

THE ONCE AND FUTURE NERD
Book II - MYTH MADE FLESH

Chapter 7
"What's Close To You"

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PART TWO:

13 INT. CASTLE GUERNATAL - AN AUDIENCE CHAMBER - MORNING

13

We're in a wide, echoey room of a castle.
And we're just sitting there.
After a beat, fingernails rap on a desk.
And then a door opens.

ANTONIN

Your Excellency. Good morning.

A chair is pushed out from a table.

NARRATOR

The Bishop of Castle Guernatal had entered an audience chamber to find the man he had summoned - one Lord Antonin Mooncrest - waiting for him.

HEAD PRIEST

(from across the room)

Lord Mooncrest. Good morn to you.

Two frail feet and a cane hobble into the room.

They hobble very, very, VERY slowly.

ANTONIN

Would you...like a hand, Your Excellency?

HEAD PRIEST

(he's hardly any closer to us)

Patience, young man. Patience is next to godliness.

ANTONIN

Of course.

A few more beats of him hobbling towards us.

HEAD PRIEST

(to himself)

Oh! Oh, it's just gas.

(to Antonin)

Please be seated, my Lord.

THE HEAD PRIEST EXERTS HIMSELF TERRIBLY TO SIT DOWN.

HEAD PRIEST

One moment, your cushion is dusty. Just a quick hasty thing, but you know...decorum matters. Thank you for making such haste, my Lord. You must have ridden very hard to arrive as soon as you did.

ANTONIN

When I read the enormity of Ardel's confession, I knew the people needed their new leader as soon as possible. Now. What would you say are the most urgent problems facing the Kingdom?

HEAD PRIEST

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, well. I would say food first and foremost. The peasantry still believes the Eastern Storehouse to be haunted by a vengeful phantom.

ANTONIN

Is that so?

HEAD PRIEST

And then there's the matter of the garrison. With all the changes in leadership lately, I'm sorry to say there may be competing loyalties among them.

ANTONIN

I see. In that case, gather all the garrison and as many of the people as you can to the Eastern Storehouse.

14 EXT. CASTLE GUERNATAL - EASTERN STOREHOUSE - LATER

14

We're outside, on a crisp, chilly morning.

A crowd buzzes, but they begin to settle down after Antonin speaks.

ANTONIN

Good morning to you all. For those who don't remember me, I am Lord Antonin of House Mooncrest. I was wed to the Lady Arlene, before she fled the cruelty of her treacherous brother. Now it is true that Ardel's abdication leaves me lawfully the Lord Regent of this Kingdom. But you know all too well that the subtle maneuverings of the law have little to do with who is most fit to rule. So I intend to earn your trust in me. Captain?

NEW GUARD CAPTAIN

M'lord.

ANTONIN

I'd like to enter the storehouse.

NEW GUARD CAPTAIN

Won't do it m'lord. Hang me if you must. Saw what happened to the last chap.

ANTONIN

I understand your trepidation. If I go in there myself, and return with a barrel of salt pork, will you and your men pledge an oath to me?

NEW GUARD CAPTAIN

I'd have to advise against it m'lord.

ANTONIN

I appreciate your counsel. All the same, the key please.

NEW GUARD CAPTAIN

If you insist, m'lord.

We hear Antonin walk away from us, open a big storehouse door, and walk in.

(The rest of this scene, we have the peasants' POV - outside the storehouse listening in.)

ANTONIN

Nothing out of the ordinary here, just a plain old storehouse. Wait! What ghastly apparition do mine eyes perceive behind yonder crate?

WHISPERER

Who goes there?

ANTONIN

Why! It is a phantom, the rumors were true. Who art thou, spirit?

WHISPERER

I am the Spirit of Vengeance!

NARRATOR

Now I have to give Lord Mooncrest credit here. As a thespian, it is no small feat to disguise one's voice and have a conversation with one's self, such that one can convincingly seem like they are in fact two.

