

THE ONCE AND FUTURE NERD
Book II - MYTH MADE FLESH

Chapter 3
"Bridges"

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PART TWO:

5 INT. CASTLE GUERNATAL (EASTERN STOREHOUSE) - NIGHT

5

There's a hollow wind outside, and maybe owls and wolves - just general spooky nighttime ambience.

NARRATOR

The night was dark and gloomy near Castle Guernatal. The Eastern Storehouse, once a vibrant hub of servants coming and going at all times, had been all but abandoned of late.

A bell tolls midnight.

At the stroke of midnight, two lonely guards kept their watch. These were the only two men in Redmoor's infantry without the clout or cleverness to barter their way out of that charge.

BERNARD

(antsy and scared)
Just two more hours. Just two more hours.

CARL

(not sure of this himself)
I've heard he doesn't come out when there's a full moon, so maybe--

--Stomach growl

CARL

Oh, chaos, what was that?!

BERNARD

Just my stomach. I ain't eaten today.

CARL

Well what'd you do that for?

BERNARD

Mess hall closed early. One of the cooks said they saw him.

CARL

Oh. Right.

BERNARD

Carl? D'you ever think--

WHISPERER

--LEAAAAAAAAAAVE.

This hangs in the air for beat.

CARL
(holding back panic)
 Bernard?

BERNARD
(having a genuine dis-associative episode)
 Aye Carl?

CARL
 D'you hear that?

BERNARD
 Yes I did, Carl.

WHISPERER
LEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAVE.

CARL
 Reckon we ought to go fetch the Sergeant-at-Arms?

BERNARD
 Reckon it's a bit too late for that, Carl.

CARL
(trembling)
 What? Why?

BERNARD
 Why don't you look to your right, Carl?

SCARE CHORD!

CARL GIVES A **COMICALLY HIGH-PITCHED SCREAM.**

NARRATOR
 Inches away from poor Carl stood a hooded figure in black, blending almost perfectly into the night. Its face was masked too, but that was not what caught the guards' attention. Rather it was the knife the figure held, pointed forwards.

CARL
 Is that a dagger I can see in front of me?!

WHISPERER
 Spread these words I tell you now: these halls will know not peace, until Ardel the Usurper's black stain is removed from this land. Avenge the King's foul and unnatural murder.

NARRATOR

As you know by now, dear listener, this was not nearly the first of such occurrences around Castle Guernatal.

WHOOSH TO:

6 FLASHBACK MONTAGE - VARIOUS AROUND CASTLE GUERNATAL

6

Knitting needles clink together.

SEAMSTRESS

I swear Siggi, if I don't mend m'lady's cloak 'fore next it rains...Siggi?

NARRATOR

And as the spectre's message spread...

SEAMSTRESS **GASPS**.

WHISPERER

These halls will know not peace...

WHOOSH TO:

Hands splash in a washbasin.

TAILOR

Thomas. Be a dear and fetch me that black dye?

NARRATOR

...So too did the sense of trepidation...

THE TAILOR **STARTS AS WELL**.

WHISPERER

...Until Ardel the usurper's black stain...

WHOOSH TO:

A knife scrapes against a whetstone.

BUTCHER

Lucius, there you are. You've gotta cut *around* the bones, you dunce. My knives are always going dull.

NARRATOR

...amongst each and every person who heard tell.

BUTCHER

What are you standing there slack-jawed f--

--HE ALSO **GASPS** IN SURPRISE.

WHISPERER

...Is removed from this land.

WHOOSH BACK TO:

7 INT. CASTLE GUERNATAL (EASTERN STOREROOM) - RESUME LAST

7

WHISPERER

Avenge the King's foul and unnatural murder.

NARRATOR

So when the two guards in the storehouse saw the spectre they had already heard so much about...

WHISPERER

I am the Spirit of Justice. By gods. Remember me. Now leave!

NARRATOR

...They turned and fled.

Both guards scream.

They go running down the corridor.

