

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Thirty-Second The Things You Learn By Asking

by
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I don't know which of us was more grateful to see the dirigible's hatch open above us. I climbed up first, so as to help Dorothy in. Hugo came forward- he'd been watching through Tom's 'scope, and so had an idea of our guest's size. I don't believe the others did, though, if their sudden silence was anything to go by. Then again, not too many people can think of much at all to say upon meeting a seven-foot-tall pumpkin-headed man. Tom stared, Lord Peter blinked and fished for his monocle, and Cranston- well- that's a nasty twitch he's getting under his eye. Miss Poppins, of course, was a perfect lady, stepping forward to greet Jack.

Being the focus of everyone's attention had turned him shy- he didn't say much beyond a quiet "Hello there". It was up to Dorothy to introduce him around, which helped a bit. Bunter tore himself away from the galley long enough to find a chair that fit the poor fellow. Jack settled into it with a sigh as Dorothy filled everyone else in on the situation. I think Jack was a little put off by Lord Peter's curiosity about his state, though it's difficult to read a face like Jack's. He just sat uncomfortably and nodded until Dorothy turned to him.

"I know I've been away an awfully long time, Jack," she said very seriously, "but why did you think I was dead?"

Jack sighed, elbows on his knees. "Well," he said in a low, hollow voice, "the grey men came, you see. They said they were from the outside world, like you. And they said you were dead."

"And you believed them?" Dorothy cried, incredulous.

He flinched back at that. "Well- yes-"

"Would you have believed the Nome King, Jack?"

"They had one of the Silver Slippers, Dorothy. They said you'd found it before you died."

Dorothy winced. I was listening, of course, but only partly. You see, it had occurred to me that the Nome King could very easily have been part of the whole problem. To the best of my knowledge, he was the only person who'd ever successfully invaded Oz before this. Even after his encounter with the Fountain of Oblivion, he'd kept up a vendetta against the Emerald City- against the entire

surface world, really. If anyone had both means and motive to throw in his lot with the Prufrocks, it was him. "Jack," I asked, "where is the Nome King, anyway? Do you know?"

"Oh, the grey men took him first," Jack answered. "Along with the entire Nome kingdom. They made the Nomes their slaves first, before they did anything else. Did you know magic could be mined? I didn't."

Tom choked back an exclamation at that. I'm sure Lord Wims Lord Peter was about to say something, but Tom recovered first. "Dorothy," he said tensely, "when did Glinda figure out that things like your Belt worked in our world?"

"Why- just before the Wizard and I went to look for the Slippers. About four years ago."

He nodded and turned to Jack. "When did the grey men first come?"

Jack scratched his head near the stem, thinking. "About four years ago, I think," he said at last. "I don't really know."

Tom nodded grimly and looked to the rest of us. "There's our answer," he said. "That's what's been going on. I'll bet any money you like that they've been mining magic here in Oz and exporting it for use in our world. If they've got exported magic, they can make magic artifacts work just as well as scientific ones."

"Hard to fight an enemy who uses weapons you scarcely believe exist," murmured Lord Peter.

"So Prufrock was telling the truth in Glasgow." Cranston had the look of a man proved right against his wishes. Crossing his arms over his chest, he said, "They aren't making war on England- they're making war on the world."

"Where does Neverland come into it, though?" Hugo wondered. "I mean- they had the star charts to get there. D'you suppose they were behind the pirates?"

"Well, maybe-"

Miss Poppins cleared her throat very quietly. It was a small noise, but an effective one; the rest of the men went silent. "One thing at a time, gentlemen," she said. "Let Mr. Pumpkinhead finish."

Jack ducked his head uncomfortably. "Well, I-"

"You said they burned down the Emerald City, Jack," Dorothy said. "When did that happen?"

"Oh, quite a while ago. After they took the Nome Kingdom. No one's seen Ozma since then, either," he added, anticipating what was going to be her next question.

"What about the rest of Oz, then?" she asked, taking one of his hands. "Where's the Tin Woodsman, and the Scarecrow- where's Glinda, do you know?"

"I don't know, Dorothy. I'm sorry. I haven't heard from the Scarecrow in months, or the Woodsman, or even Jinjur. Glinda's in the Quadling country as far as anyone knows." He glanced at me again, but kept going. "She's keeping the resistance against the grey men alive, but she has to do it from hiding. The only time anyone hears from her is when she sends messages, or when the Cowardly Lion comes back from visiting her, and he won't tell anyone where she is. Just in case the grey men take them, you know."