PEASANT PLAYED BY IAN

(panned left)

I told you the spirit was still here!

ANOTHER PEASANT PLAYED BY IAN

(panned right)

Run m'lord! Run while you can!

HEAD PRIEST

(panned center)

Oh, I do hope he's safe!

ANTONIN

What do you want of me, spirit?

WHISPERER

My quarrel was with Ardel the Usurper - AS I MADE A POINT OF SAYING LAST TIME. It's BEEN safe to come in here since he left. But since you are here, identify yourself!

ANTONIN

I am Lord Antonin of House Mooncrest. I am the lawful Lord Regent now. I've come here to prove my worthiness to the people. I only wish to bring them back the food which they have worked so hard to store.

WHISPERER

Very well. I shall examine your soul.

ANTONIN

Galadon's mercy! I can feel the spirit's gaze upon mine soul.

WHISPERER

I have examined your soul and found you...worthy. I shall depart this place now. But beware! I shall return if injustice does! Fare well!

NARRATOR

A long, cautious silence settled over the gathered crowd.

(beat)

And then they saw Antonin emerge, with a barrel of food held over his shoulder.

Thunderous applause!

DISSOLVE TO:

15 INT. BARN - SOMEWHERE EAST OF GUERNATAL - EARLY MORNING

15

We're inside a barn, with all the animal sounds you'd expect.

NARRATOR

South of Castle Guernatal, the once mighty Ardel Redmoor slept restlessly in a stall next to his horse. Ardel had ridden south - towards the ports in Seahold, and away from both his enemies at Castle Guernatal and the infamously ruthless mercenaries of Armstrungard - attempting to stay at least a day's ride ahead of the news that he no longer held any titles or land.

ARDEL

(sleep talking)
Turpitude... character...

NARRATOR

Nightmares plagued him as he slept, haunted by the words Antonin said to him a few nights prior.

ARDEL

(sleep talking)
Trust... never needed trust...

NARRATOR

Forced at knife-point to give up his claim to his lands and his lordship, he had fled that night in hopes of finding refuge with the field folk that lived further from the castle.

ARDEL

(sleep talking)
Literal peasants...

NARRATOR

Unfortunately for Ardel, the further from the castle he rode, the more the definition of hospitality seemed to change.

ARDEL

(sleep talking...)
Couldn't draw a decent bath...

A splash of water hits Ardel

ARDEL

AHHHHHHHHH!

PEASANT

Sorry to disturb your slumber, *m'lord*, but I just heard an interesting story from my neighbor to the north.

ARDEL

How dare you assault the Lord of Castle Guernatal! Justice shall rain down upon you the moment I get word to the nearest barracks! Do you not realize who you are attempting to trifle with?!

NARRATOR

The farmer stood over Ardel, arms crossed, immune to his threats.

PEASANT

My neighbor says there's been quite a lot of changes at the Castle of late.

ARDEL

As I told you last night, ma'am, there has been an attempted coup and as your liege I am more than entitled to lodging for the night. Now bring me your best garments so that I may look my best before presenting myself to the barracks, and you can have some hope of saving your neck from the gallows!

PEASANT

Word is, by your own decree, you're no longer any kind of lord. That you gave up your titles and your sister's husband is in charge now.

ARDEL

MOONCREST IS A LIAR AND A SNEAK!!! HIS TREACHERY AGAINST THE THRONE KNOWS NO BOUNDS!! I rue the day I gave away my sister to that loathsome, idiotic,..... charlatan!

PEASANT

As I was speaking with my neighbor, an infantry patrol came through and told us the same thing. What's more, they said you confessed to all manner of crimes.

ARDEL

Well obviously they would say--

NARRATOR

--Ardel looked into the eyes of the peasant and realized he was not convincing this woman.

ARDEL

(barely hiding his disdain)
I appreciate the warning, my good woman. I'll gather my things and be on my way posthaste.

PEASANT

Right, then. I'll thank you for the gold we agreed upon last night - plus a little more of course, and I'll bid you fare--

ARDEL

--What do you mean a little more?

