

Clark always felt comfortable around books. That much was certain. It wasn't just the serenity of the library, the blissful silence, it was the company of the books themselves. They put him at ease. Books can contain highly complex ideas, but books are not in themselves complicated. The same could not be said of people, as far as Clark was concerned. People are complicated. Sometimes dangerously so.

He took a moment to adjust his glasses before picking up another stack from the many piles of books that littered the room. Some on the shelves, some on the worktop that ran across the length of the room, some on a desk and just about as many on a series of wooden trollies. Sorting the books ready for the flying squirrels to return to their shelves was a task he relished. It had been a while since this had been one of his regular duties, but given recent events, the Library had been a little short staffed. Not that Clark really minded the extra workload. Usually the task of organising the books by a strict and clear system was what allowed Clark to relax. Today, however, this was impossible.

He took a quick glance up at the clock on the wall. It had been several hours now. Normally Clark would have finished sorting the books long ago, but a sense of anxious anticipation was slowing him down. The truth was, if he finished too early, he'd be expected to go home. He wanted to make sure he was still working when Belactacus returned from the Tower of Realms. He had to know what was happening.

Several months ago, such things wouldn't have concerned Clark at all. He'd carried out his duties, kept his head down and his mouth shut (the last of which is usually expected in a library). He was relatively content to let the entire Realm pass by without him being called upon to take part in its events. That was before the three of them arrived.

They'd been a major irritant at first. Two of them had even attacked him upon their first meeting. Tackled him to the ground while he'd been carrying an immense stack of books. The other one hadn't been anywhere near as aggressive, but her overt eagerness for everything had rankled Clark. One thing he had to admit, he admired her respect for books. That was something they at least had in common.

During all that happened, the goal had been clear; to get the children back to the Realm of Reality. No one had been keener for this to happen than Clark. Yet, once it became clear that they were going back, he came to suspect that he was going to miss them. Even the small, arrogant and mouthy one. Over the past few months Clark found that his suspicions had come true.

He was just thinking of young Isaac when the door opened. Nearly dropping a book, Clark looked up immediately to see a young boy entering the room.

'Clive? It's late, what are you doing up?' he asked.

'Surprisingly enough, I can't sleep!' snapped the young Friend. 'It's those words, over and over in my head still!'

Clark had been somewhat perturbed when Clive had turned up at the Library earlier that day, demanding to see Belactacus. This had given way to utter shock when he claimed to be a Friend imagined by Isaac Llewellyn, a boy they'd all previously thought to be Un.

'Didn't Sylvia make you something to help you sleep?' asked Clark gently.

'I'm not drinking that stuff, it's vile!' exclaimed Clive, his nose wrinkled in disgust.

It was at that moment that all doubt was removed from Clark's mind. This had to be Isaac's Imaginary Friend. He may not have looked much like him, with his thin face and lack of freckles, but their personalities were virtually identical as far as Clark remembered.

He was about to make a suggestion when a barking voice from behind the door beat him to it.

'Never mind what it tastes of, just get it down you.'

The door to the Sorting room opened slowly as Belactacus made his way in. Despite his long grey hair and the fact that he was older than most Figments, Clark had never really thought of Belactacus as elderly. That had changed after the Librarian's fight with Torvik, his injuries necessitating the use of a cane to get around.

Clive, despite feeling tired and grumpy, knew well enough to show Belactacus at least a little deference.

'But ... what if I can still hear him while I'm sleeping?' he asked a little less sullenly.

'We won't know until you get to sleep,' replied Belactacus gently. He placed a hand on Clive's head and smoothed his short, dark hair back. 'Go on now, back to your room. Hold your nose and drink it down in one go. You'll feel better once you're rested.'

Clive left the room without another word. Once he was gone, Clark moved towards Belactacus, pushing a chair into position for him.

'Have the council made a decision?' Clark asked.

'Indeed,' said Belactacus evenly, taking the seat gingerly. 'It took a great deal of debate, as usual, but a course of action has been agreed upon.'

'What are they going to do?'

'Someone is being sent to aid the children.'

Clark breathed a deep sigh of relief and turned, picking up another stack of books. He had been extremely worried ever since Clive had come to the Library, claiming to have a message from Isaac and saying that Torvik was somehow involved. Now, however, he was confident that the council had matters well in hand. That feeling of confidence did not last long.

'Captain Madroc was very eager to volunteer,' continued Belactacus casually. At this, Clark managed to drop the entire stack of books. He paid them no mind as he rounded on Belactacus.

'M-Madroc volunteered?'

'Oh yes, and Councillor Callion agreed. There was even talk of an entire platoon of Heroes accompanying him. You doubt the good captain's ability to extract Torvik?' asked Belactacus, still in the same casual tone, looking up at Clark with an expression of mild curiosity.

'Well, no ... it's not that, exactly ... it's just that-'

'Speak your mind, Clark,' said Belactacus evenly, his eyes fixed on his young clerk.

Clark paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts and putting aside some fears while he was at it.

'I mean no disrespect to Captain Madroc, but he isn't exactly subtle. He has a penchant for carrying around a great many weapons, and I ... I just don't think he'll be able to blend in with the humans all that well.'

