



FAIRFAXE

THE DISSATISFIED

by

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DEDICATION

To all the bitter, bitter overthinkers
with immense intellectual ambitions
throughout the centuries
who died utterly unrecognized
in war, in hunger, in frustration...
and who shall be forever
unremembered...

This book is for them.

CHAPTER ONE

Underneath a bright wedge of moon, a sheet of ocean froth spreading gently across an unwatched shore. Another slosh of pale hissing bubbles...then sliding back...

It was a quiet, crooked mile of chilled sand, unwatched in that hour of darkness. The wind that had begun somewhere far across the black ocean, far away under the immensity of shimmering stars, reached the shore in a soft breeze.

Nothing else moved. Nothing else was there at all. The froth spilled forward...and back...and forward...

Then, from out of the dark, a tiny pair of webbed feet were making a straight line across the cold powder in an efficient sort of nervous hurry, flapping the cuffs of plain trousers.

The skinny creature also wore a plain coat of brown cloth, the sleeves precisely the proper length for its arms. Neither garment was thick enough to afford it any steady warmth, but even so, it did not hug itself to keep warm. Nor did it rub its tiny hands together. Its entire posture remained stiffly formal and upright, three feet tall, extremely slender, with smooth skin of dark green. The shape of its head was familiar - somewhat akin to a frog's, especially at the top, where two very wide-open eyes bulged upward into the world, giving it the appearance of being constantly alarmed. Yet the mouth stretched outward too far for a frog; it looked more like an elongated dark green clam, with two small dots of nostril at the end.

The creature soon veered away from the shoreline and into the darkness, its feet now pressing upon the soft rot of the jungle floor. The tips of cold leaves brushed across its face as it hurried, along with specks of broken moonlight, keeping a steady pace through the low sprigs and ferns, the wide eyes rarely blinking. Then it detected, above and in the distance, a small circle of hazy orange, behind the shapes the furthest trees.

The creature stopped, and stared...

Its movements now became very cautious, even being so far from the distant flame. It continued sneaking through the tangles - and would stop for a full minute at every breeze...until it could see the flickering outline of a window high above.

All was quiet.

The creature stepped out from the cover of the trees, onto a wide expanse of shifting grass. For several minutes, it stood absolutely still, gazing up at the silent, ruined castle, crumbled and sinking at one end like a half-crushed box. If not for the light in the single window above, the place would have seemed long abandoned...

A dim, tattered flag at the very top made dreamy turns to each side - and even this modest movement made the creature pause for minutes more, its wide eyes waiting for any other movement.

It took a few steps closer, and held still...

It took another few steps forward...then watched the window, listening.

Perhaps it was simply pausing to summon up the courage to continue forward...or perhaps it was reconsidering the choice of this castle, reluctant to conclude its weary

errand at these stony remains instead of searching further for a proper castle. Or maybe it was just a curious creature. These were possible thoughts - but there was no indication in the wide eyes as to which it was, if any.

Its wide eyes blinked once again...and then, with great care, adopting the soft and silent pace of a predator, it began taking last handful of steps forward.

Within the castle, down in the depths of the dark kitchens, a very different sort of creature stood all alone, holding a well-chewed spoon against the front of the dingy robe he wore in the evenings. His canine face was thoughtful but slightly embittered, and he kept his unhappy gaze fixed upon the flames that shifted beneath the large iron pot. A thick bubbling began within, shooting up small spatters of steam. Fairfaxe lowered the spoon into the pot and stirred the dull chunks of the glistening stew. Behind him, between spare shelves of dusty jars, the chilled night air poured in through a window of crusted iron bars. The wide eyes of the creature were there above the bottom edge, unnoticed.

Fairfaxe continued his slow stirring of the stew, staring into the bubbling mass without focus. After another minute, he filled a bowl with three careful scoops, set the bowl onto a wooden tray alongside the chewed spoon, topped it with an old linen napkin still bearing the family crest, and carried it from the kitchen himself, all alone, walking upright. He quietly made his way down the first of the dark corridors, the nails of his lower paws gently clicking against the stone floor.