"The Lion?" Dorothy exclaimed. "He's all right? Where is he? Oh, can you take us to him?"

"I don't know where he is right now, Dorothy. Nobody does. He and the Hungry Tiger are in the wilderness somewhere, with the rest of the animals. They come around about once a week, maybe once every ten days. It's been a few days since I saw the Lion last."

"Oh, we've got to see him, Miss Poppins, we've just got to!" Dorothy dropped Jack's hand and turned to face her. "If anybody can help us-"

"It won't work," said Jack quietly. "You'd have to find him first."

"Well- can't we find him? Or at least try?"

"He won't let you. The beasts of the forest don't let anyone from outside find him and the Hungry Tiger, you see."

"But-"

"It's all right, Dorothy," I said, stepping forward. "We can still find him. At least, I think we can."

"But how?" Dorothy asked. Jack looked as if he wanted to ask the same thing.

I'm not much good at what you'd call a 'poker face', but I can hold one when I try. Long enough to whistle for assistance, anyway. At first, nothing happened. I was about to call out again when the room's door opened and a very familiar face poked in. "Yes?" Prince asked politely, his ears pricked forward.

"Prince, old boy," I said, "I believe we've got a job for you. And Toto, too, if he'll help you with it."

His tail was wagging as he trotted up to me. "Of course," he said, tongue lolling out. If that wasn't his idea of smiling, I don't know what would be. "What is it?"

"We need you and Toto to find a couple of very big cats. D'you remember the smell

of the lions at the London Zoo?"

"Yes. You are looking for the girl's friends?"

"That's right," I said, scratching him lightly behind the ears. "Dorothy, do you think Toto-"

"Of course I'll help!" The little terrier had come in after Prince, unnoticed. "Dorothy, what do you need me to do?"

She laughed. I believe it was the first I'd heard her laugh since before we came to Oz, and even though our situation was pretty grim, it did the heart good to hear it. "Just go with Prince, Toto," she said. "Help him find the Cowardly Lion and the Hungry Tiger, and bring them back to us if you can, all right?"

"Wait a minute, Dorothy," said Tom. He was looking at my dog, with a peculiar intensity in his face. "I have an idea. Where'd we put the wireless?" Hugo passed him one; he nodded. "All right. It's a little big for Toto, but I think- Sergeant, mind if I borrow your dog?"

"Ask him yourself, Tom."

"Um- yeah. Prince, c'mere, would you?"

"Why?" Prince asked warily, his gaze on the thing in Tom's hand.

"Because I want to see if I can rig this up to fit your head. If I just make a few changes, you'll be able to talk to the Sergeant and he'll be able to talk to you, even if you're out of sight in the woods."

Prince looked up at me, the question in his eyes. I nodded, and he went off with Tom. Cranston, to his credit, only shook his head a little bit. "I'm going to assume it's time to land the dirigible?" he asked Miss Poppins.

"As long as Mr. Pumpinkhead has no objections, since we'll have to put it down near his home."

"What?"

"Mr. Cranston needs to land the flying house, Jack," Dorothy explained. "Can we put it near yours, if we promise not to break it?"

"I- well- all right."

"Thank you," said Cranston, and vanished.

Moments later, we began circling downwards. By the time we'd landed properly, Tom was done with his jury-rigged wireless. He'd arranged it so that Prince could speak into a part of the mouthpiece separated by a length of pipe, but hadn't quite

made his case to Prince as to why it was needed. "Maybe you can talk some sense into him, Sergeant," he said as he handed me the receiving unit.

"Well, I'll try." I crouched down to Prince's level. "What's the matter, fella?"

"I do not like that thing," he said bluntly. "It sits heavy on my head and it talks into my ear. I can hardly hear anything else with that thing in the way."

"I'm sorry, Prince," I said. "I know it's uncomfortable, but I need you to wear it for me. I'm going to need you to track down the Lion, and I won't be able to follow you right away. Remember when I made you wear that little signal light? So you could show me the way to that cave outside Dawson, where those men were holding the woman and her dog team prisoner?"

"Yes."

"You won't even have to wear this thing as long as you wore the light. As soon as you've found the Lion, you can speak into it and let me know, and I'll come to you and take it off."

He heaved a sigh, dropping his head. "Then I will find the Lion quickly," he said, in a tone so dejected and yet so determined that I had to laugh.

"It's not that bad, Prince! It'll only be a little while, I promise." I got an arm around his neck and ruffled his fur. "You'll be fine. Now, take Toto out there and find the Lion for us. Tell him who we are, and call for me. I'll come get you and take that thing off just as soon as we've found him, but you have to put it on first."