NARRATOR

And once they were gone, the spectre lowered its hood. And as you, dear listener, are perceptive, clever, and no doubt exceptionally good looking, I doubt you'll be surprised to learn this was in truth no apparition from beyond the grave. No, of course, this haunting figure was what had become of our Lord Antonin Mooncrest. His grimy face fell into an almost religious reverie as looked at the wheels of cheese and barrels of apples and salt meat he had just won for himself.

ANTONIN

(little private prayer)

Bless Galadon and damn Ardel Redmoor.

Antonin ravenously devours some apples.

The apples crunch and squirt juice.

8 EXT. CAMP NEAR FREEHOLD - DAWN

8

There's a small fire amidst the birds of morning.

NARRATOR

The sun had just begun to inch over the horizon near Freehold, but Billy and Jen had already broken their fasts.

Footsteps approach and sit.

Everyone in this scene speaks to each other with a kind of stilted nervousness.

NELSON
Yo.

JEN
Couldn't sleep?

NELSON
Not really.

One more set of footsteps.

NIA
Good morning, Nelson.

NELSON
Hey.

NIA
Billy, Jen. You've managed to eat I see. That is well. Nelson, you should try and break your fast while you can. We know not what the day might hold.

BILLY
Anyone seen our guy?

NIA
Not yet. Though I am confident Sir Brennen will keep his word.

A beat.

Some wind picks up.

NIA
The sky in the west is pink, and cloudy. It snowed in the mountains last night. Perhaps the storm is headed our way.

NARRATOR
All right, Nia, I'll thank you to leave the metaphors to me. Everything's gotten a bit too literal, what with burning bridges and storms on the horizon, don't you think?

She wasn't wrong about last night's snow though.

9 EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS - THE PREVIOUS NIGHT

9

A gale force blizzard whips around us.

NARRATOR

Allow me, listeners, a brief interlude. Our thoughts, as we consider Orcs and Elves and Men - and what each is and seems to be and isn't at all - must drift to the West. West of Blackhold, to the Black Mountains themselves. Foreboding land, to be certain. Sparsely populated by men who choose to live in solitude, tucked away in caves and cabins precariously perched on precipices.

(pause)

Oh yes, definitely still got it.

(continues)

Where the winter, when it starts, falls thickly, suddenly and as surely as night itself. No, not a very good place for wood sprites, and not for you either, I should think. Not even to vacation. But if one should take it upon themselves to cross from one side of the Mountains to the other, one would do well to travel before the height of the winter storms. For once they start, the mountains are nigh impassable, and even now, this early in the season, the snow blew down in a horizontal blur.

Footsteps trudge slowly through snow.

NARRATOR

Jethro the Woodsman had lived a long time in this desolate landscape. And while, as I said, it was a life most harsh, Jethro found that the calm press of the drifting snows helped him to focus on only the things that mattered to him. To each his own, I suppose. We join him - and you'll see why soon enough, I promise you - as he trudges steadily through the valley, his pack overladen with supplies to last the winter and a mangy old dog at his heels.

JETHRO

(singing to himself)

*Rough the winter winds do rage and rage, *
*'nother year hath turned a page. *
*Blow, gust and freeze you bitter sky, *
*For your cold can't freeze I. *
*Spark the fire up and warm the hearth, *
*Merrily, now gather 'round. *
*Though we won't see the sun or the green of the leaves, *
'Til the snow doth melt from the ground.

*
*
*
*
*
*
*

The dog sniffs, then growls, and bounds away a bit.

JETHRO

Woah now, Caleb! Stay on the path, ya hear? You fall into a snow pit, I ain't going in after your raggedy old hide.

The dog barks urgently and with alarm.

JETHRO

You smell something, boy? Whatcha got there?

A weight hits the ground followed by faster footsteps.

NARRATOR

The old man lowered his pack to the ground, his back quite grateful for even a brief reprieve. Cautiously, he walked toward the mound of snow his hound was inspecting. He saw then, that the ground around it was stained the color of rust. Or perhaps, blood?

The wind flares up.

JETHRO

Caleb! Don't touch that I said!

Hands brush away snow.

NARRATOR

Brushing aside the drifted snow, he discovered a hand...and then an arm...and then, yes, you see where this is going. Tucked into a small depression in the side of the craggy pass, he found a body.

