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## The Off-white Knight – Part Two

The stage was set. Julian had gone ahead by a roundabout route and was waiting behind some bushes near Lord Skulldugger's castle. From there he could see that the drawbridge was still up. This was the big wooden door that closed the entrance to the castle. Once lowered, it would bridge the moat, a water-filled channel that encircled the castle making it difficult for anyone to launch a direct attack. That was about to happen quite soon; or so Julian hoped it might have appeared.

Chundermor's small, slightly battered army could be seen topping the rise beyond a wide area of open space. The company paused. Although Julian couldn't be seen from the castle, the leader of the troopers had spotted him and waited for the signal. Following a deep, nervous breath, Julian raised his sword high in the air; then brought it down swiftly. The command: "Charge!" echoed across the plain and the horse soldiers were off. Now it just remained to see how Skulldugger would react.

At first nothing happened. The drawbridge remained closed. Julian had expected as much and had ordered that two archers should ride with the troopers. Chundermor's army halted. The archers moved to the front, drew back their bowstrings and waited for the rags tied to the end of the arrows to be lit. Then they aimed and shot them straight at the drawbridge. The rags themselves would have caused little damage, but also fixed to the arrows were small bags of oil; and the instant the arrows hit, the bags burst and the oil inside them exploded. Flames began to spread. Soldiers on the ramparts above ducked out of sight, reappearing moments later to empty buckets of water to douse the flames. The fires were out in seconds so it seemed hardly a winning strategy; until the drawbridge started to lower. "They have taken the bait," said an excited Julian to his horse. Colin snorted and whinnied.

The next part was crucial to the plan. Once the drawbridge was down, Skulldugger's horse-soldiers rode out of the castle and headed straight for the rag-tag army waiting in the middle of the plain. Closer they came, and closer still; yelling out war-cries and waving their swords in the air. "Not yet," whispered Julian. "Stand just a few more seconds..." Then: "Now!" Chundermor's troops would never have heard him because they were too far away; but they had their orders and obeyed them to the letter. Turning their horses they began to do what they had been told to do – run away. Julian was off too, heading straight for the castle drawbridge.

The courtyard seemed deserted with the exception of a servant standing before the main entrance to the castle. The instant he spied an intruder, he turned and ran inside. The man could be heard shouting: "My Lord, come quickly! An enemy Knight is in the castle!" Lord Skulldugger it seemed was still here! Julian dismounted, withdrew his sword and approached the entrance with caution.

A clunking resounded from inside as someone in heavy armour hurried along a corridor; then, sword in hand, Skulldugger emerged and took a moment to assess the situation. All he

saw was a lone individual wearing the armour of Chundermor. "You are not welcome here, Sir Knight," he rasped through gritted teeth. "Be gone, or face the consequences."

"I shall go, but not without the Lady Helen," said Julian as calmly as he could. "Where are you keeping her?"

"Where you will not find her," sneered Skulldugger. His glove came up to tip his helmet down to cover his face; but just before this he made the mistake of glancing upward.

"So, the tower is it?" enquired Julian casually, already knowing the answer.

"I never said that," was Skulldugger's response, hollow and muffled now under the helmet.

"Not in words," said Julian, "But your eyes told the story." He took two steps forward and raised his sword in the usual salute prior to engaging.

Ignoring the rules of combat, Skulldugger gave no warning and swung his weapon. Julian parried the oncoming blade and lunged, the point of his own sword glancing off his enemy's armour. Skulldugger retaliated and it was all on. The clash of steel echoed round the courtyard along with grunts from the combatants as they danced, ducked, swung and parried. Julian fought his best, better than at any time in the past; but the more-accomplished Lord was too good for him and he found himself falling backwards. As he lay on the ground seemingly defeated, Skulldugger advanced to stand over him. "Before I finish you, Sir Knight, I wish to know your face. Raise your helmet."

Although reluctant to do so, Julian was about to comply when something unexpected happened. Until then, Colin had been standing off merely watching; now, however, it was time for him to play his part. A short jog brought him close enough to barge Skulldugger aside. The man tripped, fell and before he could move, Colin was on him: both front hooves planted on his breast plate holding him down. Julian struggled to his feet. "Well done, Colin, and thank you," he said, stooping to retrieve his sword. Gathering up Skulldugger's weapon, he hurled it across the courtyard. "You will not be needing this, Your Lordship. I shall now go for Lady Helen. Before I do, however, you wished to see my face," he said, tipping up his helmet.

"YOU!!!" growled Skulldugger venomously.

Julian smirked. "US, actually," he said, patting his horse's neck. "Hold him secure until I return, Colin."

"Colin?!!" ridiculed Skulldugger. "What a stupid name for a horse!" Colin obviously didn't like that. He raised one foot and stomped down hard on his captive's armour.

