

## **Chapter 1**

In the chronicles of man there lie commoners, varlets, kings, queens, thieves, pretenders and princes. As many who call themselves King or pretend to any throne, be it by coin of the realm or through the acquisition of power, find, only those that have achieved the title 'prince' truly play in the God's arena. Only they deal above the fray of the common and low, the material and base, only they work with truth and fight in the arena of blessed ideals.

For you to think you have acquired it all, for you to think you alone are the ruler among men. You are but a pittance, a nuisance to be humbled before being cast aside for those more worthy. For it is the prince that truly wields the power, for they alone know their true place in the universe and therefore know truth as a companion. Mortal man can only hope to be in the presence of but a few of these people of nobility in a generation. Yet woe be to the plunderer that brings the wrath of these lords onto their heads, for to call their notice is to call hell itself. This is a story of one of these princes and the base forces that so chose to challenge his presence. It begins as most of these stories do with the prince, yet unaware of his true nature.

I, Shamus, had first witnessed Prince Cedric on a street corner of my city. Having been granted the honor of working in the service of some of these Prince's of Earth I knew at once, not to intervene or confront the unknowing and uninitiated. Taken aback at my fortune to witness the transformations and trials of a Prince, I lingered and observed. True to their nature, Prince Cedric did not go by without a smile and a heartfelt hello. As I returned the courtesy, Prince Cedric stopped to chat and I learned of his current story and circumstances. I gained his trust readily and he invited me to a small luncheon. Between the salad and the soup I became a ready companion and thus I am able to recite the events for future generations of seers and men.

It had been through sheer lack of will or an actual aversion to confrontation that had allowed Cedric to be found in the small apartment on the lower west side. It seemed the necessity for a grand and palatial residence was of no use to his current needs. Besides, Tiffany had to position herself for the clientele she expected to entertain in her pursuit of her career. Cedric therefore, had acquiesced to her request and exchanged apartments for a small duration. He smiled, as he was pretty sure that the small duration would consume mortal time, but he was happy she was happy. Besides finding any apartment, whatever the time, place or requirement seemed easy enough if he needed it. The material just wasn't of necessity. The work and the pleasure of living among man is what he valued most. Cedric had found his true happiness high in the Andes with a shepherd and in a 52<sup>nd</sup> street dining club with a major industrialist. Both had offered themselves, at no cost, to Cedric's search for knowledge. The companionship was real and the information exceptional. Cedric was always amazed at the sources of his kernels of truth.

Cedric had once found a moment on a street corner with a five-year-old child one of the most enlightening times of his life. The child's casual observances and innocent truthfulness, while remarking on the events unfolding around her, captured Cedric's attention for weeks afterwards. It was these times Cedric lived for and these instances that began his transition to his true form as a Prince of Earth.

I had moved in with Cedric at his insistence, as I currently had no station or place of my own. The apartment was small, but equipped with two bedrooms and an ample kitchen. As with most Princes, monetary resources always seemed to be available when needed but at no time did the Princes ever seem to have a need to hold a position. Therefore, try as I might to avoid being conspicuous to his nature, I did perform many of those tasks that eased the Prince's mundane

existence in order to earn my standing. This enabled him to continue more with those items that assured his ascendancy. The appreciation for my efforts was genuine and we formed a strong bond. But as is their nature, a prince must travel to every part of the experiences of men, and there is where we met Balfour.

It had been a small dive on a back street of a minor neighborhood. In a noted search for a lost companion and a serious concern for her welfare, Cedric had wandered into this den. His demeanor and innocence set him for an easy mark. I sat as always slightly behind in observance wanting desperately to intervene, but knowing the need for the restraint. As expected, one of the ladies of the den offered the possibility of knowledge for a small pittance. Cedric in his innocence and trust readily agreed. However, before I could note any exchange up walked a large man, black in all demeanor from skin to his coat. He hustled the woman aside in a firm, but unabusive manner. At her retreat he offered to Cedric that the woman was not reliable, but that he would be willing to retrieve any information he needed at no cost. Cedric was hurt at the woman's dishonesty, but revived at the offer from the man. A few more exchanges were had and I was brought over and introduced to Balfour.