‘You mean he’ll stick out like a sore thumb,’ ventured Belactacus.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Clark quietly, ‘and then there’s ...’

‘Yes, Clark? What else?’

‘What if, while he and his platoon are carrying out the mission ...someone gets hurt?’ asked Clark.

‘Do you think Madroc would intentionally harm the children?’

‘No! No, of course not ...but as I said, he isn’t one for subtlety. He’s ...well, brash. I think he could charge in without thinking and I couldn’t bear it if ...’ Clark found he couldn’t quite finish his sentence for a great number of reasons.

There were several moments of silence, during which Belactacus merely closed his eyes, his head down as though deep in thought. Just as Clark was beginning to think his old mentor had fallen asleep, he spoke at last.

‘It just so happens that I agree with you, Clark. I spent a great deal of time and effort this afternoon arguing the case for a subtle approach. Madroc is a fine Hero, but it is not his skills as a warrior that we need right now. We require someone with a calmer disposition, someone who will carry out a precise plan and, as you say, someone who can blend in with greater ease.’

‘Was nobody else considered?’ asked Clark. ‘Did no one else volunteer?’

‘A few options were discussed, all coming to nothing,’ sighed Belactacus. ‘Under normal circumstances, I’d have gone myself, but as we all know ...I am no match for Torvik.’

Clark could have sworn he saw Belactacus’ grip on his cane tighten at these words, but soon enough he seemed to relax again. It appeared that the events of the day had wearied him greatly. Just as Belactacus was moving as though to stand, Clark found himself saying something. Something very unexpected.

‘I’ll go.’

Belactacus had barely managed to rise half an inch before settling back onto his seat, once again looking up at Clark.

‘Will you indeed?’ he asked, his tone as light as ever.

‘Yes, yes I will,’ replied Clark, surprising himself more and more with each passing syllable. Another period of silence passed, during which Belactacus sat, now stroking his moustache while Clark stood awkwardly, unsure of what else to say or do.

‘Do you understand the dangers involved?’ asked Belactacus.

‘Yes,’ replied Clark briskly.

‘And the full ramifications?’

‘Yes!’

‘I’m not so sure you do,’ said Belactacus crisply. Holding on to his cane, he shifted his position on his chair so as to look at Clark more directly. ‘Think about it, Clark. Putting aside the dangers involved in tackling a foe like Torvik, the fact remains that if you enter the Realm of Reality, you will become Real.’

‘I know,’ muttered Clark.

‘You will become human,’ continued Belactacus. ‘I want you to be fully aware of what that means. Should you return to the Realm of Imagination ...should you return to your home, you will still be human.’

Clark said nothing to this. He had seen for himself the powers that Thomas and Emily had displayed. He'd done his utmost to hide it at the time, but the fact was that their power had unnerved him greatly. For a brief moment he considered what it would mean to have access to such abilities for himself, but he quickly pushed all such thoughts aside. They terrified him.

'Now I'm not saying you would be forbidden from returning,' continued Belactacus, 'but we both know the difficulties that would arise. Not to mention the grief that Griffar is currently stirring up. Things are not as they once were.'

'I know, sir, but I'm the best choice for this task,' said Clark, looking down at the floor. 'I've read more ...I know more about the Realm of Reality than Madroc ever will. Once Torvik is apprehended, I'll have less trouble fitting in with the humans than Madroc would.' Clark's gaze remained on the tiled floor of the Sorting room, unsure of whom he was trying to convince.

'And do you believe you can do it?' asked Belactacus sharply. 'Do you believe you can succeed in capturing Torvik?'

'I ...I think-'

'Do you believe?'

Clark slowly looked up at Belactacus, fully understanding the extent of his question. The council were not about to trust such an important mission to someone who had any doubts. The logical reasons for choosing him over Madroc weren't going to be enough. He had to make them believe he could do it.

'Give me a bag of Sand,' said Clark grimly. 'I'll surprise him and knock him out before he can do anything to anyone. It'll work better than brute force. I know I can do it.'

Belactacus rose silently from the chair, relying heavily on the cane to help him. For a moment it seemed as though he was making to move towards Clark, but instead merely nodded his head.

'Yes, yes that will do nicely,' he said quietly, a half smile emerging under his moustache. 'A solid strategy. Quiet, quick and ...subtle. Yes, very good.'

'Do you think the council will approve?' asked Clark as Belactacus began limping towards the door.

'I certainly hope so. We shall need to report to the Tower of Realms first thing in the morning. We'll present our case before they send Madroc. For now, get some sleep, Clark. In the morning, come to my chambers. There's more we'll need to discuss before you go but for now, sleep. Yes, let us both get some sleep.'

Clark said nothing as he dashed forward to open the door for Belactacus. The Librarian's ability to go days without sleep was unparalleled, even amongst other manifestations. It was never unusual for him to carry on tending the needs of the Library long after all the Figments had gone to bed. Over the past few months, however, Clark had noticed that Belactacus was requiring more and more sleep. It was just one of his many concerns that had been piling up ever since the children came to visit.

This pile of troubles, unfortunately, was only going to get bigger.

