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The Off-white Knight – Part One

Baron Ardnutt sat in the stands watching the tournament. The event being enacted was the jousting competition where two armoured soldiers on horseback charged at each other from opposite ends of the arena. They carried long wooden poles called jousting sticks or lances which they held so that they pointed out in front; and the idea was to strike their opponent with the end of the pole and knock them off their horse. Whoever did this was the winner. The jousting was nearly finished except for the final challenge; and this was the one in which the Baron was most interested because his son Julian was a competitor. Unfortunately, Julian was not the best when it came to any kind of combat or fighting; and despite having been made a Knight, he was that in name only. Baron Ardnutt turned and spoke to his wife: "I suppose the boy is going to embarrass us again," he moaned. "I've had the best trainers teaching him and still he's useless. He stands no chance against Skulldugger."

"He is only young," the Baroness reminded her husband, "And he has no real experience of anything beyond the walls of this castle. Perhaps he should go forth to see what life has to offer. Maybe then he might find a way to prove himself," she suggested. The only reply she received was a grunt and a sneer.

Trumpets blared a fanfare and the assembled spectators rose from their seats to cheer in the last two competitors. The Baron groaned. "Look at him – his armour was white once; now it's filthy. He hasn't even cleaned it. He's a disgrace."

The two riders faced off from their respective ends. Julian patted his horse's neck and whispered in his ear: "If nothing else my faithful Colin, let's see if we can give a better account of ourselves this time." At the signal from the Baron it was time to go. Colin was slow to start, but eventually he was charging forward with Julian on his back, racing to meet Lord Skulldugger. Many times a winner, especially in the jousting, even his appearance was intimidating: highly-polished black armour glinting in the sunlight, full helmet masking the snarl which was no doubt spreading across his cruel mouth in anticipation of a quick result. And it was that alright; but it was not of Skulldugger's making. Julian's lance was aimed directly at his foe's chest and was about to make contact, but he hadn't allowed for the shield which swept the wooden pole aside. This unbalanced Julian and he simply fell backwards off Colin to land in the dirt. The crowd went wild; Baron Ardnutt just got up and stormed out, growling under his breath.

The following day in the courtyard of the castle, the Baron and his wife were standing beside their son who was mounted on his horse. Soldiers were in the background watching on as Julian lowered his lance for his mother to tie her scarf to the end of the wooden pole. "Carry this with pride, my son," she urged, "And return to me as the brave Knight I know you are."

Her husband rolled his eyes. "You might believe that," he grumbled, "As for me, I doubt he can be anything but a wastrel and a loser." He turned his attention to Julian. "You have your mother's blessing. Now honour her by going out into the world to achieve at least something

she can be proud of. A quest would be good..." Then under his breath he muttered: "If he can find anyone silly enough to give him one."

As his mother had observed, Julian had rarely ventured beyond the gates of the castle, and he had a strange feeling as he rode away. "I think I'm a bit frightened," he said to Colin. His way of replying, the horse nodded his head and gave a little whinny. "I am unsure what a quest is, nor where to find one. I suppose all we can do is ask whoever we meet on our travels."

There were a few, mainly common people like farmers on their way to market, but none of them knew what a quest was, nor where a Knight might be given one. Then they came across a scruffy old man who looked a bit like a tramp. "A quest you are after, is it?" he grated in a wheezy voice. "Well, it really depends on what sort – there are many of them. The favourite is always rescuing a fair princess from a tower; then there could be a dragon to slay, or vanquishing a band of ruffians which keeps raiding a village..."

Julian was shaking his head. "I fancy no quest that involves fighting. I am not much good at it, and hurting people is hardly my style."

The old man sighed. "In that case, Sir Knight, perhaps you should offer to help with simpler tasks that don't involve fighting. You could try Lokstok, an estate on Earl Chundermor's lands." The old man pointed vaguely into the distance before trudging on his way. Julian watched his back and his stumbling gait. He seemed so weary, maybe of life in general he supposed; and he started imagining this could eventually be his own fate; unless he could find a worthy quest.

Later in the day he came upon a farm. Workers were engaged in some strange activity which seemed to involve attacking a field of long grass. They were edging into it, hacking at the grass stalks with peculiar blades attached to wooden poles and handles. Julian led Colin over to a man who appeared to be taking a break from the hacking. "Why are you attacking the grass?" asked Julian. "Has it offended you?"

"Offended...?" The man laughed. "No - we are just cutting it."

"Why would you do that?"

"To make hay," replied the man. "Once cut, we tie it into bales and store it in a barn to be used as cattle feed in winter."

"Hmm," Julian murmured with a frown, not really understanding any of this. He glanced back to the workers in the field and had an idea. "I don't suppose I could be of help?" Withdrawing his sword, he showed it to the man. "You see, I need to practise my swordsmanship," he continued, and flicked the long blade back forth as if he was fighting someone. "It seems to me that cutting and slashing grass might be a way to improve my skill. My father tells me I should. What say you?"