We understood each other at our handshake. I looked into his eyes with determination and he shook my hand and grinned. He too, could not believe his fortune at having confronted a Prince in the raw. He was also aware of my sacred duty to remain an observer. He knew far more than a mere commoner would know. I took it upon myself to find out who he truly was.

## **Chapter 2**

Now the realm of Prince's is hidden in the public. Unless one knows where to look, they will most assuredly pass it by. Having once been recruited, then in the service of a few Princes', I knew precisely where to go. It was a medium sized five-story brownstone in the middle of the old business district. As with everything in their lives, the Princes' eschewed finery and trimmings, it remained to those with lesser talents to ensure proper surroundings were provided. Therefore, the doorman knew my identity and he let me in immediately. As I suspected, many of the staff had learned that I had come into the presence of a novice and I was immediately surrounded with questions and comments. I answered many as quickly as I could, and then sought out Meldroit, the current associate of Karman. Karman was the oldest and wisest of the Princes. He had found his station before the Consensus and pursued his passions without wavering ever since. To the displeasure of all, more than once he has taken up his shield and sword in the defense of an innocent, deemed unworthy by many. I found Meldroit busily filing papers in an old office on the second floor.

"Meldroit, old friend. I find you well?" Was my inquiry.

"Shamus. Very well, thank you. And I hear fortune has smiled upon you. A novice? Could not be in finer hands." Said Meldroit.

"You do me too much honor." I replied.

"You do yourself too little. It was not you that caused Martin's demise. You performed well until the last." Meldroit replied.

"Little it seemed to help. Yet I come in need of another favor. Is your Master about that I might inquire of him?"

"About, and if I know him, in anxious anticipation of some company let me show you to him." Said Meldroit.

Now meeting a Prince is such a pleasant occasion. When in their presence it seems little doubt that that one is capable of moving worlds with the spoken word. But to come in Karman's presence was to come into ecstasy itself. He was so genuinely happy to see you. His eyes sparkled and he seemed to give you his complete attention. You felt as if you had known him for years. He sought all your experiences in one rush and fed on them like a hungry dog at supper. His dress was usually comparable to his demeanor. One could likely find him in a T-shirt and baseball cap as the robes society bade him wear. Anxious, excited, friendly and curious yet singly concerned for all was Karman and all of the known Princes.

When Meldroit opened the door to the small library room on the third floor, Karman turned and fairly swooped forward to greet me.

"Shamus! How awfully nice of you to come by. I was just thinking about you. How have you been? What have you been up to? Is it true you have found a novitiate?" Was his opening welcome.

"Prince Karman, it so nice of you to greet me." I replied.

"Please just Karman. You know how I hate titles among friends. Come in. Sit. Meldroit, come join us. Maybe I can find some refreshments. Would you like some tea?" Asked Karman

"Allow me, Karman." Meldroit said as he left to find refreshments.

"Are you sure? Well, OK. If you are?" Said Karman to Meldroit as the latter withdrew.

Princes were notorious for wanting to help and notorious for serving the most vile tasting refreshments. It wasn't that they liked what they prepared; it was just that anything could distract them from mundane duties. Dishwashing water could be easily substituted for tea or coffee when they prepared any type of meal. If the associates weren't around to serve and immune from most

of the many pleasantries in the Princes presence, one wonders if they would all die from food poisoning.

“Do you know a man named Balfour?” I asked before Karman could get a second wind.

I swear to this day the temperature changed ten degrees lower in that warm room the moment the name left my mouth and registered in Karman’s brain. His seriousness was such a change from the warm greeting only moments before.

Now before I go on any farther let me remind you that as likable as they are, Princes are THE force in the universe. They wield it well and in defense and in action towards any threat to the unity they have embraced. As flighty and freewheeling and friendly as a Prince is, jeopardize or challenge this balance, or them, a true Prince will become a thing of unimaginable fury and horror. They are defenders of Truth and know it, and its powers, well. In short they can concentrate and focus on one issue and right now Karman was focused on me.