JETHRO

Ach! Skin's all blue and grey already.
(*then, puzzled*)
Still bleeding, though, ain't he?

NARRATOR

And then the body twitched.

TRAVELER

(*badly shivering*)
W-wait. Help. Help me.

10 INT. JETHRO'S COTTAGE - NIGHT

10

The storm continues outside, but we're inside with a merrily crackling fire.

NARRATOR

Now you'll recall that when we last saw General Traft, he was fleeing the battle of Freehold, with his tail between his legs. Not literally. Orcs don't have tails, as you should have figured out by now. And anyway, the general of the Orcish forces had only one Orc parent. Neither here nor there at the moment...just reminding you.

His armies routed and his Templar allies as feckless as the chaos god they served, Traft had sought to make his way back across the Black Mountains, to regroup with the Orcish nations and nurse his severely wounded pride. However, winter having fallen early, and without gear to protect himself from the storm, Traft found himself trapped between a rock and a...well, a lot of snow. Which was where this Jethro fellow had found him, and brought him in to his humble home and hearth.

JETHRO HUMS HIS WARMING SONG.

The dog barks, clearly desperate to be heard.

JETHRO

Hush now, Caleb! Our guest here don't even know which way is up without you trying to yammer at him.

The dog tries one more bark.

JETHRO

I said HUSH! TSK! TSK!

The dog whimpers.

JETHRO

Now let's see here...

Jethro dips a rag, picks it up, and rings it out.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

TRAFT LAPS THIRSTILY AT THE DROPLETS.

JETHRO

There you go. That's it, nice and easy.

TRAFT
(barely conscious)
 What's...where...

JETHRO
 Hush now, and rest. You've a mighty thirst, near to
 killed you. You'll sick if you drink too fast.

TRAFT **NODS BACK OFF.**

Drip. Drip. Drip.

11 INT. JETHRO'S COTTAGE - MORNING

11

*The blizzrd still rages outside but the fire
 in here is healthy and warm.*

NARRATOR
 It was not until morning that Traft's faculties began
 to return to him.

TRAFT
(waking)
 Where am I? What is this place?

NARRATOR
 He looked around the small cottage where he found himself.
 It was not the spartan place one might expect to find at the
 borders of a civilization. It was, however, in a shambles.
 Guttered candles languished in the corners, stacks of books
 littered floor and table alike, a map of constellations was
 pinned to one wall, and beneath it a compass, papers, quills
 and scribblings lay scattered haphazardly. Notably, the
 ceiling of the dwelling had been studded with tiny pieces of
 glass. Sunlight slanted through the single window, bouncing
 erratically about the shards. But even more notably, the
 fire was warm and the food cooking over it set Traft's
 stomach to rumbles. His hand went to his side, tenderly
 touching his bandaged wound.

JETHRO
 Morning to you. You slept mighty long. Happens when
 you're weary of the road. Or when you caught a pick-axe
 in the flank there. Nasty, nasty wound that.

A wooden bowl/spoon clatter on a table.

JETHRO
 Reckon you'll be wanting sommat to eat. Have your
 porridge and get some strength back. Drink that tea,
 too, before it cools. No cream, sorry to say, but eat
 and drink and do so with the blessing of the gods.

The dog barks furiously; desperate almost.

JETHRO

Hush yourself now, Caleb!

The dog keeps barking.

JETHRO

TSK! TSK!

Now it whimpers.

JETHRO

Into the cellar with you. Don't look me like that. Get!

One last whimper...

NARRATOR

With a final glance over its shoulder at Traft, the despondent-looking mutt sulked off.

TRAFT

He don't take kindly to strangers.

JETHRO

Don't take it personal. I'm sure he thinks he's helping.

(beat)

Ain't you gonna eat? I know you must be hungry.

NARRATOR

Traft, for his part, had been trying to size up his host and his food as quickly as he could. This was not lost on Jethro.

JETHRO

(good-natured)

Now if I'd any ill-will towards you, why'd I not've acted on it before, when you was all but dead to the world?

NARRATOR

Traft very nearly smiled, in spite of himself, before partaking greedily of the food in front of him.