PEASANT

Mister Redmoor, I don't have much stomach for castle intrigue, it's why I live all the way out here. But the lord of these lands does, and I think he might be interested to know there's a fugitive staying in his barn.

ARDEL

(caught, incredulous)

I- You- Are you threatening me?!?!

PEASANT

I wouldn't say that, Mister Redmoor. More that the rates for the stall you stayed in just went up.

ARDEL

Overnight? That's preposterous!!

PEASANT

I wouldn't say that, either, Mister Redmoor. Any farmer'll tell you - when an enemy's threatening a siege, taxes go up. Just the way of things.

ARDEL

(flabbergasted)

Yes, but, this isn't--

PEASANT

--Shall I call for my lord, sir?

ARDEL

(defeated and bitter)

Let me see what I have.

NARRATOR

Ardel reached next to him for the sack of items he had hurriedly smuggled out of the castle. The bag had gradually been drained after similar stops Ardel had made on his journey. Usually the first item was enough to dazzle the folks beyond the castle keep. Ardel reached into the sack...

ARDEL STIFLES A **GASP**.

NARRATOR

...and came up with nothing. Frantically, he looked around for something, anything he could offer this woman.

ARDEL

(nervously laughing a bit)

My good woman, could you find it in your magnanimous heart to waive your fee just this one time? I appear to be short on supplies today.

PEASANT

Two ways you can pay for yer stay: first way is you can work it off.

ARDEL **SCOFFS**.

PEASANT

Second way is you can barter with me.

ARDEL

But my friend, I have nothing to barter with. Surely you will accept a writ of debit.

NARRATOR

The peasant turned to look at the fine, castle-bred horse Ardel had ridden in on.

PEASANT

Wouldn't say you had nothing.

ARDEL

(sighing)
Ugh....

NARRATOR

And so, Ardel Redmoor rode away from the farm towards the still rising sun on his newly acquired ass.

The mule makes a hee-haw sound.

CROSS-DISSOLVE:

16 EXT. OUT ON THE PLAINS - DAY

16

A different mule brays as it clops along the prairie, pulling a small cart behind it.

STEADY RIVER

This is a good place to stop.

FIRST SNOW

Woah Daffodil.

The mule - and the cart she's pulling - clop to a halt.

STEADY RIVER

Now. Do you know why we stopped?

NARRATOR

First Snow surveyed the prairie that surrounded her. In every direction stretched miles of terrain that - to an untrained eye - would seem unremarkable and indistinguishable.

FIRST SNOW

Uhhh...

(MORE)

FIRST SNOW (cont'd)

(beat)

Oh! The horizon up ahead is moving. There's a herd in front of us. If we need water, we should get it now while we're still upstream of them.

STEADY RIVER

(impressed)

Hm. So it is. Very observant of you girl. But we've got plenty of water to get us to the Federation House. I was more thinking that...

(switches to a cooing baby voice)

...Someone deserves a carrot!

We hear her reach into a cloth sack. The mule brays excitedly.

STEADY RIVER

Are there any good girls around here who'd like a carrot?

Daffodil crunches the carrot with glee.

STEADY RIVER

(genuinely giddy over this)

That's a good girl!

FIRST SNOW

(sighs)

Auntie. We'll never get there if you keep stopping to give her carrots.

STEADY RIVER

Would you rather walk?

FIRST SNOW

No, of course not, but--

STEADY RIVER

--Then we should show her we're grateful for the service she provides. She's quite old, you know.

FIRST SNOW

Yes, you've mentioned that.

STEADY RIVER

All right, all right, we can get going again.

FIRST SNOW

Here we go, Daffodil.

First Snow snaps the reins and they start moving again.

We let them just roll along in silence for a beat.

STEADY RIVER

So. Have you thought about what you'll say to the Federation?

FIRST SNOW

Sorry?

STEADY RIVER

When you present our proposal, I mean.