“Why do you ask?” Was Karman’s measured reply.

I quickly and completely related my encounter with Balfour to Karman. At my conclusion Meldroit entered the room with refreshments. His look at Karman’s face melted the smile from his lips. Meldroit set the refreshments down and quickly left the room.

“He is my brother. Half brother actually. Swept up in the chaos and gluttony of things. Acquiring them, using them and disposing of them. He places wealth, position and power above all else and seeks to control and dominate anyone for his own pleasure. Our bonds and his talent allowed him unprecedented access to our way of life. He seeks to own and destroy our existence and our way of life as much as anything else in the universe for his own pleasure and his own greed. He believes that owning then destroying us will allow him the ability to be the ruler of all.” Said Karman.

“Your brother?” Was my shocked reply.

“Worse, he too had the ability to be a Prince and turned his back on all of it in a fit of sibling jealousy.” Said Karman.

“Balfour a Prince. Hard to believe.” I reached for a sip of tea.

“He would have been a great Prince. He had much more inherent talent than I did.”

“Such a waste.”

“More than a waste. With his knowledge and his greed he can cause great damage. I fear for your novitiate. If he joins with Balfour the two could wreck unimaginable terror and harm. Even unto these halls themselves.”

“Then should I intervene? Steer him clear of this danger?”

“No, it is quite wrong and if I know my brother, impossible. He knows of your novitiate now. He would find him wherever you took him. The only way a Prince can achieve his place is by the trials he faces. Unfortunately, your novitiate may be facing the greatest trials of us all. I will meditate on him and hope for his strength. You must stay in the background, but do keep us informed.”

“I will do as you ask”

The door creaked open and in walked a raven-haired woman of five feet two. Karman’s face lighted instantly and the room resumed its normal temperature and demeanor.

“Princess Anna! What a wonderful surprise.” Said Karman.

I rose immediately from my chair. Although Princesses were far from the ideals and powers of a Prince as were most commoners and notables, there was no doubt that princes would cease to function without their presence.

“My good wishes upon you, Princess Anna.” I said.

“My good wishes to you also. I understand you have caused a grievance with my Prince Karman today.” Said Anna.

“Not so. He has just brought disturbing news. We have discussed it and returned everything to rights.” Said Karman.

“Well, I was sent to inquire. The whole building noted your demeanor, particularly poor Meldroit.” Said Anna.

“Meldroit! You have seen to him?” Asked Karman.

“Why of course. Would you think I would not?” Said Anna.

“Now you tease. I shall seek him out at once to apologize.” Said Karman.

“No need. He follows on my heels with concern.” Said Anna

With her words Meldroit peeked around the corner of the door.

“May I come and clear, Karman?” Asked Meldroit.

“Here let me help you, dear friend. I do so apologize. I did not mean to disturb you.” Said Karman rushing to pick up the tray.

Meldroit smiled and waved him back.

“Please, Karman. Allow me. You know what happened last time.” Said Meldroit.

“Ah yes that was a mess. Is there anything else I may offer you, Shamus?” Said Karman.

“No, thank you. You have offered more than enough. By the way I do have that booklet you requested at our last meeting.” I pulled a small pamphlet from my inside pocket of my jacket.

“Really. Why thank you. Well it is. Really. Well I see.” Karman said as he took the pamphlet and started to read its contents.

“Good health Prince Karman, Princess Anna, Meldroit” I said as I departed their presence

I was descending the third flight of steps when I heard the light footsteps behind me. Princess Anna still dressed in her jeans, white top and gym shoes was rushing to accompany me downstairs.

“Hold, please, Shamus.” Anna asked from above.

I stood my ground on the step I had achieved and waited. When she arrived she faced me and I could see her beauty in her eyes and smile.

“I understand you serve a novitiate.” Said Anna.