"I can't see the harm," said the man. "Why don't you give it a go?"

Julian rode closer to the field and dismounted. "Wait here Colin," he said to his horse. "I am off to cut some grass; not exactly a worthy enemy, I know, so I shall have to use my imagination." As it happened, imagining was one thing Julian was quite good at; and soon he was putting it to the test. First, though, he had to observe the rules of combat. Standing tall at the edge of the uncut grass, he raised his sword until it almost touched his helmet. "En guard," he said. "Prepare to defend yourself." Then he was advancing, cutting and slashing at the grass stalks, carving a pathway through the field.

The workers had never seen anything like this, and they stood watching in amazement. One of them commented: "He looks pretty fearsome, and that sword of his is *really* sharp."

If Julian had heard this he would no doubt have been pleased. As it was, he was too busy wading through an imaginary army that was putting up a very poor defence. Through to the far side of the field, he paused and realised he was quite breathless. "Definitely out of practice," he muttered to himself. "Just as well I am not on a quest. I wonder where I can find one?"

The answer to that question wasn't long in coming. The long grass having been cut, the workers were busy tying it up in bundles called bales, and these were loaded onto a cart using pitch forks to pick up the bales. This gave Julian another idea. "They have forks," he said to

Colin, "But I have my lance. What do you say we help them to load the bales on the cart?" His horse gave the nod of approval, so Julian turned him to face a stack of bales well away from the cart and the workers. Lowering his lance, he gave Colin a nudge and the horse took off, charging towards the bales. The point of the lance made contact and speared into one of the bales. Backing off with the bale still on the end of the lance, he steered Colin across the field to the cart where he dropped the bale. Here was something else the farm workers had never seen before and they were clearly impressed, judging by their clapping.

The baling and loading continued for a while until someone noticed a troop of horse soldiers approaching. One of the workers said to Julian: "You were wanting a quest, Sir Knight. Maybe you should ask the soldiers. They look to be from Earl Chundermor's castle."

Taking the advice, Julian rode to intercept the troop. As he came closer he could see that it wasn't in the best of shapes. Both men and horses appeared tired, and judging by the dents and scrapes on the armour it seemed they had been in a fight and not come out of it too well. The lead trooper confirmed as such: "The Lady Helen was captured by Lord Skuldugger and we were sent to rescue her; but there were too many soldiers for us and we had to flee."

Needless to say, the name Skuldugger sent a shiver down Julian's spine; but it also sparked anger and a desire to regain some of his lost pride. "There could be a quest for me in this," he mused. "Might I ride with you and seek an audience with your Lord?" he asked...

Earl Chundermor was waiting in the courtyard for his soldiers to ride in and was sorely disappointed to see that the Lady Helen was not with them. Then he noticed Julian and frowned. "I know you, don't I?" he said. "You are Baron Ardnutt's son. Why are you here?"

"I come seeking a quest, My Lord," said Julian, "And it seems you need someone to rescue the Lady Helen."

"That I do," admitted Chundermor, "My daughter Lady Helen means everything to me, but if my soldiers were unable to rescue her, I cannot see one man doing any better. Certainly not you. As I recall from the tournament, your skills as a Knight leave a lot to be desired."

"That was then," said Julian, "However, I have since been practising and am much improved. Plus, I have a plan that I think might work."

Once again, Julian's imagination came to the fore and he outlined his plan to the Earl who seemed doubtful at first. Chundermor panned his gaze over the battered soldiers, then narrowed his eyes at Julian. "I believe your plan has some merit, Sir Knight; and it *is* quite devious..." He pondered for a few moments before reaching his decision: "Very well. I will grant you the quest to rescue Lady Helen and her companion Ralph."

"Who, may I ask, is Ralph?" queried Julian warily.

"My daughter's pet dragon," replied the Earl as if it ought to be obvious to anyone. Ignoring Julian's look of surprise and bewilderment, he continued: "If you are to be my champion in this, you must be appropriately attired. Go with my servant and he will dress you." A short time later, Julian returned. No longer in grubby off-white armour, he was wearing shining silver plate with the red dragon emblem of the Chundermor House emblazoned on his chest. The Earl nodded his approval. "Now you look like a true champion, Sir Julian. Do this for me and I shall reward you handsomely."

"I want no money, My Lord," said Julian. "The satisfaction of returning your daughter will be sufficient."

"Don't forget Ralph." The Earl reminded him.

Julian smiled nervously. "How could I ever forget Ralph?"

He had the evening to think about the coming quest which was not quite like the old man had described. There was a Lady who might well be imprisoned in a tower; but as for rescuing her pet dragon...? Tomorrow promised to be a very strange day; perhaps even a dangerous one?