

The Desert

Commander Kasra looked up apprehensively at the radiant, sapphire sky. Tears emerged in his eyes from the intense reflection the blazing sand cast over them. The extreme heat was almost too much to bear, as was the uncomfortable camel that was his steed. He much preferred his horse. Kasra could no longer remember, nor comprehend, why he took this job: an armed escort mission for Prince Throckmorton of Montecore, the valuable "cargo" being some exotic bird nearing extinction.

Recalling a bit of recent history, the young commander knew this particular species, the Diddy-Dum, once flew freely about the damp jungles of Southern Daventry. As fate would have it, a merchant stumbled upon a large community of the poor birds, and their rainbow-splashed feathers suddenly became the richest trade on the Daventry market. But that was almost a decade ago, and Diddy-Dum feathers, now considered vintage by most fashion standards, went out of style.

Kasra turned in his saddle to look behind him so he could see the bird's cage. Fluttering occasionally in the concise breeze, a white satin cloth hid the bird from sight. The faint shadow of the bizarre creature showed that it hung upside down and the fluffiness of its many feathers made it seem rounded. Trying to refocus his mind, Kasra resumed watching the vast desert unfold before him like the plot in an extraordinarily boring story.

Why? Why a desert? Why camels? The money just isn't that good.

“Commander,” a plump man exclaimed as he approached on a tired camel.
“Commander Kasra, according to the map we should arrive at the city of Montecore within the hour.”

“The Fates be thanked,” reacted the commander with a deep sigh of relief.
“Mazaarian, inform the rest of the caravan. That should raise morale a little. I hope those arrogant fools are pleased that we didn’t put their bird in any harm.”

“You are not alone, Commander. That absurd thing is riding in more luxury than we’ll ever have in our lifetimes,” Mazaarian replied cynically. His insult of the Diddy-Dum drew a smile from Kasra. “At any rate, Commander, I shall notify the others of our imminent arrival.”

As Mazaarian returned to the caravan to carry out his orders, Commander Kasra released another long, powerful sigh.

Only another hour...another hour of this scorching weather and these camels.

He was beginning to hate all deserts...this desert, the Great Ferum, being the worst he’d ever traveled. Not so much as a clean, ivory bone or mountainous rock had been spot the entire journey. Though the air reeked of sweat and decay, nothing dead had passed them. Still, Kasra wondered how many lives the fiery sand had claimed; grateful he would not become a part of that strange, corroding smell that haunted the desert air.

.....

"All hail his majesty, Prince Throckmorton of Montecore," the voice of the chamberlain rang out, followed by a trumpet fanfare. He stepped down and bowed as the prince appeared on the balcony of his palace.

"I am pleased to see that our sacred Diddy-Dum is unharmed," said the prince in an unusually high voice. "Since no physical harm was inflicted upon this rare and remarkable species, you shall all be rewarded with a bountiful dinner, a refreshing rest, and of course, your payment." Wiping his brow with a handkerchief, he continued. "My guards will show you into the palace."

Commander Kasra followed the two elaborately dressed guards over the marble bridge that led to the grandiose entry gate. A beautifully sculpted tiger upon a short outcropping above the entryway watched menacingly on as the commander's caravan slowly passed through. As he was entering the palace, Kasra slid his fingers over the smooth, cold surface of the marble walls. Prince Throckmorton was rich and he loved to show it.

While walking the violet-tinted marble floor in the Great Hall, the commander noticed a large window was set into the back wall. Through the crystalline panes, he could see the famed Water Gardens. Even from this distance, the roaring sound of water being pumped out the top of the pyramid-like structure and tumbling down in sequential waterfalls was like a torrential rain storm; gallons of water finally splashing in a large pool on the ground.

Spectacular!

While entering the enormous dining hall, one of the guards announced, "Please be seated everyone, dinner will be served shortly."

The commander took his seat—the seat of honor—next to a plush chair adorned in a debonair look of dark purple, most definitely the prince's chair. A smell from the kitchen loomed about the room and many of his troupe anxiously commented how long it had been since they ate a decent meal. After several long minutes, with no sign of Prince Throckmorton, waiters appeared from four doors set into the corners of the room. Pushing blinding steel carts, the waiters served, what smelled like, delicious food to each guest.

Five courses later, with no still no entrance by the prince, the chamberlain strolled through the main dining hall entrance and spoke.

"His most exalted highness will not be joining you this evening for reasons I cannot disclose. However, you are all still welcome to enjoy dinner and dessert."

Unrolling a piece of parchment from which he read, the chamberlain recited,

"Tonight's main course will consist of Kolyma Tuna Salad, Mossberry Wine, Monkey's Brains with your choice of fruit or cake, and finally, a rare specialty only made in Montecore, Stuffed Diddy-Dum."