“It is my privilege, Princess Anna.”

“Please, just Anna. We are not in formal setting.” She Said

“As you wish” I said.

“What is he like?” Anna asked.

“A man like any other. A Prince in the making.” I grinned and started towards the lower levels.

“You tease me Shamus. You know I am the youngest. No one new has been added for two years.” Said Anna as she joined me in my descent.

“Not an unusual wait to my understanding. It is not like these men grow on trees. Besides you know you should not meet him while he is a novitiate.” I replied.

“Of course, I know. But it does not mean I cannot be interested. I mean give me a clue. Is he Asian, American, Dutch. Does he speak our language? Does he have black hair or blond?”

“He is from this city. As such he bears your lineage and language. He does have blond hair. And stand about a head taller than you. His age is the same as yours.” I said anticipating her next question.

Anna smiled and did a little curtsy.

“Why thank you, kind sir.”

“Just be sure you allow him to achieve on his own. Leave him be. It takes time and few make it.”

“I’m sure with you nearby he will have every chance.” Said Anna.

“Blue” I said as I opened the front door to leave.

“Blue? What do you mean blue?” Asked Anna.

“The color of his eyes. They are deep pools of blue.” I said as I headed down the steps.

I turned to look at Anna before I strode off. She smiled a wonderful smile my way, turned with a flourish and, with another little smile, closed the door.

### **Chapter 3**

I encountered Cedric at the door to our apartments. He was making his way out for an encounter with an old friend.

“Shamus. I’m so glad you are back. I wanted to invite you to meet my friend. I didn’t think you would be back in time.” Cedric said in greeting.

“Would that be the meeting at the dining club on 42<sup>nd</sup> you mentioned earlier?” I replied.

“Why of course. Did I mention it earlier? I don’t recall. What was your answer dear friend?” Cedric asked.

“To join your company, why of course. But, may I make a small suggestion?” I answered.

“Please do.”

“I do not believe khaki shorts and a muscle shirt are the expected attire for this establishment. Could I interest you in the clothes I set out earlier?”

“Those were for my use? I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Are they still available?”

“I have not moved them for fear of offending you.”

“The offense would be in the lack of their use.”

“Then we shall quickly change, but then off to the meeting. Baltazar has promised a first person dissertation on his recent encounters in Nepal. I’m especially interested in the nuances he brings to the rituals of the monks.”

Cedric made his way hurriedly into his bedroom and began changing, all the while exchanging views on societal causes of the demise of the age rituals. I made a few phone calls and secured a taxi for our disposal and assured the maitre’d at the club that we were on our way.

Baltazar, for those of you that are unaware of his position, is a prominent businessman in the city. He made his fortune in real estate, secured his reputation in service to the community, and created his position in elected government office. In all respects a well-connected prosperous gentleman. But he was in every sense a gentleman. Through all his dealings and all his trials he never lost his civility, honesty or generosity. Recently retired he had engaged on a few trips throughout the world learning about and helping civilizations. His works were well known to the Princes and he was warmly received and helped quite often in his causes by their efforts. As most men, he was quite unaware of the Princes’ true stations in life, but accepted their company with extreme warmth.

I had not met Baltazar before and was encouraged by the offer to join in his visit. Slacks, blazer and white polo shirt established on his frame, Cedric rushed forth to complete his meeting. I gingerly set him in the taxi waiting at the curb, agreeing to the accompaniment of an elderly lady waiting for the bus at the corner. Cedric of course engaged her in a complete commentary about her medicines, doctors and many ailments befalling her and the elderly.

Our arrival at the club was the only distraction for Cedric that allowed the conversation to be interrupted. Cedric assured the lady the driver would take her to her destination and exited through the taxi door held open by the doorman. I nodded to the driver and he smiled then noted the fare on his sheet. I left by way of the same door and joined Cedric at the entrance to the club. Cedric was all flushed by his discussions with the woman.

“It’s a wonder she gets up in the morning. Still she has a good life. Nice children and a loving husband. I wonder if Baltazar has had such experiences.” Said Cedric.