Being that he was a bisktritt, he vaguely resembled several other canine species, looking somewhat like a slender orange jackal or an irritated fox. But - like all other bisktritt - he was a rather disturbing sight to other races, particularly humans. No matter the proper diction, no matter the politeness, the vision of a dog walking upright - with a tail that swayed for balance, and with hands that looked like elongated paws - was simply distasteful. It was an imperfect representation of both dogs and humans. It was difficult to believe that bisktritt were not perpetually suffering by walking, or constantly being deformed by their advancing adulthood - which hunched them over a bit further every year, until they were on all-fours again by the end.

Seen without prejudice, they were no more or less attractive than all other canine, only decidedly less playful. Even their humor tended toward the spiteful. But nothing of that particular trait could presently be applied to Fairfaxe, since he had no one to share any spiteful humor with. All he really had in common with other bisktritt was his form, and the wild look which came mostly from the reddish fur around his neck not being properly combed and flattened; he had neglected that custom for many months now. His standing height was a little less than four feet, since he was often comfortably hunched forward - especially if no one else was looking, and these days no one ever was. And when he sat, he simply fretted, as if he were troubled by the patch of empty air in front of him.

He moved through the castle blackness with his tray of stew. Stale puddles glided by unseen. The cramped passageway came to an end, and his steps began to softly sound across the immense void of an abandoned hall. Dingy

tapestries rose to an unseen ceiling, one of which had fallen to the floor some unknown time ago, lying in a cold, damp heap where it had landed. Far to his side was the enormous open entrance of the castle, unguarded, casting the moonlight across the barren floor. He did not quicken his steps past it.

A stone stairwell curved upward into a frigid scent of wet stone. He reached the long corridor of the third floor. More spoiling tapestries were hung along the shadows, frayed threads unfurling like sleepy cobwebs as he passed, then falling still once again. He was guided by the glowing doorway of his chamber, lit from a warming fire within.

Syrupy flames licked the charred log in the hearth. In a dark corner was a wooden bed frame of carved swirls, the old blankets twisted and rumped into similar swirls. A plain writing desk was hidden in the shadows of the other corner, partly buried by overlapping shingles of open books laid face down, as was the floor surrounding it. The rest of the desk was a scatter of pages covered with cramped paragraphs of Fairfaxe's own writing, the more fractured thoughts stitched together by swooping arrows to indicate the sequence. A slim wooden shelf above the desk was lined with misshapen candle stubs and a row of slender wax drippings. A drawer had been left somewhat open, and the gap revealed a spread of more handwritten pages, thousands and thousands of lines, some neatly formed, some hurriedly scrawled, journals half-complete, essays half-corrected, proposals raw and proposals refined, all waiting for eyes that would perhaps never revisit them; philosophical insistings that Fairfaxe had since evolved from, or would not necessarily advocate anymore, or at least not in the manner he did back then with

those particular flourishes of certainty - he had since found better ones...which he presently mistrusted, since they seemed destined for the same cyclical fate of partial obsolescence and perpetual revision.

And now there was no chair at the desk. It was across the room, facing the flames of the restless hearth...and in it sat the aged, silent Fairfaxe with his stew.

He stared into the embers. The stew was being eaten without enthusiasm, almost without notice. He was lost in the usual mist of thoughts unnumbered and unrecorded, as he was with every meal. How long he had lived there, how long he had lived elsewhere, how his distant youth had ebbed away over the many years of solitude, these were no longer any concern to him, and yet always there in the scent of his mood which reeked of creeping discontent...or perhaps it was just a steady sincerity that never relaxed. Or sometimes neither, or sometimes equal measures of both - or sometimes, perhaps, he was just disappointed in a general sort of way. But on this night, as he took the last bite of stew, he stopped. A narrow trickle of gravy leaked down the curve of his chin. He wiped it with the back of his elongated paw - and had a faint, absurd idea that he was no longer alone in his chamber.

He glanced over his shoulder. Standing perfectly still in the doorway, the skinny creature stared back at him.

Fairfaxe jerked backward in shock, loudly scuffing his chair on the stone floor. Then he merely sat in the silence, clutching his bowl of stew, his eyes meeting the wide-open gaze of the creature.

