

THE KING'S DYING WISH

A long time ago in a land shrouded in the mists of time, there lived an old and benevolent king who ruled over the kingdom of *Civilisia*. Under his wise rule the Civilisians had enjoyed many years of peace and prosperity, the children's bellies were full and everyone had enough to eat.

But the king was unhappy and dissatisfied even though he had everything his heart still desired. For even though he lacked for nothing there was one thing he did not possess, though he had sought it for many a long year-it was wisdom. He had called in the wisest counselors from the eastern kingdoms as well as those from the West but to no avail. None of these men and women knew what this strange thing called wisdom was, some thought it was a strange kind of precious jewel, others believed that it was a book, and some reasoned it was some kind of star gazing instrument.

The king grew tired of all the bickering and shouting in the end and sent them all away, his legs were growing weaker and weaker with each passing day and he knew it would not be long before he joined his ancestors in the Tomb of Kings. So it was that he called forth his bravest knight, a mighty man of valour who had served the king for many years without murmur or complaint. A seasoned warrior with many a battle scar he was nonetheless more than capable of besting any man at arms even now in the twilight of his youth.

"You have served me faithfully all these years Sir Knight, but I have one last task to set you 'ere I cast off this mortal coil. Go and find this thing called wisdom and bring it back to me, for I would gaze upon it at least once."

The knight bowed stiffly and backed out of the throne room, he wasted no time preparing for his quest for time was of the essence. As the sun set that day he rode out of the capital on his trusty war-horse to find this thing called wisdom. Of all the tasks his Lord had set him and the many campaigns and battles he had fought none was as momentous nor as daunting as this last one the king had asked him to perform.

He was loyal and true however and so he set forth to find wisdom stopping at every inn and tavern on the way there to inquire as to this thing called wisdom. By and by through a process of careful elimination he came to the borders of *Civilisia*. Beyond the border outposts lay the wild barbarian wastelands, a chill ran up his spine as he recalled the earlier campaigns against the Northern warlords. The danger up ahead of him was not about to turn him though, and so he crossed over towards the high country and the pitiless wilderness of *Vulgarity*.

He traveled for four days and nights without seeing a single soul for the warrior hordes had been through here just recently and the land had been devastated. However as dusk was falling on the fifth day, he chanced upon a woodcutter's hut set at the foot of the Forbidden mountains. At first he was cautious for this was dangerous country through which to be traveling alone. After riding around the outskirts of the property he ascertained that the woodcutter in the yard was indeed alone. The man was a jovial enough soul and greeted him warmly as he approached.

"So, one of the brave knights of *Civilisia* wishes to ask directions does he?"

His voice had a cackle to it and the knight sighed wearily, his features cracked in one of his rare smiles as he tried to play along, swinging out of the saddle as he spoke.

"I am on an errand from the king himself," he tersely replied and at this the old man burst out into a raucous laugh..

"And what does your king seek this time? Amber, or perhaps gold from the mountains? Maybe even," his grey eyes twinkled merrily. "The golden sword of Cruickani?"

"He seeks for wisdom," was the terse reply as the knight led his horse to a nearby trough, the laughter stopped suddenly.

"Ah," his eyes gleamed. "So he saves the best till last does he?"

"Aye, that he does," the knight leaned wearily on his sword and the man motioned to him.

"Come hither then brave knight and I will show you where to find your wisdom," with a quick glance over his shoulder the knight followed him down a beaten path that stopped at the edge of a steep gorge.

"See yon castle down there?"

The knight squinted in the direction indicated by the withered hand and sure enough perched on a rocky crag stood a castle. In the fading light it looked foreboding, its silhouette clearly visible

against the gathering gloom of the valley below them.

“It is said that there you will find whatever it is you are seeking.”

“And whose citadel might that be? He inquired.

“It is the city of dreams and of nightmares too, but it is also the only place where true wisdom can ever be found.”

The knight wasted no time returning to his horse but before he could take his leave of the woodcutter he was given strange advice.

“Choose your wisdom carefully,” the old man warned. “For many go there seeking the same as you but so few ever return.”

“And where am I to find this wisdom?”

“It is in the place you least expect to find it.”

The knight wished to question the man further but he had turned away signaling that the conversation was over. Somewhat miffed the knight set his face towards the path and set off, if he rode hard and fast he would most likely reach the citadel by dark.

The silver moon was high in the air however by the time he reached the castle walls, the fortress looked even more forbidding down here than it had perched high at the entrance to the valley. Warily he drew his sword and waited for the inevitable challenge to ring out from the parapets atop the towering walls. But no voice greeted his arrival and curiously he rode over the drawbridge and nudged at the huge wooden gates with his sword. To his surprise they swung open revealing a narrow street overlooked on both sides by rows of houses. At the end of the short street stood an old woman holding a lantern and taking his courage in trembling hands he rode forward as she called out her greeting.

“Greetings Sir Knight,” she quavered. “Have you come here seeking wisdom?”

“Aye that I have, I am on an errand from my Lord and Master.”

The hooded old crone let out with a cackle as she turned away.

“And I pray that you find it,” and with that she was gone almost as if she had been but a pale figment of his imagination, he swallowed hard and edged his horse forward into a huge courtyard that was surrounded on all sides by many doors. He dismounted near the closest door and with a prayer for safety on his lips began his search.

The castle had dozens and dozens of halls through which he passed and each one was filled with people, all intent on the activities in progress there. In one hall he found a great multitude of dark skinned men and women from the desert wastes of the South, they lay prostrate before a priest who intoned sacred blessings over them. One of the guards by the door motioned to him to follow suit but the wise old knight beat a hasty retreat, the people didn't look any wiser because of the priest's words.