The Maitre’d noted our arrival and well aware of Cedric’s reputation for inviting even the lowest to dine at his table quickly ushered him in to Baltazar’s presence.

“Baltazar, old friend. How good it is to see you.” Said Cedric.

“And you, Cedric. Have you brought another friend?” Said Baltazar.

“A close and dear friend. This is Shamus. He is staying with me in the apartments. He has worked wonders on clothing, food and organization. I dare say I don’t know how I did without him.” Said Cedric.

“Well met, friend Shamus. You must be doing very well by Cedric. Even the Maitre’d is not scowling at his clothing today.” Said Baltazar.

“Well met, Mr. Baltazar, and thank you. You honor me too much though, the work is just compensation for the room and Cedric is no bother.” I replied.

“You shall just call me Baltazar or I shall take offense, friend Shamus.” Smiled Baltazar.

“No offense shall be given then, friend Baltazar.” I smiled back.

“Well done then. Shall we eat? I have found the salmon to be most excellent here, Shamus.” Said Cedric.

“Then Salmon it is.” I replied.

The waiter had come over to the table almost as soon as Cedric sat down. The camaraderie and excitement fairly filled the room when a Prince was near and all wanted to be close to the source. I likened it many times to the cold and lonely crowding around a warm flame. It drew all near and gave warmth freely to those around it. The waiter had scarcely taken our orders when the conversation between Baltazar and Cedric began. Baltazar was earnest in his description of his travels and his observations and I found myself drawn to his recitation. Cedric was aglow in the new knowledge attained and had fairly a lot of questions to which Baltazar answered each in detail. The third dessert and coffee had arrived before I noticed many of the patrons and not a few of the staff had joined our table in the conversation. The give and take of informed judgments was a heady experience even for the most experienced of our number. I leaned over and tapped the Maitre'd on the shoulder as he was sitting next to me enraptured with his cook staffs disclosure of his experiences in Thailand. I asked if he might be able to secure a cab for our departure. He looked at his watch and nodded affirmatively.

I held Cedric by the shoulder and leaned down to remind him of his appointment with Francis. He nodded his assent and rose to leave, all the while listening intently to the details of rice paddy farming. I guided him past the participants at the table and tapped Baltazar on the shoulder as well. His reverie broken, he joined us in our exit. We left the room with fairly twenty at our lunch table still steeped in their discourse of cultural divisions.

“I say, that lunch was extraordinary. I will definitely return. My compliments.” Said Baltazar to the Maitre’d as we left to get in our cab.

The Maitre’d smiled and shook Cedric’s hand heartily as we left.

“I have to join you in that assessment. It was one of the finest meals I’ve ever had.” Said Cedric.

“And I as well” I enjoined.

“Shall we drop you off at your lodgings, Baltazar?” Asked Cedric.

“If it would not be too much trouble, could you drop me off at the Astoria? My house is not yet ready due to my early return.” Said Baltazar.

“We can make room at our apartments, Baltazar. Then our discussions may continue at my return.” Said Cedric.

“If it would not be too much trouble. I would certainly enjoy the company.” Baltazar replied.

“All we have to offer is a small couch and warm coffee.” I said.

“Well enough. More than I had on the hike into the Himalayas” Enthusiastically replied Baltazar.

The mention of the Himalayas immediately sent the both of them off on another discussion of rock formations and placements within the world structure. I offered no resistance to the addition of our number in the apartments. I was grateful there was only to be one at this time. Princes’ as I have said, were well known for their hospitality.

Baltazar was true to his word. His outer garments secured in the small closet set close to the door, he retreated to the comfortable couch and immediately fell sound asleep. Cedric had

already deposited his sport coat on the floor at his entrance and was eagerly slipping on some athletic footwear for his next association.