Julian grinned and turned to hurry into the castle. A long flight of stone steps took him to the top of the tower; and he knew he was right about where Lady Helen was being held captive because there was a guard outside the wooden door. Not a very brave one as it happened. On seeing the fully armoured Knight with sword drawn, he scuttled off down the stairway. Julian knocked on the door before opening it and called: "Be not afraid Lady Helen. I come from your father to rescue you." When there was no reply, Julian entered.

The room was only small with a table and chairs and a bed against one wall. Lady Helen seemed uncertain, not recognising the face of the Knight; but she accepted he was indeed in her father's service as he was wearing the blazon of the Chundermor House. Julian was expecting to see a large terrifying dragon in the room with her, but there was no sign of the creature. "Where, pray, is Ralph?"

Lady Helen pointed to the bed. "Hiding. He is only young and is scared of strangers. Come, Ralph," she cooed softly. "This Knight is our friend." A head poked from under the bed; then a red dragon no bigger than a large dog crawled out hesitatingly. "What is your name, Sir Knight?"

Julian told her, then said: "We must be going. I shall carry Ralph." He approached the young dragon and reached forward to pick him up. Ralph shrank back and sat shivering. "It is alright little one," said Julian gently. "I will not harm you."

The descent of the staircase took a while; soon enough, however, the threesome were in the courtyard. A snarl erupted from Skulldugger who was flat on his back with Colin still holding

him down. "Keep him there for a moment while we mount, Colin," Julian said. It wasn't easy with the horse being higher at the front than he was at the back; but Julian couldn't risk Skulldugger being released too soon. Julian handed Ralph to Lady Helen before climbing onto the saddle, then took up the dragon to rest on his lap. Next, he extended a hand to help the Lady up to sit behind him. So far, so good. He eased Colin backwards clear of Skulldugger, and the moment he was free the man scrambled to his feet and began running to the castle entrance, screaming: "Raise the drawbridge! Raise the drawbridge!"

There was no time to waste. Creaking and clanking resounded as the gatekeeper began winding up the chains that held the huge wooden door. Colin took off. He reached the drawbridge which had already started to rise. "Hold tight, My Lady. We have to jump. Go, Go, Colin!" urged Julian. Almost at the far end of the wooden bridge, by then it was clear of the ground beyond the moat and was continuing to rise. Colin launched himself into the air and landed safely on solid ground. Now all they had to do was make it back to Chundermor castle.

Julian returned via the route he had come, staying under cover of the bushes skirting the open plain. By the time they were approaching Chundermor castle there was no sign of Skulldugger's soldiers who had presumably given up the chase. The reception was noisy and joyful, the courtyard ringed by soldiers who cheered and rapped swords on their shields. Earl Chundermor was delighted his daughter was home safe and he saluted Julian saying: "You have done me a great service Sir Julian which I can never repay. I have, however, one last task for you. There is part of my land which has no worthy noble to take care of it. I believe you know of the estate and I charge you with its safekeeping. From this day forth you are granted the title Lord Julian of Lokstok."

Cheers erupted again. Lady Helen came forward to hand Julian her kerchief. "A small token of appreciation, My Lord, with a hope that you will return it when you call on me next; provided, of course, you can fit a visit into your busy schedule." Ralph had been behind Lady Helen, but now he moved forward to rub his cheek against Julian's leg. The Lady smiled. "I do believe Ralph has quite taken to you, as have I. Perhaps there might be a future in the making for us at some time...?"

Eventually, Julian rode out from the castle and he was not alone. Walking beside him was a young lad who had been gifted to him by the Earl to serve as squire, his own personal servant; and trotting behind were two horse soldiers. According to Lady Helen's father, a Lord could hardly travel the land without a retinue, one which should be expanded on reaching Lokstok. They were there soon enough and the people of his new estate, many of whom he had already met during the hay cutting and baling, came out to greet him warmly.

He spent some days there discovering how the village and surrounding farms were managed; and once it seemed that the people were well able to continue adequately without their Lord, Julian set out to return to his father and mother. His arrival at Ardnutt castle was a far cry from the way he had left. Wearing shiny silver armour, he was accompanied now by a retinue of six, one of which carried his banner imprinted with his new coat of arms. Needless to say, amongst other symbols decorating it there was also a red dragon.

The reunion with his parents was strange. His father actually saluted him and said: "You have done well, my son."

"Better than that," said Julian's mother with a curtsy when he handed back her scarf. "And let us not forget Marcus, our son is no longer just a Knight; he is a Lord."

Celebrations took place over the coming days, but then it was time to leave. "I have my estate to oversee," explained Julian, "And there is a certain Lady on whom I must call." This news caused his father to frown and brought a sparkle to his mother's eyes. "And, of course," Julian added, "There's Ralph." He patted the dragon emblem on his armour. "I think he may be missing me; hopefully his Lady will be too; just a little."