

Diary of a Mountie - Part the Thirty-Third Loyalty

by
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Day Forty-Three / First Night in Oz
The Winkie Country, Oz
Night

The Yellow Woods of the Winkie Country are a tangled, mucky mess, more like the forests of the southern United States than anything back in Canada. My jarred fairy's light was pretty bright, but one look at those trees told me right away that it would be slow going. Given that everyone else wanted to come along- well. If I'd had any other choice I would have gone straight in by myself. Trackless wilderness isn't a good place to try and keep a group together.

Dorothy asked to hold the 'lantern'. I didn't like the idea of letting go, but after a little thought it turned out to be a pretty good idea. As long as she held the light steady, it would be easier for me to find Prince's claw marks- and there was the matter of Toto. In her shoes I would've wanted to contribute anything I could. I gave her the stick without a protest.

We were just about to leave when Miss Poppins took a close look at the fairy in the bottle. The woman's got a 'tsk' more disapproving than a circuit rider in a gambling house. She said very little about the fairy's condition, but she did insist on passing it a slice of lemon before closing up the bottle once more. "To sober her up," she explained. "The last thing we need is a violently ill fairy as our light."

With that, we were off into the woods.

Prince's trail wasn't the easiest I've ever had to follow, but it wasn't the hardest by any means. He'd been trying to leave a trail, after all. That meant good clear footprints anywhere he could manage, claw marks on trees as he'd promised, and the occasional tuft of fur where he'd been forced to rub up against something rough. Toto didn't leave nearly as many marks, of course, but since the two dogs were together I didn't worry too much about that. I was more concerned with the sheer amount of noise we were making. This was a forest full of hostile animals, after all- animals which had managed to get the better of an extremely canny dog. The crunching, snapping noises made by Hugo alone... well, it wasn't as if we had the advantage of surprise to begin with. Still, it seemed disrespectful somehow. A man ought to do what he can to avoid disrupting even as alien a forest as this.

I suppose it was thoughts like that one that distracted me. We had reached the

edge of a small clearing in the woods. I was examining one of Prince's claw marks in the light of the fairy 'lantern', and I heard something crunch behind me. I assumed it was Danner- he'd taken up the point position on Dorothy's left, since I was on her right- and didn't turn to see. There was a rustle of cloth from further back- Cranston, maybe, or Tom. I started to stand up-

And, with an enormous roar, something flung itself out of the woods at Hugo. In the next moment there was another roar, and I found myself pinned to the ground by what must've been four hundred pounds of- well, something large, furry, and incredibly angry. From that close up I couldn't see much but the underside of its throat. Even if I could have, the first thing was to get out from underneath it- I could barely breathe under that crushing weight. It stank, like a dog that's been rolling on a moose carcass, and its growl was the loudest I've ever heard. It flashed through my head that Prince had said 'bears'; I tried to get an arm free, but the beast's claws started to dig in-

There was yelling. "It's me! It's Dorothy! It's me!"

The growling broke off in a brief, surprised whine. The creature suddenly bounded away. When I rolled over and propped myself up enough to see what was going on I could scarcely believe my eyes. Our 'lantern' had gone flying, and Dorothy had disappeared under masses of tawny and striped fur. I started to reach for my revolver-

And stopped. One tawny beast, one striped, and she'd introduced herself- why, that had to be the Cowardly Lion and the Hungry Tiger!

I stepped back a pace and started checking for broken ribs. At least, I tried to. I hadn't been the only one to bring weapons to Oz; Cranston had his guns out, and Tom already had one of the electric rifles to his face. I shook my head. "It's all right. They're friends."

"What?"

"Ever seen how kittens greet each other?"

And that's just what it looked like, really. Much larger, to be sure, and a lot louder, but they really did look like a pair of excited kittens. Reluctantly, Tom lowered the rifle. Cranston didn't put his guns down until the big cats backed off, still rumbling, to reveal a slightly scuffed but unharmed- and very happy- Dorothy.

"It's all right," she said, beaming like a sunrise. "We've found them."