Stunned silence.

STEADY RIVER

Don't look at me like that. Why do you think I asked you to come?

FIRST SNOW

I don't know, you ask me to do lots of things!

STEADY RIVER

You're thinking about putting your name in for Speaker, aren't you?

FIRST SNOW

(caught off guard)

I...maybe! But not until your term is over!

STEADY RIVER

I've already announced I'm stepping down at the end of this season. And I doubt we'll be back to the Federation House before then. So this is your last chance to practice.

FIRST SNOW

Auntie, no, I...I can't. It's too important.

STEADY RIVER

You built consensus in our village, largely on your own. Who better to convince the Federation? And besides, if you're right, and appeasing the Elves is doomed to fail, then young folks have the most to lose by it. You are the better of us to speak for this.

FIRST SNOW

But they don't know me. They don't trust me like they trust you.

STEADY RIVER

No one at the Federation knew me, when my uncle first brought me along. They trust me now because I've spent my years saying sensible things. And you have sensible things to say. Not to mention, I'll be there to voice my support for you.

NARRATOR

But Steady River's young companion continued to look at her with an almost desperate uncertainty.

STEADY RIVER

(firm)

Do you trust my judgment as a matron of the town?

FIRST SNOW

Of course.

STEADY RIVER

Then trust me that you're the best one to speak. Now walk me through your reasoning, as practice. It will remind you how much sense you make.

First Snow collects herself.

FIRST SNOW

Giving the Elves what they want brings peace only for a time - a short time. And that time gets shorter the more their presence out here grows. It was barely three seasons ago that they provoked Traft Sixhills into building his army.

STEADY RIVER

Indeed. And if someone reminds you how badly Traft's campaign cost us?

FIRST SNOW

Traft's rage led him astray. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if that was the Elves' plan all along, but that's beside the point. In any case, we need not do what the Easterners have done to us, we just need to halt their advance. Make their campaign costly enough that they abandon it out of self-interest. And Three-Bridges is well-placed to do just that.

STEADY RIVER

And why is that?

FIRST SNOW

The River. We only need to hold our bridges to hold the town. If the other federation villages send even a few hundred people in fighting shape, we could fend off every Ranger in Rangerton until the snows come.

STEADY RIVER
(Devil's advocate)
 But they only want one field.

FIRST SNOW
 Fighting takes food. Every field we cede to them makes it easier for them to launch an attack, and harder for us to mount a defense. No. The time is NOW!

Steady River lets this reverberate for a moment - lets First Snow sit with it.

STEADY RIVER
 Good. Feel better?

FIRST SNOW
 Do you think they'll be persuaded?

STEADY RIVER
 I truly don't know. But if anyone can persuade them, I'm certain it's you. What do I always say about your name?

FIRST SNOW
 That my parents named me well.

STEADY RIVER
 You are inevitable.

FIRST SNOW
 I am inevitable.

DIP TO:

17 INT. RED REAVER - CREW QUARTERS - EVENING

17

Nia walks briskly through the crew quarters of the Red Reaver. Around her are the sounds of gambling, drinking, and carousing. Maybe someone tries to get a shanty going but they're shut down.

NELSON
(on edge, a little frantic)
 Nia! Got a sec?

Nia keeps walking and Nelson chases after her.

NIA
 Not right now I'm afraid. Are you unwell? Or unsafe?

NELSON
 Uh, no, I just really need to talk to you.

NIA
It will have to wait, then.

NELSON
It always has to wait.

NIA
I'm sorry. I'm late to meet with the Captain.

NELSON
Is Jen in there?

NIA
She is.

NELSON
Why is she always in the important meetings?

She stops for a second.

NIA
Because the Queen named Jen as her second when we first met Ren. It's not a matter of who we value more, it's a matter of...who Regan thought should play which roles.

NELSON
That feels like a good answer to you?

NIA
I promise I will talk to you later.

She starts off again.

18 NEARBY ON THE SHIP - MOMENTS LATER

18

We hear Nelson walking.