*

A spoon moves rapidly in a mushy bowl.

TRAFT **INHALES** THE FOOD, HARDLY EVEN CHEWING.

TRAFT

(mouth full of food)

Forgive me. I've known some downright untrustworthy folks in my day.

JETHRO

Oh, now that I understand, boy. No apology needed.

TRAFT

You put salt pork in this?

Very brief pause

TRAFT

It's damn good. Didn't know you could raise pigs up past the tree line.

JETHRO

You can't. But you can sure freeze anything you venture out to hunt.

TRAFT

Well I thank you for your kindness. I'll not overstay my welcome, I aim to be on my way as quickly as I can.

JETHRO

Doubtful. The nine winds have started their gusting. Barely got back with my supplies for the season. You'll not be going over the mountains this year, that's for damn sure. Course...there's other ways of getting where you want to go, but--

TRAFT

--If you know another way through that pass, I'd pay handsomely to know it too.

JETHRO

But I don't recommend venturing out tonight.

NARRATOR

Traft gave no answer in either direction, but helped himself to another heaping spoonful.

He spoons up some more hot mush.

TRAFT

Sorry, I haven't even asked your name.

JETHRO

Called Jethro. A good workaday name, picked it myself. Wasn't always such.

NARRATOR

Then Traft happened to notice an oil painting, framed with precious but tarnished metal, propped up in a corner opposite an old looking glass. Two things struck him about this painting.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)

The first was the expressiveness of the eyes - remarkable even to such an unsophisticated critic as Traft. The second was the resemblance of the young, well-dressed subject of the painting to the ragged old man who sat before him. Traft gestured towards the painting.

TRAFT

Kinsman of yours, Jethro?

JETHRO

Oh yea, of a sort.

(pause)

Would you ever believe the man in that painting was sitting right before you even now?

TRAFT

'Spouse I could. A man wears different faces throughout his life.

JETHRO

Feels like a lifetime ago. Always figured it were worth keeping. When a man's all by himself, it never hurts to remember what he once looked like.

TRAFT

Powerful thing a portrait. Lots of folks might take it for granted, but getting to choose how you wanna appear to the world...that's no small thing.

Spoon hits bowl again.

JETHRO

I'd ask your name, boy, but I think I already know it.

NARRATOR

Traft looked up from his meal.

*

JETHRO

Knowed it as soon as I saw that tattoo on your chest.

NARRATOR

Traft couldn't stop the brief look of panic from crossing his face.

JETHRO

Don't worry, I ain't fixing to turn you over to the Elves. Ain't got much use for them, truth be told.

TRAFT

(Still a little wary)

Is that so?

JETHRO

Greedy for power something fierce, says me. Rule all they touch with an iron fist, however much gold they like to plate it with.

TRAFT

(perking up)

Well if you've heard of me, you probably know I'm inclined to agree with that.

JETHRO

It's why I come all the way out here. Get away from all that, thought I. There's a wandering, pioneer spirit in my blood, my pa always said, going back generations. Go west, thought I! Go west. Where the land's still untamed, and a man can build sommat for himself.

TRAFT

You know, you might be surprised just how tamed things are west of the mountains. Where my people have built.

JETHRO

Aye, but that's just the rub ain't it? The Elves got they greasy fingers in that too. No, says I. No man'll ever be truly free in this world so long as the Elves rule it.

TRAFT

(pleasantly surprised; "I can work with this.")
Not often one meets a man who thinks like you do, Jethro.

JETHRO

Well, not many's been around so long as I have, seen what I seen.

TRAFT

Then you know it doesn't have to be like it is.

JETHRO

Nay, nay, it don't.

TRAFT

The Elves are on top now, but they are not invincible.

JETHRO

Not invincible, no. And for what it's worth, I ought to say I've no ill will toward your kind. Never believed what the Elves said about you anyhow. Seems to me it takes a certain kind of virtue to build something in so hard a land.

TRAFT

You continue to strike me as a very wise man, Jethro.

JETHRO

I dare say though, you may be thinking about freeing yourselves all wrong. Burning the world down around you and all.

TRAFT

(heard this before)
Ah. You think I'm too violent.

