

The Quest for the 24 Gemstones

Prologue: The Assignment

Once there was a kingdom made up of twelve counties, home to different peoples. There were soft, grassy hills as well as steep, rocky mountains. There were cold firths in the snow-county, but also hot, sunny beaches along at the border of a jungle. Furthermore tall, cantankerous warriors and merry fishermen; fearsome and mean giants, as well as affable and quick-witted islanders. The name of this kingdom was Twelven. And Beletosta was the capital of this motley kingdom. Of course there was a royal palace as well. And knights. And court ladies. And, by all means a king. He was presently sitting in his private chamber talking in confidence with the one person he trusted most. Do you think it was his wise counselor? No, it was not him. You might think then it was his general? No, neither was it him. It was ... his jester!

The jester was doing exercises on the king's bed – something he was doing by force of habit for he could not sit still. Finally he placed himself on the king's clothes chest and listened to the secret and urgent affair the king was relating to him.

"My dear Crawuz", the king said gravely. "I will charge you with an important task!"

"Dear me, that was that", thought the jester.

"My kingdom is in great danger!" The sovereign marched up and down in a quite unkingly fashion.

"A mighty enemy has assembled at our borders! Once again it is the deceitful King Dorkenlog of the shadowy neighbouring kingdom of Grottania."

"Bollocks. This one's small fish", the jester dared to throw in a pun. "With one side of our nose we suck him up and with the other one blow 'im out again. Haha!"

Yet as he saw the king's piercing look and knitted eyebrows, the jester shut up.

"Until today our borderwalls have detained the enemy. But now the walls seem to give in. We barely manage to keep them up. Heaven knows why. This must be a novel artifice of those fiendish foes."

The king now took a deep breath. It was apparent that it was painful for him to admit the next problem: "Unfortunately we are also being attacked from the inside! I was informed that our people allow themselves to lose heart. They are grumbling, and sooner or later they will oppose us."

The king hesitated: "And then, we are lost."

The jester believed himself to be in a nightmare. Until just now everything was shipshape, when suddenly the king was conjuring up a disaster.

"But Your Majesty", he exclaimed in surprise. "What are we to do now?"

Again the king inhaled deeply as if he needed an extra portion of air for the next statement.

"We will have to ask help from King Livencraft of the Northern High-Kingdom!"

Crawuz was at a loss. He had heard of this kingdom, but never of its ruler's name. The king must have seen his puzzlement.

"You do not know this king. He is mighty. Once, we were close. He is hard, but just. He will demand a return for his services."

"Which return, Your Majesty?" asked Crawuz.

The king stopped marching between the chairs, faced the jester and looked gravely at him.

"Jewels!"

"Jewels?" asked Crawuz astonished.

“Yes, the most precious jewels we possess”, replied the king.

“But Your Majesty”, the jester dared to throw in. “There are no jewels in our kingdom! There might be gold and silver, but surely no jewels!”

“But there are!” retorted the king. “They are hidden, but they are there. This is what makes them so precious.”

If the king said so, it must be true. He was the king after all. If he said something, then it was true – even if it was not true. But that was another matter altogether.

“I want you, my jester, to set off, together with Wisbert the court-scholar, Commander Yogodt of the royal army- and my best guard Ronder. You are to bring me the four-and-twenty most precious jewels from the twelve countries of my kingdom. You shall give them to King Livencraft as a recompense for his services.”

“I trust you fully. You might be but the jester, but I know you are no fool. In fact, you understand more things than most learned people. You are clever! And you have the ability to find out secrets playfully. The sage Wisbert will guide you to the various counties. He knows about their secrets, plus he is the best explorer. Commander Yogodt will find the best route, and my most trusted guard Ronder will protect you. Pack your belongings. We do not have time. Report to Yogodt at once!”

For one more time Crawuz got the better of his being the jester when he asked mischievously: “But Your Majesty, what if I have other things too ... ?”

A scowling look from the king gave him to understand that the king was not in a playful mood. Quickly the jester – an envoy now – tried to take to his heels. He went for the greatest adventure of his life.

Chapter 2: Departure for Deepwell – Kindness

They looked around, haunted. Were they safe? The cave looked empty. It reached deep down under the ground.

When the attack had started, they had rushed to the closest burrow, of which there existed many in this county. The burrow though turned out to be an entrance to a far-reaching cave labyrinth. It was what gave this part of the kingdom its name: Deepwell.

There was only little water in this desolate county. Most of the water was flowing in underground rivulets and collected in natural wells. The people of these parts made use of the wells. Therefore they mostly lived underground, in a confusion of caves, wells, shafts and grottos.

The dull sound of the impact of the enemy's missiles was still above them. Yet the evening had started off so peacefully. It was their first day on the expedition. They had travelled several hours from Beletosta in a harsh gallop. In the end they enjoyed sitting on firm ground again. Especially the jester, for he was used to riding merely his hobby-horse. As well as the elderly scholar Wisbert who was barely able to ride any longer. The two other men were warriors and therefore used to riding horses.