NARRATOR
As Nelson took his leave of Nia - in a somewhat dour mood I might add - he chanced upon Arlene and Gwen.

GWEN
Nelson. You all right?

NELSON
Yeah, you know.

GWEN
Have they gone to talk to the Captain?

NELSON
Uh huh.

ARLENE

Might you know what they're discussing?

NELSON

Do I ever?

Nelson sulks off.

A beat passes.

GWEN

We still going to the Isles, d'you think?

ARLENE

I'm not sure. I imagine that must be what they're discussing.

GWEN

Aye. Must be.

An awkward pause. Then...

ARLENE

Gwen...

GWEN

I've been thinking.

It's one of those moments.

ARLENE

(ad lib, e.g.)

Beg pardon, say what you will.

GWEN

(ad lib, e.g.)

No it's all right, you can go.

GWEN

Right then. I've heard there's a lot of his kind on the Isles. I was wondering if we might find someone who'd take him. Not that I want to be rid of him, far from it. Just...would he be better off raised by his own?

ARLENE

I know what you mean, I've wondered it myself. He'd be better in some ways perhaps. But if what I've heard is true, his kind are enslaved there. All considered I'm afraid it's best for him if we continue to pretend he's like us.

GWEN

Right. Well, you know more about politics than I do. Just want what's best for him.

ARLENE

Of course. As do I.

A beat.

GWEN

Can't believe how fond of him I am already.

ARLENE

Yes. That's what I was going to say. Given everything, it's hard to imagine that we'll just...keep him forever. But it's becoming harder to imagine not having him as well.

The baby wakes from a nap and begins to coo.

ARLENE

(to the baby)
Yes, isn't it, darling?

GWEN

D'you think it's time we give him a name?

ARLENE

He deserves one, yes. But if I name him, I don't know how I'd ever say goodbye.

19 CAPTAIN'S QUARTERS - CONTINUOUS

19

A heavy curtain parts. Nia enters and closes it behind her, muffling the sounds of the crew.

REN

She deigns to join us.

NIA

Apologies. I was, ah...

REN

--I'm sure I don't care. The matter at hand is the deal your "queen" brokered. And then failed to honor.

JEN

Look, obviously, things went very very wrong. You're a reasonable woman, and you've gotta know we weren't trying to--

REN

--Oh, believe me girl. If I thought you'd double-crossed me, this parlay would have a much less... cordial tone. But there's no amount of good intentions that make two and two into five.

ALF

And I've tried, doncha know.

NIA

We understand. In your estimation, what would it take to make you and your crew whole?

REN

I was promised half the purse from the race. And you brought back...what would you say, Alf?

ALF

Boys just finished counting. Two sevenths of the expected haul.

REN

So, needless to say, all that you did bring back is mine. And you owe me quite a bit more.

BRENNEN

Now wait a moment. Just because you've the upper hand right now doesn't mean we need yield to some.... gangster's code of--

REN

--Gangster's code?

ALF

Let's be very clear here fella. The Guild of Merchant Mariners Code of Laws and Best Practices, Section B, Article 2 says, in agreement with the practices of common law and all basic notions of good faith: if a party, formal or otherwise, enters into a contract with another party, formal or otherwise, in which either party incurs a debt to the other--

NIA

--Thank you, Alf. We take your point.

REN

'Course if you'd rather work under gangster's code, your protections under bankruptcy are considerably less, shall we say--

JEN

--Right, yeah. Gangplanks, sharks, we get it. Brennen's just trying to look out for the...crown's assets.

NIA

And naturally, if we were in a position to compensate you for your losses, we would. But as I'm assuming you would not accept a writ of debit--

REN

(a unusually good-natured chuckle)
--You assume correct.

NIA

We'll therefore need to establish some reasonable promise of future repayment.

REN

Oh good. You've arrived at where I was. A half hour ago when I called for you.

JEN

How about we all simmer down a sec? Is this worth anything?