There was a lot of sniffing and more than a few introductions after that. And apologies, of course. "I hope I didn't hurt you," said the Hungry Tiger, who'd been the one to jump me. His voice was very light and mellow, for a cat his size. "I had

no idea you were Dorothy's friend. I wouldn't have gone for you if I did, my conscience wouldn't let me, but we thought you were with the grey men."

"It's all right," I told him. Something screeched overhead; I looked up and saw the trees had begun to fill with monkeys. "You had no way of knowing, after all. That's why we sent the dogs."

The Tiger nodded. "When we saw the thing on the big one's head- well, we thought for sure he must've been with the grey men. It was their kind of thing."

"Yes... speaking of which, where is my dog? Is he all right?"

The Tiger gestured with one paw to the edge of the clearing and stepped away to inspect Lord Peter. There was very little light left by then, since it seemed someone had released our fairy to buzz around in disgust at being used for a beacon, but there was enough to see the gleam of eyes. I counted at least a score of wolves in the mirk, though there might've been more just out of sight. Then Prince stepped forward, head high and tail higher. "I am all right, Sergeant," he said calmly. "They have not hurt me."

He stepped forward, holding his muzzle a little higher. One of the wolves growled at him. Without blinking an eye he whirled on the beast, teeth bared and snapping. It yelped, scrambling back to the safety of its pack; Prince sniffed and turned away, stalking to my side and pushing his head against my leg. "Sorry about that, boy," I murmured as I dropped down to ruffle his neck fur properly. "I never dreamed they'd attack you."

"As I said, they did not hurt me." No doubt he was trying to sound unconcerned, but his voice was still just a little bit shaky. Facing down twenty wolves alone is more than I'd ask of any dog. "And they took the thing on my head. Do I have to wear another?"

I laughed. "No, Prince. You don't. You did everything I asked. I'd say you've earned a respite- as soon as we're done here I'll take you back to the dirigible and bring you dinner. Sound good?"

His ears splayed, and he licked my hand. "Very good," he agreed. "Thank you."

"Thank you, Prince. You did all the hard work here."

"And Toto, too-"

"Yes, Toto too. Where is he?"

Prince jerked his muzzle across the clearing. "With the girl, and the Lion."

"...yes, they did," the Cowardly Lion was saying. "I don't know where they got it from, but the men who came saying you were dead really did have one of the

Silver Slippers."

Even in the wavering glow from the fairy (who'd settled on Miss Poppins' shoulder), I could see Dorothy's lips going thin and white.

The Tiger nodded at the Lion's words. "I et a couple of 'em," he added, licking his chops.

"Good for you!" That was Cranston's voice, which didn't surprise me - but it was Dorothy's, too. And that worried me. I expected savage sentiments from a man like the Shadow, but Dorothy? Yes, it'd been less than twenty-four hours since the castle in Ev. Yes, that was too short a time for anyone to put such horrors from their mind. Even taking that into account, she sounded too... enthusiastic. If she'd been a man, I'd have been tempted to take her into custody for her own good, to prevent her from going off looking for revenge.

The Lion's tail swished behind him. "The men marched on the Emerald City not too long after that," he said. "Everyone saw them coming, of course. Omby Amby called up everyone he could to help with the Army of Oz, and Billina led the Emerald City's animals, but-" He shook his great, maned head.

"But what?" asked Tom, who had shouldered his rifle.

"The grey men had a box as big as a house, and it moved on wheels. I wasn't close enough to see it myself, but some of the other animals told me what happened." He heaved a sigh. "There were things in the box, and when the Army of Oz came out to fight the grey men, the things started singing- magic songs. Horrible ones."

Hugo winced, catching Tom's eye. Miss Poppins' eyes narrowed. "Go on," she said to the Lion.

He sighed again. "The magic songs made the army march right up and into the box," he said. "It was terrible."

"Whatever it was in that box," the Tiger added quietly, "it didn't have no conscience to keep it from eating those men."

The most uncomfortable silence I've ever heard followed the Hungry Tiger's words. It was Cranston who broke it, by asking, "What about you? Did the animals try to fight back?"