JETHRO

Nay, nay, not exactly--

TRAFT

(defensive; has had to give this speech too often)
--If a dog has a bone that he doesn't want to share, that's understandable. If he keeps that bone and then takes mine - and then takes yours?

JETHRO

Aye, put him down and get another dog. Or...find sommat you value that cannot be taken from you. For no matter where you go, or how many mountains you climb, you'll still be you when you get to the top. If you want for sommat, sometimes it's best to look within. Me? I care not for the world. Burn it, or don't. Run from it, or don't. But what if instead, you tried to turn the world inside-out.

TRAFT

Afraid I don't follow.

JETHRO

Tell me young man. Do you believe in the uncorruptible soul?

TRAFT

("Oh, great. One of these.")
Ah. I see. Tell you the truth, Jethro. I never much cared for priests and chapels if that's what you're asking. And I don't think there's anything in this world that's uncorruptible.

JETHRO

Well that's just it my boy. Uncorruptible don't mean a man can't be lead to do wrong. It just means that a man's will is what it is and ain't what it ain't. It can't age or decay or break like his body can. In that way it's the purest most perfect version of a man, no matter what ends it's applied towards.

TRAFT

One way to put it I guess.

JETHRO

Take my little old hand for instance.

TRAFT

Your hand?

NARRATOR

Jethro held out his hand so that the fire in his hearth cast a dancing shadow behind it.

JETHRO

No matter what I do, my hand can't pass through this table.

He knocks a few times on a wooden surface.

JETHRO

I could try and break the table, but I'd break my hand first more like. But the shadow?

NARRATOR

He waved his arm next to the table to demonstrate.

JETHRO

Passes over, through, around the table ever which way.

TRAFT

(lost)

I suppose that's true.

JETHRO

You say you wanna get over the mountains and see your kin. And I say there's another way.

TRAFT

I've heard of passages from underneath the mountains from the old times. If you've got any maps, or--

JETHRO

--No, no, no, no. You're thinking about it all wrong. What if the mountains weren't even there?

TRAFT

(Okay, nevermind. This guy's nuts.)

Jethro, I thank you for your aid, but as you know, I have people who depend on me, and interesting as your thoughts are, I'm afraid I've no time for philosophy. I think it would be best if I returned to my people with haste.

JETHRO

Nay, nay, I told you you'll not leave here tonight.

TRAFT

I appreciate your concern. But I'm a man who values his freedom. Like you. So I trust you'll not think me too rude.

A chair is pushed out.

NARRATOR

Traft rose from the table to gather his things--and collapsed to a heap on the floor, his legs suddenly jelly.

His body crumples.

TRAFT

What the--

JETHRO

--There's black nightshade in your tea.

TRAFT

You lyin' bastard.

JETHRO

Like I said. You might travel tonight but not on your own two legs.

12 INT. TENT NEAR FREEHOLD - JUST AFTER DAWN

12

The birds of the early morning chirp.

NARRATOR

We'll return to the mountains and Traft's predicament in due time, I assure you. But for now I must take you back to Regan's tent near Freehold.

Tent opens.

NIA

Your Grace? Sir Brennen has returned.

REGAN

He's late.

NIA

The Kalth'yr is with him.

REGAN

You're shitting me.

NIA

That's not all. There is also--well, you'd better see for yourself. Time seems to be of the essence.

REGAN

You don't fucking say.
 ("Well?")
 Send them in.

*Note to mixer: For this scene to avoid Arlene/
 Regan sonic confusion, I think we should pan
 Nia and Regan slightly R and everyone else
 slightly L.*

NARRATOR

Nia ushered in Brennen, Yllowyyn, Arlene, and Gwen. The former two knelt immediately, and the latter two quickly followed suit.

BRENNEN
 Your Grace.

YLLOWYYN
 Your Grace.

REGAN

(cautiously impressed?)
 You put that arrow in him, Brennen?

BRENNEN

No, Your Grace. But I think you had better hear the account from him.

REGAN

Who's this with you?

BRENNEN

Allow me to present the Lady Arlene Mooncrest, born to House Redmoor.