Now Princes are quite often very athletic. Most believe in the purity of sport and exercise, feeling that the development of a healthy body is essential to a healthy mind. Cedric was no different and his meeting with Francis was a weekly effort at extreme exercise. They had been known to race for miles over the most difficult terrain, just to engage in a quick game of football with a pickup team of friends. Numerous wagers had been lodged between both men on the outcome of these endeavors with Francis usually gaining a cold draft of the locals finest at Cedric's expense. On the occasion that Cedric won, his reward was a detailed explanation of some obscure theorem that Francis had encountered in his research at City Library. Francis was in fact the chief researcher for City Library and had many a tidbit at his disposal. Tonight's wager included a dissertation on the diary of a soldier in Saint Joan's army in the original French. Cedric was fairly drooling at the opportunity to win this event and prepared in every way. He left in a rush as I tidied up the remains of his former garments.

Baltazar wakened at the slam of the door.

"What? What? Oh, my word." Said Baltazar.

"No worries, just Cedric heading out for a little exercise." I replied

"That boy does have energy." Said Baltazar.

"Quite a bit, I'm afraid. May I get you a coffee or small tea?"

"A coffee would be wonderful, if it wouldn't be too much trouble?" Said Baltazar.

"No trouble at all."

I went and poured the coffee from a pot I kept under a coffee maker on the counter top. I realized an opportunity and decided to pursue it.

“Baltazar, may I ask you a question?”

I set down the coffee on the small table next to Baltazar’s elbow that rested on the couch.

“Ask away, friend.”

Baltazar turned and lifted the cup to his lips.

“In your dealings have you met a man called Balfour?”

Baltazar nearly dropped his cup and expelled what little he had consumed in a spray of surprise.

“Where have you heard such a name?” He asked while quickly wiping his face and the couch with a napkin.

I was startled by the reaction of Baltazar as I had been by Karman.

“I was approached by him in the offer of some assistance. I declined. Something about him. But the encounter has stayed with me and I was just wondering.” I replied.

“Friend Shamus. You were right in declining his offer. The man has nothing but evil driving his desires. I have dealt with him and his minions in government and business. Nothing was ever gained by those associations that didn’t require payments in great excess of the product purchased. The enforcement of those collections, by him, resulted in numerous fines, lawsuits and deaths. Stay clear of him at all circumstances, my dear Friend.”

“I fully intend to do so. Is he really all that dangerous?”

“Exceptionally so. If it were not for a few of my closest friends, I myself would have fallen victim to his ways.”

“Strange I have not heard of him before. A man of such terrible credentials surely should have been widely known.

“He never carries his duties out personally. He always dispatches a minion. Yet the mark is clearly his and the terms are hard. If there ever was a more cunning deceitful man I would not know of him.”

“Has he never confronted anyone face to face? Always a surrogate? “

“Let us hope not. He is an exceptionally gifted man. Intelligence, athleticism and skill are all bound within him. I have been the witness to a fencing lesson some years ago. He was the tutor. The man of whom he was opposite paid dearly for the lesson. It was over before it began. The speed and grace of Balfour’s attack was itself poetry. Terrible, tragic and dark, yet it was still poetry. I doubt anyone could withstand his skill.” Relayed Baltazar

“It is good you had friends to help you in your trials then.”

“Most definitely. I am bound by their courtesies to render any assistance I may to anyone that confronts this Balfour. He rarely leaves a contact unmarked. If you find yourself in his presence or, God forbid, his debt, please contact me. I shall do all I can to right the situation.”

“You are a true and honorable friend, Baltazar. I wish I could offer you better accommodations during your stay with us. But, Cedric seems content with this residence and its limitations.”

“No fear, Shamus. I am quite comfortable when in the company of good friends. Besides my stay will be quite brief, a day or two at most. Then back to my apartments. “

“Then we shall make every effort to make your stay truly enjoyable. Would you care for a small cake with a renewal of the coffee?”

“A fine offer, Shamus. I shall be obliged to take advantage.”