"Oh yes," said the Cowardly Lion. "we did- at first. But the grey men didn't just have the box. They had twenty or thirty sticks that spat rocks at us-"

"Rocks?"

"Well- very small stones- very, very fast, again and again and again without stopping. It was awful. Nothing we could do could stop them."

"What about Glinda?" Dorothy burst out. "Where is she? Can't she do something?"

"She's away down south, Dorothy," said the Lion. "In the Quadling country. It's not safe to travel so far any more. Even the Yellow Brick Road's dangerous these days, although it's the safest place anyone can be any more."

"But you go there, right? You've seen her?"

Both the Tiger and the Lion nodded.

Dorothy was fairly vibrating with the tension as she exclaimed, "Oh, we've just got to go see her, we've got to! Can you take us to her, please?"

The Tiger exchanged a long glance with the Lion before finally sighing. "I'm sorry, Dorothy," he said. "I'm sure they're very good people if they're your friends, but we can't take that kind of chance."

"But-"

"We've only just met them," the Lion said. "It isn't allowed to bring strangers through to Glinda. Anything might happen."

"And if the grey men found out where she was hiding-"

"We know we can trust you, though."

Dorothy stared from the one to the other, hands trembling for real now. "I'm going," she said at last. A little more loudly, she added, "I've got to go with them-"

You could see it in her eyes: she wasn't thinking of anything beyond getting to Glinda. Even if that meant leaving us behind.

I couldn't let that happen.

With two strides I'd crossed the open space between the girl and myself. I put one hand on her shoulder and dropped down to look her in the eye. "Dorothy," I said, "listen to me."

She gave a sharp little start, blinking and looking at me with the most heartrending expression I'd seen yet. I'm not proud of what I did next; I know it was necessary, but that doesn't mean I have to be proud of it. There are ... there are ways of making words stick in a person's mind, phrases that work like setting a hook in a fish's jaw. It's one thing to use a trick like that on a criminal, or on a frightened witness- but it didn't seem right, somehow, to use such a trick on Dorothy. Still, I didn't think I had a choice.

"I know you don't want to hear what I'm about to say," I told her, as firmly as I could. "But I need you to hear it. Please. Listen."

"A- all right..."

Good. That meant it had worked, or at least started to. I nodded once, and continued. "I know you need to find Glinda. I know the Lion and the Tiger here would take you to her in a heartbeat if you asked. But we can't stay here without you. We don't have any way of reaching you, or you of reaching us- you'd be gone for weeks, or more, and we've got to stop these people just as much as you do. They've attacked Oz, and they've attacked Scotland- we don't know who they're going to go after next. We can't leave you behind, and we're no good in this country alone. You're as much a part of this team as any of us..."

Funny. I could almost see the frantic, desperate look draining from her eyes as I spoke.

"And there's something else, too." I nodded to the two big cats. "You heard what they said- about trusting us, and taking chances. If you leave with them, there won't be anybody left in Oz except than Jack Pumpkinhead who knows who we are. We need you here- for our own protection. All of us do..."

"Don't go, Dorothy," I said very quietly. "Please."

She stared back at me for several long, silent moments. Then she nodded, and I could breathe again.

"Thank you," I said. "You made the right choice."

"I hope so, Mr. Preston," she said soberly.

There wasn't much else I could do, so I smiled a little and murmured something (I don't remember what) before turning back to the others. Some of the tension had gone out of the air. "Well?" asked Miss Poppins.

"I- I still want to find Glinda," said Dorothy, "but Mr. Preston is right. I can't just go off and leave everyone, so I s'pose I'll stay."

Miss Poppins nodded. "Very good, Dorothy," she said. Then she raised her voice. Looking at the Lion and the Tiger, she said, "Will you excuse us, sirs? There are a few things I believe we need to discuss amongst ourselves."

"Of course," said the Lion, bowing with his front end. Miss Poppins dropped a curtsy in return, and we withdrew a little way through the forest.

When we were far enough from the clearing to avoid being overheard, Miss Poppins spoke again. "It seems, gentlemen, that the situation is more complicated than we knew when we started out."