Thus they were sitting, with their bellies comfortably filled. When the fire was about to burn down to embers, Crawuz noticed the countless shooting stars in the clear sky. When he pointed them out to Wisbert, Yogodt leapt to his feet as if stung by a bee. He shouted something like: "Fast, get to safety! Follow me!"

He darted towards a foxhole. The horses cried out in bad premonition. They broke loose and galloped away at breakneck speed without their masters. Frightened, the three men followed Commander Yogodt.

Not one second too late. For where they had sat comfortably, some huge fire-balls hit and burst into a thousand little flames.

Now, in the safety of the cave, the jester finally dared to ask: "What was this all about, Commander Yogodt?"

The commander looked at him with his vigilant eyes and explained: "They shoot at us with catapults. I'd never have reckoned them so close. We should not have built a fire. Contrary to our soldiers, the troops of Grottania rather fight during the night. Then they do best. They must have seen our fire, aiming at us with their catapults. They know how to handle them, I have to admit. They've almost had us."

At dawn the four companions had left the beautiful palace with its many towers and flags. They rode off fast. The scholar Wisbert had suggested they first ride to the East, because this county was likely to be conquered within the next few days. That being the case there would be no more chance to find the first two jewels.

Crawuz had never travelled further than the green fields surrounding the splendid Beletosta. After the fields came lush meadows, but the further they rode on, the landscape changed into dry grassland. Soon the hills, grown with long, dry grass, made way to an even more arid region. The scene resembled a huge, dried up riverbed. How could anyone possibly live here?

They took their first rest near the border to Grottania, by a range of hills resembling dunes. There they were surprised by the ambush.

Alas, their provisions were all gone: the tasty sausages and the delicious flat buns. Everything had been destroyed in the attack. At least they were all still alive. The horses had probably got to safety, for they were battle-horses and therefore used to the infernal din of battle.

After a troubled night they started out for the exploration of the cave. The attack which had lasted all night had finally stopped. It seemed that the enemy knew they were still alive and hiding. Above ground they would soon die of thirst, and without their horses at the mercy of the sun beating down upon them. Hence they were on their way deeper down.

It struck them as odd that it was not completely dark in the caves. Softly green glowing toadstools showed them on their way. The roof was covered with myriads of glow-worms. Their cold, bluish light blended into the green of the toadstools. The walls of the cave were thus tinted purple.

As soon as Crawuz found out about the marvellous echo, there was no more holding him. As was his wont as a jester, he had to take advantage of the situation to fool around.

“Laddies an’ gents! Queerest assemblage! Expperriensse the novel gothick lighting, presenting the herroic quartet, conducted by ourr courageous Commander Yogodt – applause, applause.”

How wonderful his announcement echoed from the caves! Altogether Crawuz made out ten echoes! Yogodt apparently found it less amusing. He grabbed Crawuz by the collar, drew his dagger and held it to the jester’s throat.

“Quiet, you fool! Or do you want to draw their attention to us?” he hissed through clenched teeth. “Why, Lord of the Army”, croaked the strangled Crawuz. “Why are you so troubled? Do you want to shave me?”

Crawuz did not understand what the agitation was about. Who should hear him?

After four more hours of wandering they were exhausted and had to take a short rest. They had walked all that way only to find a dead end. The soft green shimmer of the toadstools had made way to the orange light of some other plant.

All of a sudden the walls seemed to move. Countless spears were pointed at the four companions. Single figures seemed to detach from the walls and started to speak: “In the name of King Goodenhigh – yield!”

Now they saw them: Soldiers in camouflage coats which made it impossible to discern them from the walls. One voice rung out.

“Commander Yogodt! Is it truly you?”

It turned out that a fellow officer of Yogodt’s had heard the screaming of Crawuz. Since he had not been sure whether they were intruders, he had made a move with his soldiers in order to apprehend them. They had been positioned here because of the attacks from Grottania.

The companions were finally able to take a good rest in the underground headquarters of the royal soldiers. Even though the desert-people had but little food, they gladly shared it with them. Every drop of water was carefully saved. When Crawuz gurgled because he felt like enjoying the precious liquid, they looked at him anxiously. Maybe they feared he would be lavish with it and spit it out, which of course he did not do.

The jester then wanted to play another prank. He waved his arms and accidentally overthrew a jug with delicious herb cordial. Crawuz was startled. Would they punish him now? Yet he was to experience their proverbial kindness. Instead of getting angry and telling him off, they started pouring out into everyone's cup with a smile on their faces. What sacrifice it must be for these people! They had scarcely enough for themselves, for they arduously had to wrest all foodstuffs from the ground.

When the jester went to sleep all kinds of thoughts passed through his head. He was unable to fall asleep. Also because their quarters were immersed with the faint light of the fluorescent plants.

Moreover, Crawuz had to think about the king's orders. How were they to find the first jewel? Wisbert the scholar had told them that each jewel was in some way connected to the distinctive characteristic of each of the peoples of the kingdom.