NARRATOR

From a satchel, Jen produced a cloth-wrapped bundle. She unwrapped it to reveal the bronze statue that she and Nelson had purloined from the Library of Armstrungard.

(beat)

...And then she noticed the wide eyes and slack jaws of those around her.

NIA

(working hard to steady her voice)
Jen...Where did you get that?

JEN

(N.B.D.)
The library. Why?

REN

Well I'll be fucked.

JEN

...Valuable?

REN

That's the White Lady. It's the masthead of the first ship that brought Elves to Iorden.

NIA

It is one of the most precious relics in the world.

ALF

Any chance it's a fake, mum?

REN

Anyone caught with a replica is tied to an anvil and thrown in the ocean. By law.

NIA

And Blu'u lo-Ba'al would not keep a counterfeit in his personal collection. Why did you take this, Jen?

JEN

Looked like it was worth something? So...we're good then?

REN

Good?! We're damn far from good, girl. I can't possibly fence that. And if the Elves thought for a second I had this, I'd have the whole damn navy after me. I need you off my ship. Very soon.

NIA

Right. Well. As you say, we are something of a liability to you. And even if you were willing to turn us in, which I'd not besmirch your...ethics by implying, you'd risk capture yourself.

NARRATOR

Nia began to perceive some, shall we say mildly concerned looks from her two comrades.

NIA

I'm realizing as I hear myself speak that I may not necessarily be strengthening my own bargaining position. But it seems that, were you resolved to throw us overboard, you'd have done so long ago. So - our admitted but unintentional breach of contract aside - it may still be in your best interest to deliver us to the Sugarcane Isles as agreed. And, as long as we're dealing in promises anyway, simply add the cost of that to our debt. In any case, due to our actions at the race and before, we've no choice but to...

She just trails off into nothing.

JEN

...Nia?

NIA

(voice a little shaky)
Sorry. Saying it out loud is...due to our recent actions, we've no choice but to topple the White Forest and become wealthy and powerful beyond imagining, in which case we will have an easy time making you whole. If we fail at that...we will be dead and our memories all but erased from this world.

NARRATOR

Nia then took a moment to sit down, and regain her composure.

ALF

Oh yah no, that's a coin toss. Could go either way.

REN

Mm. Still. She's not all wrong.
(*Aside to Nia's friends*)
Clever, this one. Talks too much by half. But, clever.
(*Back to business*)
Here's what I'm willing to do. The Sugarcane Isles maintain their relative sovereignty through some very careful maneuvering. Their Magistrates, Governors, and custom collectors are of a certain...moral persuasion.

NARRATOR

To illustrate her meaning, Ren tossed a gold coin out of some unseen pocket, and caught it mid-air. She twirled it, back and forth across her knuckles, before making it seem to vanish once again.

REN

And to keep one's entry a secret requires even more "persuasion." When we made our deal, I planned to handle all of this. For eleven adults and one baby. Alf - how many is two sevenths of twelve?

ALF

More than three but a good bit less than four, mum.

REN

So, because I am a woman of my word and because you and your "queen" amuse me, I can get four of you to the Isles, and no more. Provided you--

BRENNEN

--But you cannot expect us--

REN

--This is a *final* offer so please permit me to finish it.
(*takes a beat to reestablish dominance*)
Four or less to the Isles. I'll require collateral of some significant value--
(*anticipating an objection*)
--Monetary or otherwise--for the remainder of your debt. The rest of you, I can deliver to some arms traders up north who have a hidden land route over the Black Mountains. You'll have to make your own deal with them. But. *They* might accept that statue of yours. I hear the...politics over the mountains are different. They might be able to fence it. Now this journey's neither pleasant nor safe. But it's not a shark's belly, and it's not the Elves.

A beat of silence.

NIA
It's a lot to think on.

JEN
We've...kinda been through a lot together.

NIA
May we have some time to discuss it?

REN
I can give you 'til sunup. Latest.

END OF PART TWO.