Prince nodded, and let me strap the device on. He shook his head a little afterwards, but only to test the fit. "What else must I do?" he asked me, ignoring Tom completely.

"Just go outside of the dirigible and speak into the thing," I said. "I want to make sure this works before you go into the woods with Toto."

He nodded, loping off through the door that Dorothy held open. A few moments later the wireless in my hand crackled. "Sergeant," said Prince's voice, "can you hear me?"

"Your dog calls you 'Sergeant'?" Tom asked.

"Everyone calls me 'Sergeant'." I shrugged, and pressed the button. "Yes, Prince. Loud and clear."

It crackled again. "Good. Please, send Toto out? I would like to find the Lion as soon as we can."

Toto hardly needed the encouragement. He shot out the door like a furry little

bullet. We filed out after him, even Jack, and watched as the two dogs vanished into the yellow underbrush.

"Are you sure this is such a wise idea, Sergeant?"

"Oh yes, Cranston. I'm sure. Prince is the best tracker in the whole of the North Country. I'd be willing to bet there isn't a dog in Canada who could beat him."

"This isn't Canada. And our new companion said the Cowardly Lion doesn't want to be found," he pointed out.

"Neither did the people Prince and I trailed back home."

"True enough." He squinted upwards. "It's getting dark, though."

"Doesn't mean much to a dog-"

My handset made a buzzing noise. "Sergeant?"

"I'm here, Prince," I said immediately.

"Toto says we are very close. The trail is old, but used often." He paused. "By many beasts."

"Anything dangerous?"

"Bears," said Prince's voice. "Wolves."

I thought for a moment. Most of the animals of Oz were pretty close to civilized, when it came right down to it, but they never really said exactly how the meat-eaters went about feeding themselves. "Be careful, Prince," I said. "How far in are you?"

"Many strides. I did not count, but-" Another pause. "The trail is marked."

I was careful not to look at Dorothy as he said that. "Ah- marked how?"

"Claws. On trees." It almost sounded as if he were about to laugh. "You cannot smell the other marks I would make."

Someone did laugh at that, though I'm not sure who. I just smiled, relieved. "Good boy, Prince. Is the trail coming any clearer?"

He was silent for a while. Then: "Yes." There was barking in the background. "Toto says he has found fresh tracks-"

As the dogs continued to work their way into the woods, I looked over at Tom. "What's the range on this thing?"

"A few hundred yards- I haven't had time to work up a proper power source, or it'd

be longer."

That wasn't especially comforting, given that it was starting to get dark in earnest. I tried the handset again. "Prince?"

The next sound out of the handset was a low growl. I've heard my dog make that noise before. It's not a good one. "Prince," I said immediately, "what's going on?"

"There are-"

The handset suddenly squealed and went silent. I didn't hear much after that- I was jamming that button with both thumbs for all I was worth. "Prince! Prince, can you hear me?"

Nothing at all, even after I remembered that I had to let go of the button. "What did that mean?" I asked, turning to Tom. "That squeal?"

"Means the microphone is too close to the audio receiver, usually."

"But it wasn't before, was it?"

"No. Something must've-"

"I don't mean to interrupt you, Tom, but that's my dog out there. Along with whatever it is that just grabbed your wireless. Miss Poppins, I'm going to have to-"

"No you're not," she said, bringing me up short.

"Excuse me?"

"You're not," she said quite firmly, stepping forward. The last light of sunset was very nearly gone. "We are. This is a team, after all."

I could just about have kissed her then, but it wouldn't have been proper at all. "Thank you," I said. "Did anyone bring a torch, or a lantern?"

By the way the others started patting down their pockets, I knew right away that we weren't going to have any answers of 'yes'. I thought for a moment, then dashed back into the blimp anyway. The galley was exactly as we'd left it- a royal mess, despite Bunter's best efforts, and covered in glowing, sodden fairies. Where Bunter'd got to I don't know, but it made my job easier. The fairies had found a bottle of something alcoholic and drunk the contents dry; there was even one fairy still inside, giggling and bobbing its head unevenly. I found the stopper and closed the bottle up, though not too tightly, and pulled the cord from my hat. Should've brought rope, I suppose, but I'd been so busy preparing for the trip by arming myself that rope had slipped my mind.

There are plenty of sticks outside long enough to tie to my makeshift little lantern.

I've got my gun, my skinning knife, and my hatchet. Whatever's taken my dog is in for a very bad time.