I left and went to our small kitchen and retrieved the pot of coffee and some small cakes I keep for just such an occasion. I returned to the front room and poured for us both. At Baltazar’s

insistence I sat with him and began a torrid conversation about the texture of coffee beans derived between various countries. I believe we were on our second cup of coffee when the door flew open with a loud crash.

The noise startled both of us and caused the coffee to be discarded upon the floor as we stood to confront the intruder. To our amazement Cedric was before us obviously disheveled and worn from a tremendous scuffle. At his elbow was his friend, Francis. Francis was at a bend, his chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath. Prince Cedric was somewhat less winded, but his fascination with the object in his hand held any of his attentions. A long wooden stick, common from most of the trees that populate the area around us, glided in the air before him. Cedric would whip it like a weapon, then jab it forward like the stabbing of a sword.

After recovering my thoughts I noticed instinctively the movements of the stick. I stood in awe for the few moments it took Baltazar to break the silence. Never before had I seen the beginnings of the accumulation of a Prince's powers of the sword. Nor had I heard of anyone having seen such an event. The use of a sword is inherent in a Prince, although each talent is differently developed. A Prince knows how to wield a sword from birth. However, it takes a certain moment in time, a certain event for the latent talent to carry forth. From that point on it is only through constant battle and training that a Prince develops this talent. A Prince of great skill in swordsmanship is usually very old, won many battles, or both. Watching Cedric with the stick was akin, to me, to watching the birth of a new baby.

“What is this? What is wrong, friend Cedric?” Asked Baltazar.

Jostled from his reverie by the insistence of Baltazar's question, Cedric lowered the stick and gave his attention to his situation.

“Friend Baltazar. Why nothing is wrong. Here let us help Francis to the couch.”

I moved forward to give a hand to Francis who obviously gave a look of incredulity towards Cedric.

“Nothing! Nothing, Cedric? You say there is nothing wrong when our weekly challenge was interrupted by a couple of ruffians. A couple of ruffians that you dispatched with such ease with the use of that stick. I say, Friend Cedric. Your definition of normal is somewhat distorted from mine.”

A hearty laugh filled the room as Cedric returned from the kitchen holding a beverage for Francis’ consumption.

“Here, Francis, the bounty of our wager. Drink up and rest. Catch your breath. Nothing has happened and all is well with us. What can be more normal?” Replied Cedric.

Francis took the bottle and a large gulp. Wiping the remains on the napkin at hand, he returned Cedric’s look and then a smile crept across his face. Finally a large laugh emanated from his form and Cedric once again joined in.

“They certainly were well routed by your skill” Said Francis.

“That they were. The look upon their brow was well worth the effort.” Said Cedric.

“What? What of this action? Please gentlemen, will one give forth?” Spake Baltazar in some discomfort.

Francis held his laughter and began to relate a story of how they had run through this rather deserted section of the park. How he was barely holding a few steps of Cedric when two formidable men jumped them from the side. They had knocked Francis to the ground. Francis had rolled and deposited his attacker to his side. As he regained his feet, he noticed Cedric had done the same. However, upon rising to his feet, Cedric had grabbed the aforementioned stick

and wielded it at the gentleman like the sword of Camelot. Every movement, every attack was matched with a formidable parry from the stick. Francis had retreated behind Cedric and merely watched in awe as both tried to attack and were repelled in turn. Each left with numerous welts and bruises upon their bodies. Cedric, replete with his new weapon suggested they retire quickly and both returned post haste to Cedric's apartments.

"My word. Attacked in the park. This is just not acceptable." Muttered Baltazar.

I departed for the kitchen and fetched another round of drinks. When I returned to the room gentlemanly camaraderie was in full swing. However, Baltazar was still uneasy about the whole situation.

"When the work is done, you shall join me in my apartments, Cedric." Stated Baltazar.

"Friend, Baltazar. There is no need." Replied Cedric.

"Still I shall be offended, if you do not accept the hospitality." Insisted Baltazar.

"But what of my friend Shamus?"

"I shall be greatly offended if he did not come also." Replied Baltazar.

That is how we found ourselves in new apartments in the better section of our fair city.