Another hall heralded yet more worshipper's, this time from the western kingdoms, they sat fanning their faces whilst a grey bearded old man explained the meaning of the words in the book he was holding. Once again a guard urged him in but the knight refused, these people didn't look any wiser either. In yet another hall he found the silent ones of the East, not one of them looked around as he clanked in, his chain mail rattling. He was at first tempted to sit for a while in the silence until he noticed the guard moving towards him, he wasted no time in exiting the hall.

Sounds of laughter from across the courtyard beckoned him and making his way across he pushed open the door and peeped cautiously inside. The room was filled to capacity with people eating, drinking, and dancing to a lilting tune. His stomach growled at the smell of the food and he so very nearly stepped inside until he saw another guard waving him to come join in the festivities. The knight sighed wearily and backed out into the courtyard, it seemed that every hall had their guards, but as to whether they were supposed to keep people in or out he did not know.

In one hall he found the warrior maidens of the North, they seemed to be engrossed in a continual series of duels. Marshals watched carefully to see that the combatants adhered to the rules but when the knight spied another guard coming towards him a smile on her face he stepped out again.

One hall looked particularly promising as it was filled with books, a small group of men and women sat at desks as they studied the ancient volumes and in one corner sat some more people discussing the books they had obviously just read. But when an armed guard stepped out from

behind a bookshelf and bade him enter he refused and walked away, somehow the guards seemed to hold the key to the enigma.

He moved from one room to the next on his fruitless search and each hall revealed more people engaged in some pursuit that seemed to take up all of their time. Everywhere he looked there were always the same guards. They were not dressed in any particular uniform and wore no crest save for the insignia worn by the inhabitants of the hall they were assigned to guard. The people didn't seem to even notice them, caught up in their particular activity, from the brothels to the tournaments, and from the wise religious orders to the feasting and drinking. Everyone had a purpose for being there and at long last the knight reasoned to himself that perhaps his search for wisdom was futile and maybe he ought to give up his quest and find a hall that suited him.

It was at that moment that he found a most remarkable hall, it didn't look like one at first, being set off to one side it was more like an enclosed garden. He had passed this same garden many times during the night but had not bothered to go in, for there seemed to be no one there. But wearied from his search he decided to go in and rest for a while, maybe in the sanctity of the garden he would be able to make sense of the confusing mish mash of activities taking place around him.

When he entered the garden however he saw that it was filled with children of every race and religion, cautiously he looked around the enclosure for the inevitable guards, but there were none. It occurred to him then that he had not seen one child in all of his wanderings that night. This began to puzzle him as he stared at the giggling children chasing each other around the garden, each engrossed in whatever game took their fancy. So fascinated was he by the childish games that he did not notice the little blue eyed girl standing next to him until she spoke.

"Do you want to come and play?"

"Nay," he smiled. "I have come a long way in search of a thing called wisdom and I am weary from searching this place."

"Ah," she smiled demurely looking every inch the young lady she would one day become.

"Pray tell me child what place are you from? I see no guards here."

"We are from here silly," she smiled and jumped up on a nearby rock. "Our parents sent us here until we are old enough to join them in the great halls."

"And what then?" He asked.

She sighed.

"Then I suppose we shall not be allowed to play with each other in this lovely garden, such a shame don't you think?" She raised an eyebrow as if seeking his confirmation, the knight stared around at the waterfalls and rock pools as a sudden thought occurred to him.

"Do your parents ever come here?"

"Oh no," she shook her head. "That would never do."

"But it seems so peaceful here, so much nicer than these great halls you talk about."

"It would not be so peaceful if they were to come here," she twisted up her nose in annoyance. "They would only fight and draw swords against each other, the guards are here to stop them breaking out and starting troubles and wars."

The knight was intrigued by this stage, and bade her sit closer to him this she did without the slightest hesitation despite the fact that he wore a great broadsword at his side.

"You mean your parents are prisoners here?"

"No Sir knight they are here of their own free will, all who come here seek the same thing as you, our parents found what they thought was wisdom. Even if someone were to convince them otherwise they could never leave their halls, it is what gives them security."

"Have you never thought to try and convince them otherwise?" The knight asked, his new companion shook her head sadly as she replied.

"They would never listen to us, we are just children and who in their right mind thinks to look through the eyes of a child?"

The simple wisdom behind the young girl's words hit the knight like a physical blow and he stared all around at the multitude of different races represented here before his eyes. Without the influences and prejudices of their parents these little ones had achieved what mankind had sought for over so many bloodstained centuries-peace and harmony with one another. The blue eyed girl at his side leapt back up onto the rock a cheeky grin on her face as she sensed his growing

enlightenment.

“Have you found your wisdom yet Sir Knight?”

The knight wasted no time in taking his leave of the castle, and through the night he rode determined to reach the king with this wonderful news. He did not stop at the woodcutter’s house but kept on riding, pushing his horse harder and harder until he feared its heart would give out.

It was on the evening of the third day that he finally reached the Capitol where the king sat eagerly awaiting his fantastic news. Impatiently the knight waited till the gate was opened and rode without stopping, right up to the palace gates. His horse was utterly exhausted when he finally dismounted and bounding up the stairs burst unannounced into the king’s chambers. Breathlessly he relayed to the king all that he had seen in the City of Dreams and where this wisdom could be found.

Tears sprang to the king’s eyes as his knight finished the story and he turned his face away to hide his shame. For with all his wealth, power, knowledge, and prestige the king knew he could never stoop far enough to look through the eyes of a child- he would never find his wisdom.

Written by Alastair Rosie 1996 ©