The creature took a few cautious steps forward. Fairfaxe hurried out of his chair, keeping a steady distance between them. He backed himself against a cabinet, then quickly set

the bowl on the floor to rummage through the belongings within - eventually pulling free a sword that was still in its scabbard. He pointed it at the creature, the dangling leather straps gently shaking with the trembling of his arm.

At the sight of the weapon, the creature had instantly fled to the safety of the doorway. There it stood - expressionless.

They kept a speechless distance from each other for a full minute before Fairfax blurted, "May I help you?"

The creature only blinked at him.

Fairfax added with an unsteady voice, "There is more stew. It is...downstairs."

The creature simply stared back at him...and then tossed a scroll of paper into the room - but so ineffectually, it flapped weakly almost straight downward, landing only a few inches from the creature's own feet. It stared at the badly-thrown scroll for several seconds, not willing to pick it up again. Finally, it reached out with its webbed toes - and foot-flipped it halfway to where Fairfax stood.

The creature gave one final look into Fairfax's wide eyes with its own, and then simply fled, leaving Fairfax staring into an empty doorway.

And as the creature was hurrying away across the dark expanse of damp grass and back into the trees, Fairfax was kneeling by the firelight and fearfully unrolling the stiff paper, his sword leaning against his trembling haunches. The lettering was somewhat clear and careful but oddly imperfect, and had dripped dry at a careless angle, making it hard to read. The brutal scent struck his sensitive snout like a slap, though he had already known it from a distance; the

message had been written using some horrible tar as its ink, like a clotted syrup made from charred pine.

This, as far as he could tell, is what it said:

Noble you are and worthy you are and your nobility and worthiness have not been forgotten yet. A great council shall now convene against the danger that devours the world. Those who lend their aid shall become the heroes of this age and all ages. Do not ignore this request for the danger spreads like water in all directions at all speeds. You will not speak of this message to any others. The council we convene is of a secret nature for the decisions we make will be of such importance and gravity as to be valued by the very few who can comprehend. Come to us at once. You will travel to the northland wilds above Shaceland Valley and wait. We will find you and take you thithering.

It took Fairfax a long, long while to begin a calm reckoning of the scroll's content. When the first light of dawn was breaking, he was standing against his bed, still undecided if the strange message was actually meant for *him* specifically - since there was no addressing of him by name. His other estimations of the document, such as the reeking ink and the troubling ambiguities of the very clumsy rhetoric, stayed in a swirl of conflicting pieces and partial conclusions.

He tried to work it out in pieces. Firstly, an invasion of an unwanted creature into that castle was not unknown; he had to chase various forms of wildlife out of the halls quite regularly. The real question at hand was...how would that creature, or any other collection of living beings anywhere,

have knowledge of Fairfaxe, and his commitment to philosophy and meticulous thinking?

Was it some sort of mistake? Or...was it an entirely honest plea? A genuine invitation to the last heir of an evaporated bisktritt royal lineage, long since expired but perhaps...not entirely forgotten?

Once the sun had risen to the sky, and all of the distant laboring lands had begun their day, Fairfaxe had finally crawled onto his bed, trying to clamp some sleep upon his frittered thoughts. He remained adrift in an almost painful wonderment, thinking it over and over and over until it ached to do so. All the suspicions he could muster were unleashed upon the scroll and its furtive deliverer - and the sheer desire for unmasking the intrigue through deduction made it impossible for his eyes to stay shut. He had never received a communication from beyond the borders of his own land before, not once. And he had seen fifty years pass.

He lay on his side, staring across the room at the sword leaning against the hearth. It seemed to add an extra air of ridiculousness to the whole event. The rolled message was there on the floor beside it. It was - he finally decided - the single most vexing and suspicious letter possible, smelling of an improvised ink that (he imagined) only desperate creatures would use. He would not be foolish enough to obey it - not without more evidence...of some sort. Still, he hurried over to the hearth and, with his lower paw, tapped it further away from the slight danger of popping embers. There - that was enough for now. Quite enough. He returned to his bed, and tried again to force some sleep into the weary mess behind his eyes.