The inhabitants of these caves had peculiar features. Due to their long living below the surface they were, most of all, pale. Their skin was quite rough, resembling delicate scales; their eyes looked strikingly big, their hair an ashy blonde. Their sense of hearing and smelling was excellent. Most of them showed a kind expression on their faces, and their voices sounded patient and gentle. The four companions were aware that kindness was their special feature. But where were they to look for the jewel?

When Crawuz awoke from his short and restless sleep, he saw an elderly man from the desert-people sitting by his side. He must have watched him for a while, because as the jester opened his eyes, the old man exhaled contently.

"Ye art looking for the jewel of our people, is it not so?" he asked with his worn-out, knowledgeable voice.

"How do you know?" Crawuz asked baffled.

"Well, t'were not difficult to guess. When I approached thy quarters, I heard thee talk in thy slumber. Thou werest speaking about a jewel which thou werest not capable to find. I repeatedly heard ye utter the word "majesty" thereupon I drew mine own conclusions. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Ari."

The old man with the understanding eyes made a pause.

"Well, dost thou want me to shew ye the way?" asked Ari.

"Oh, well, ah ... I ... I'd appreciate it very well" stammered the overwhelmed Crawuz.

The jester followed Ari. The desert-people they met on their way all bowed courteously before Ari. Aha – the jester had suspected something like that. The old chap had something dignified about him. He was probably an important person in this county.

Crawuz could not remember through how many corridors they had already passed. Once they came by an enormous cave where they saw some sort of marketplace. And further on another cave-hall where an unfathomable amount of small, pale-green plants were cultivated.

After some more time Crawuz noticed that water was dripping from the ceiling, gradually more so, gathering in small becks to the left and right, turning into bigger channels.

At long last they reached another enormous cave. It was brightly lit by countless fluorescent plants. Massive pillars rose from the water, disappearing in the clouds of steam high above.

The differently coloured lights from the fluorescent plants blended into a light which had the quality of sunshine. What was most overwhelming though were the myriads of small rivulets

which ran down along the walls of the cave. They poured into a lake. And from this lake ran three large rivers.

"This is our treasure vault", cried Ari. He had to shout in order to drown the thundering waters.

"Water is to us what gold is for ye! We live in the desert. Yet centuries ago we decided to withdraw to the underground. We are grateful for every drop of water and every bite to eat which God bestows upon us."

Ari turned to a small rowing boat which was kept by the shore. He waved to the jester: "Come, let us go to the island!"

Only then did Crawuz notice the island in the middle of the lake. Ari rowed with strong, proficient strokes. Halfway an enormous pink something approached them with high speed.

"Whass at, Master Ari? T'es cumming straight at us!" Crawuz panicked.

"This here is our guardian", explained Ari. "A mighty olm who guards the island. It took us a hundred years to tame him. Our ancestors trained him with patience and kindness. He is not taking to strangers, however!"

When Ari had finished speaking, he opened a pouch which he carried on his belt; he took out some feed and gave it to the olm, whispering something in his ear. Shortly after, the huge beast vanished in the depths of the lake.

On the island there was a deep pit. It was evidently filled with water, looking like a pond. Ari was standing before it and gestured to Crawuz to do as he did. All of a sudden the water in the pond began to bubble and seethe. Clearly something was moving in the water. Promptly a water column rose and stood in front of them, as high as a man. Ari reached out to the column. He opened it as if he were pulling a drawer. He brought out an object which he proudly presented to Crawuz: the jewel of the desert county! Then Ari shouted something in a high-pitched voice, whereupon the column disappeared again.

Ari could not help but laugh when he noticed the jester's eyes blink in amazement.

"This was the deed of our guardian! The island has an underground spring. When I give the guardian a sign, he blocks the outlet with his body. The water therefore drains away by way of the pond, pushing the column out. By giving the olm the second sign, he will let go of the water, and the column disappears."

Crawuz stood there petrified, mouth agape with wonder. Ari took the jester's hand, laid the stone in his palm and closed his fingers around it. Now the jester held the jewel in his fist. The old gentleman looked at Crawuz with his big eyes. They filled with tears, for the jewel was so precious to his people.

Ari said with solemnity: "God is good to us. We too want to be good to thee. Thou hast need of the jewel in order to protect our people. What good is the jewel if we keep it? May it help King Goodenhigh to victory over the scurvy enemy!"

Deeply impressed and bemused the jester followed Ari all the way back. He was to bring his companions the good news: they had obtained the first jewel!

Full of joy wisbert quoted two verses from the Book of Life:

Taste, then, and see that the Lord is good. Happy the man who finds refuge in him! Fear the Lord, all you his holy people; for those who fear him lack nothing. (Psalm 34:8-9)

Which thou, O God, in thy goodness providest for the poor. (Psalm 68:106)

But then came the bad news from Wisbert's mouth: he had learnt from his scholarly records that the second jewel was somewhere above ground. They had to return to the hot desert.