routine. All the big cities were in the West or South, and dragons and other exciting things lay South or East. Nothing lay North, and slightly less than that lay in East Kenting with the exception of rabbits, goats, and, if you were lucky, a barn owl or two. An adventure would certainly be a welcome change of pace.

But this might be important. It might even be tied in with those people whose images he had seen. And it might be dangerous—real danger, where people got hurt, or killed, or worse. Pim thought of the black mist that had attacked his mind and shivered. No, this might really matter, and decisions about things that really mattered were for grownups.

And magic was a bother. It was too unpredictable and, although all this business sounded like an adventure of the first order, getting involved with magic sticks just didn’t seem right. Bubot would love it, thought Pim. He was always reading books about magic things. Annar would love it, too. After all, she was too little to understand about danger. And what about Marshall? Pim thought about his other friend for a moment. No, Marshall was much too practical—he wouldn’t even believe the story. Still, thought Pim, he’s been past the borders of East Kenting. He’s seen some strange things. And so Pim’s thoughts wandered as they went to and from the market.

Suddenly his thinking was jarred by an “Oh, no!” from Bubot.

“Pretend you don’t see him,” whispered Annar, but it was too late.

Pim felt a tug on his sleeve. It was Fat Ralph. Scorned by his peers because of his considerable size, Fat Ralph spent his days sniffing out people with sweet things to eat, and his nose had led him to Pim.

“Excuse me,” said Fat Ralph, his round face trying to peek at Pim’s groceries, “but are there sweets in that bag?”

“Uh, why yes, Ralph,” Pim said as he received an elbow in the ribs from Bubot. “Would you like some?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Fat Ralph as he chose out the largest piece. “Nice of you to offer. Where are you guys going?”

“Oh, just home. Nowhere special,” said Pim, trying his best to sound uninteresting. “I have some groceries for my Aunt Marion.”

“Then you won’t mind if I tag along,” mumbled Ralph, his mouth full of butter stick.

Pim did mind and was about to say so when he saw Dora Hutchins by the side of the road.

Dora was well-known in East Kenting. Everyone was fond of the old woman, while admitting that she did have some extremely peculiar habits. The most striking of these was her odd practice of holding actual conversations with trees, shrubs, and other forms of plant life. Often groups would gather to hear her address a clump of azaleas or small dogwoods, amazed that, except for the fact that she was speaking to plants, her speeches were quite clear and meaningful.

The companions listened as they came closer.

“I tell you,” she was saying to a nearby juniper, “that Mrs. Kimball is not to be trusted. She is an evil woman.” The gossip sounded juicy and several people walked a bit closer, only to hear Fat Ralph interrupt.

“Excuse me,” said Ralph, and Dora turned around.

“Oh, Ralph,” said Dora with a smile. “You must want a sweet.” Ralph looked with longing at the deep pockets of Dora’s apron as the disappointed crowd wandered away.

“She certainly has him pegged,” said Bubot.

“I think this is where we make our exit,” Pim said as Dora hunted in her deepest pocket. The three

friends backed away quietly until both Dora and Fat Ralph were out of sight.

“Dora’s creepy,” said Annar. “I’ve heard she keeps the fingers of naughty children in her pockets.”

Pim laughed. “Dora’s just old, Annar. She doesn’t think too clearly, but she would never hurt anyone.” Pim let a piece of butter stick melt in his mouth. “They say she’s senile,” he continued, “although I’m ready to believe her about Mrs. Kimball. She’s the creepy one. I don’t like her eyes.”

“I’m with you there,” said Bubot. “That Kimball woman’s done nothing but nose around this town since she came. And I’m not too sure about that husband of hers either.”

“The chemist?” asked Annar, playing hopscotch in some patches of sunlight.

“That’s right,” said Bubot. “Old Dora gets her medicines from him, too.” He leaned into Annar, making her miss. Annar glared.

“I like his eyes better,” said Pim.

“You and your eyes,” said Bubot. “If I could tell half as much from people’s eyes as you seem to, I should be King.”

“And if I had half your wits,” said Annar, turning to her brother, “I shouldn’t have any at all.” She shook her gold locks at Bubot and tried not to giggle.

Bubot was about to respond in kind, when Pim gave a sharp whistle, bringing a huge grey dog seemingly out of nowhere.

“Hi, Wolf!” said Bubot, forgetting Annar’s insult. Wolf wagged his tail.

“Are you sure he won’t bite?” Annar asked.

“As long as you won’t, Annar,” said Pim with a grin. “The people who gave him to us said he’s descended from the Old Wolves of Dofran.”

“There are wonderful stories about those wolves,” said Bubot. He knew that when it came to the tales and legends of Erdgarth, he knew more than any of his friends. “They used to guard the countryside, seeking out evil and destroying it. They even went to war for the people of Calt when Sindor took it over, but unfortunately, even their strength was not enough. They say the Old Wolves could talk with men.”

“What happened to them?” Annar asked, stroking Wolf’s soft fur.

“After the war in Calt,” Bubot continued, “the wolves that were left scattered. Some returned to Dofran and the Inner Dominions and were tamed. Some went to work in the mines with the Herks; some remained warriors and fought along with the Melnir. Some even gave themselves to work for Sindor. They are the evil wolves you find in Calt now. There are descendants of the Old Wolves in every land.”

“Is Dofran an evil place?” asked Annar.

“Dofran is where the castle is,” answered Pim as they reached his door. “In the days when we had a King and Queen, they lived there and ruled the country.”

“Don’t we have a King and Queen now?” Annar asked.

“I’m afraid not,” said Pim. “The King and Queen died without an heir, and now the local towns govern themselves.”

“That’s not what the wizard’s lore says,” said Bubot. “According to the ancient books there is an heir, but his purpose will be to usher in the second reign of the Light.”

“So we will have a king again,” said Annar.

“You didn’t listen,” said Bubot. “Girls never do unless they’re eavesdropping. There is an heir, but he won’t be king. There won’t be another king until the Light returns again.”

“Well, what’s the point of having an heir if he can’t be king?” asked Annar, crossing her arms across her chest. “And who says it has to be a ‘he’? I think you’ve got it wrong.”

“That wizard’s stuff isn’t official history,” said Pim. “It was written an awfully long time ago. Maybe there was supposed to be an heir, but the wizards didn’t count on the King and Queen being murdered.” Pim opened the door.

Enough history,” said Bubot, who only had enough when someone else was telling it. “Let’s get on with it.”

The three of them followed Wolf inside, not noticing the figure that disappeared around the side of the house.