"That's one way of putting it," murmured Lord Peter, who wasn't looking at all

well. Come to think of it, he really hadn't looked right since- well, since Ev.

"Of course." She rested her hands on the handle of her umbrella. "The question now is- what do we do about it? Our mission remains the same as always; the question, now, is how to accomplish it. Clearly, the Prufrock threat is far, far greater than we had imagined..."

There were a few moments of silence at first. Then Cranston cleared his throat.

"Yes?"

"It seems to me," said Cranston slowly, "that we're no longer investigating and protecting. We're on a war footing now- even if the rest of the British empire doesn't know it. And you can't fight a war with seven people, no matter how well they're armed."

There were a few murmurs of agreement- mostly from Lord Peter, and from Hugo. It made sense; according to our dossiers, they'd all fought in the Great War.

"Which would indicate," Cranston continued, "that what we need to do, if we're to keep Prufrock from spreading this war into our world, is choke them off at the root. I say we go back to our world and assemble whatever resources we can- then bring the battle to Prufrock."

"What sort of resources?" Miss Poppins asked. Her expression was neutral, but there was a calculating look in her eyes.

Cranston chuckled. There wasn't much humour in it. "I have a... sizable network of agents in America," he answered. "I can have weaponry, and men capable of using it, ready in a very short time. Among other things."

Miss Poppins nodded. "I agree. This mission requires more- from each of us- if it is to succeed."

Tom put up a hand. When Miss Poppins nodded to him, he said, "I can arrange for more of the electric rifles. I've also got one of my factories turning out mass quantities of synthetic peach extract. Looks like the mermaid repellent's going to come in handy after all. And I can try and get a message through to South America- don't know how useful that'll be, but it's worth a try."

"Very good," said Miss Poppins. Then she turned to me. "What about you, Sergeant?"

I don't know what I intended to say, really. My superior, Inspector Moore, is as skeptical as they come. Any kind of assistance at all would require me to convince him of the need, first- and that would require explanations. Whether he'd even be willing to listen, I didn't know.

But I didn't say any of that. I couldn't. Not once I'd looked down, trying to think, and found myself looking at Dorothy. I'd convinced her to listen to reason- and she'd had every reason in the world not to. Maybe, just maybe, I'd be able to convince Inspector Moore of the same thing despite the fantastic trappings of it all.

"There's a detachment of men at Fort Munn," I said. "It's not that far from Dawson. If we can get there reasonably quickly-"

"We can, Sergeant."

"All right. Then I can talk to my superior. I believe I should be able to convince him to let me have a body of men- and horses."

Miss Poppins smiled. "Excellent. And you two?"

She was looking at Lord Peter and Hugo. Lord Peter murmured something. I didn't hear what, but it seemed enough for Miss Poppins. As for Hugo, he gave an odd, twisted little smile and said, "I know some people, ma'am. I believe they'll be very interested in helping out."

"Mmm." She'd lifted an eyebrow, but seemed content to let things lie for the moment. "Very well, then. Dorothy?"

"Yes?"

"It looks as if we'll be going back to England, at least for a little bit, and then returning to Oz."

"It will be soon, won't it?" she asked, half pleading.

"As soon as we possibly can," said Miss Poppins. "We want to put a stop to this war nonsense as much as you do, but we've got to be in England in a week's time. The Wizard is coming to see you, after all."

Dorothy nodded, brightening a little. "That's so, isn't it? We should tell the Lion."

"Yes, we should. Why don't we go do that?"

The others started filing past towards the clearing, but I stayed where I was. Something had occurred to me: we'd left something out. No- not something. Someone. This wasn't a situation that affected human beings alone- not in Oz, certainly, but not on our side either. There were Toto and Prince to consider, too. And the idea of going to war in a land where animals were just as capable of speech and feeling and reason as men- well, that brought back all the same questions I'd had reading Bambi.

I've got far too many questions in my mind right now. I'm not going to wait for the

answers any longer. Unless I've got the hour completely wrong, I believe I've got enough time to settle this matter once and for all.

I'm going to go talk to my dog.