ARLENE

Your Grace. Brennen tried to tell me something of your claim on the ride here. I must admit, it's all a bit of a blur. But, I know for a fact my brother's claim is false. And if Brennen and Yllowyyn recognize you as Queen then that is enough for me.

REGAN

See? Who says I can't build a court Nia? All right, everyone get up except the Elf.

NARRATOR

The queen's subjects complied, which was when Regan's gaze fell upon Gwen.

REGAN

Wait, don't I know you from somewhere?

GWEN

Aye, Your Grace. We met beneath Castle Guernatal.

REGAN

Right, that was you. Sorry if I scared you. Brennen, you know you owe this woman your life?

BRENNEN

Beg pardon, Your Grace?

REGAN

I was fucking gone from that castle, 'til this one appealed to my better spirits.

BRENNEN

(shocked)
She...how did--

REGAN

--Story for another day. Right now the splint needs to start talking.

NARRATOR

I cannot stress enough the novelty of the Elf's demeanor in this moment. Far from the youthful bravado to which you are surely accustomed, he instead remained kneeling, kept his eyes on the ground, and spoke in muted tones.

YELLOWYYN

Your Grace, I have made many and terrible mistakes, and I owe an accounting for each and every one. But I swear on my life and honor that willfully deceiving Your Grace was never among them. What I now know, I could have never believed had I not seen it for myself.

REGAN

Yeah? What's that?

YELLOWYYN

Ry' lo-Th'yyt is...she was prepared to murder the Lady Arlene, in cold blood and without a trial, and to falsely blame the murder on Orcs. All to conceal what the lady had found.

REGAN

Which is?

ARLENE

This, Your Grace.

The baby fusses.

NARRATOR

Arlene approached Regan, carrying her swaddled bundle.

GWEN

We found him next to a dying Orc, Your Grace. We think it was hers, on account of she spent her last breath begging me to save it. Only it looks like every other babe I've ever seen.

BRENNEN

It is just as you said, Your Grace. My shame for having doubted you knows no words.

REGAN

I gather things didn't go to plan for Ry'y lo-Th'yyt.

ARLENE

The Kalth'yr risked his life to save mine. He took that arrow as he rode the Lord Commander down.

REGAN

You did *what*?

YELLOWYYN

She's hurt but still lives. She'll be upon us as soon as she's able. A few hours at the most.

REGAN

So hurt or not you both walked away. I know that gift. What's to say this isn't to throw me off your scent so you can spy for your Elf friends?

YELLOWYYN

Only my word, which I know is debased by my own deeds. I am at your mercy.

A knife is unsheathed.

NARRATOR

Yllowyyn unsheathed the gilded hunting knife, gifted to him by his parents years ago, and held it to his throat with the hilt facing Regan.

YELLOWYYN

If Your Grace wills that I answer for my errors with my life, then I've no standing to protest. But if you'll have me, I would do my penance by fighting beside you. A skilled tracker, born and raised of the wood-folk, will be no small advantage in the fight to come. Only you had better decide quickly, Your Grace. Ry'y lo-Th'yyt is furious, and she is desperate, and she is on her way.

REGAN

Look at me, Yllowyyn.

NARRATOR

Regan held the young Elf's gaze, unblinking, for quite some time.

Beat.

REGAN

You believe him, Brennen?

BRENNEN

I do, Your Grace.

Another beat.

REGAN

Stand up.

YLLOWYYN GROANS AND STRUGGLES A BIT AS HE STANDS.

His chain mail jingles.

REGAN

You fight for me now. And I'll bring you in on my plans if and when I decide it's wise. That clear?

YLLOWYYN

Admirably so, Your Grace.

REGAN

Nia, take him out of earshot. And dig that dart out of him.

NARRATOR

Nia and Yllowyyn both bowed low, and then exited the tent.

They open the tent and walk away.

REGAN

I take it you've had a change of heart, Sir Brennen?

BRENNEN

Your Grace, I still struggle to imagine any way we survive a war against the Th'ar lo-Hyyl.

(beat)

But there's naught to do now but try. I am at your service, without reservations.

REGAN

Good. Let's go to work.

END OF PART TWO.