

THE KINGDOM OF THE BLIND



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A hot wind blew across the plain, carrying with it the late afternoon scents of the desert; jasmine and the distinctive aroma of the creosote bush. The scents were as familiar to Albert as the whisper of the sand against his scarred, wind-worn skin, as familiar as the hiss of the minute particles swirling and dancing over the dry dirt and rocks. These things were such a part of life here that no one noticed them any more, not unless they really concentrated on what their senses were telling them. Albert paid attention, picking out the subtle shifts in the wind as he sat on the bench outside the small, ramshackle hut that he called home. This is where he spent his time as strangers came and went to the watering hole next to his hut, occasionally throwing a few copper coins in the battered tin hanging from the edge of his roof, taking the years with them as they passed by.

He heard an approaching horse, coming from the direction of town - a grandiose title for a collection of mismatched wooden shacks in the middle of nowhere. He recognised the horse's gait, the scuff of hoof on dirt as it didn't quite lift one foot clear of the ground, the legacy of an old injury, imperfectly healed. Albert sympathised with the horse, he had more than a few of those himself. It would be Bridget, same as it was every other day, bringing him a meal and a few supplies; a cheap bottle of whiskey and some bread and jerky to tide him over until her next visit. He waited, grumbling sourly to himself the same as he always did, until the horse's hoofbeats stopped nearby. There was a thud as Bridget's boots hit the dusty ground and then a creak as she stepped on to the porch.

"Good afternoon, Albert," said Bridget. "How are you doing today?"

"Just fine," he answered, "everything's wonderful."

"Now now, there's no need to be sarcastic." She patted him on the shoulder and he caught the scents of bread and pastry, underlain by horse, sweat and dust.

"You would deny me one of my few remaining pleasures?"

He heard her sigh but she didn't answer. Dishes clanked and he caught the whiff of pastry and stew. "I've made you two meat pies, some bread and a big bowl of stew. Should be enough to tide you over until my next visit," she said, he waited expectantly. "And yes, I brought you a new bottle of whisky and some beer."

"That's my girl."

"Shall I give my usual speech about you moving into town?"

Albert grunted. "Can if you want, won't make no difference."

"Albert..."

"Don't 'Albert' me. Like I've told you more times than I can remember, this here's my home. Besides, who else is going to warn you when the demon's come raiding."

"We would manage, I'm sure," she said, but her voice was one of weary resignation. "The walls are high enough and the door's are thick enough."

"Ha! Heard that before."

"Probably from me a few days ago. I've picked up the empty dishes."

"Same as you always do." He did enjoy trying to get under her skin.

"Same as I always do, true enough. I could always leave them, let them stack up until you knock them over." She was no stranger to the verbal jousting. "Have you made much since I was last here?"

"Ha!" Albert's laugh was bitter. "Only been three folks riding past and only one of them stopped for water. Made all of ten copper."

"Every little helps, Albert. We should be thankful to Sol for whatever we get."

"Sol? No sign of Sol here. That sun set forty years ago. Another thing I'd have to put up with in town, damned preachers telling me how wonderful life is and isn't the great Lord Sol wonderful the way he looks after us!"

"Albert..."

"Never there when you need him though, is he, eh? Wasn't here forty years ago was he?" Suddenly the scars on his face were aching with the memory of the burning venom, and his chest tightened as he saw again his wife and son struggling in the arms of the bestial demons, the mocking grin of the reptile as it spat into his face and took his sight away. The screaming of his family still rang through his dreams. He became aware of a hand gently squeezing his shoulder, a sliver of comfort in the darkness. "Sorry," he said.

"You've nothing to apologise for, Albert," she said. The hand left his shoulder. "I know why you stay here. I understand. It's just that I worry about you."

"I'm in no danger, girl. Them demon's don't want me dead, it's more fun for them to mock me. Might as well use that to make myself useful, besides, I got my shotgun if they decide they want to come in my house. No chance of them sneaking up on me!"

"Now you be getting home, it feels like it's getting cooler. Don't you be out here when the sun goes down."

"I'll be fine, Albert. Take care of yourself, I'll see you in a couple of days. Give the bell a ring if you need anything." He heard her mount up and ride away. She would be waving back at him - she'd told him she always did this - pointless thing to do to a blind man but it was a nice thought.

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Albert was eating a slice of one of the pies the next evening, still early enough to feel the heat from the west on his face. Even cold, the pie was delicious - beef and potato and plenty of pepper, just the way he liked it. Perfect washed down with a beer. The last mouthful of pie was just disappearing, and he was seriously considering getting some more, when he heard hooves approaching. He tensed, thinking for a moment that the demons were raiding early, but the hooves were moving at a steady, walking pace. There was only one horse, by the sound of it, and he had his shotgun by his side so he wasn't unduly worried. There had been a few would-be thieves down the years who had been terminally surprised at just how well a blind man could aim. He put down the plate, put the shotgun on his lap and went back to sipping his beer while he waited for the traveller to reach him.

"Good day, friend," he called out when he judged they were close enough to hear him. He kept his tone welcoming but made sure that the shotgun was visible. "Care to water your horse, and you too if you're desperate?" He reached out and tapped the can that hung from the porch roof near where he sat, punctuating his point with the rattle of the can's contents (actually pebbles rather than coins but the stranger wasn't to know that).

"Good day," the stranger replied. Their horse slowed to a stop and Albert could briefly taste the dust that had been kicked up by its hooves.

"Not often I hear a woman's voice all the way out here, miss, least ways not on her own. What brings you this way?"

"Just passing through. And the water would be much appreciated."

"There's a pump and a trough round the side. Help yourself. Best not take too long though, else you won't make it to the town before dark."

"There's no rush," said the stranger over the noise of her horse noisily slurping at the water.

"No rush? My girl, you might be a stranger round here but even a stranger would know it's foolish to be roaming around at night. There are dangerous things out there - demon bandits, and even worse than that."

"There certainly are," she replied.

Albert chuckled. "The confidence of youth, I vaguely remember that. So what's your name, stranger?"

"I'm older than I sound, and my name is Christine," she replied.

"Ha! Most folks wouldn't have noticed it but I've done nothing but listen carefully for the last forty years - I heard that hesitation when you said your name. Call yourself whatever you want as far as I'm concerned, 'Christine'." He chuckled again, imagining the look on Christine's face.

"Very perceptive," she said. "What do I call you?"

"Albert's the name, guardian of the road!" He laughed, which turned into a wheezing cough.

"And you live out here alone?"

Albert nodded. "I surely do, miss Christine."

He heard her bring horse back round to the front of the house, then she stepped up on to the porch, the boards creaking beneath her feet, and dropped some coins into the can.

"Music to my ears, thank you kindly."

"Think nothing of it," said Christine. "Would you not be better living in the town?"

He spat in disgust, but away to the side so he wouldn't hit his visitor. "Bah, too many people, too much noise, too much whispering they think I can't hear." He put on a high-pitched, whiny voice. "Oh, look at poor old blind Albert, isn't it sad?"

"I am sure they mean well."

Albert sighed. "Yeah, they do, and they make sure I don't die from thirst or hunger, but I can only take so much pity. This was mine and Fiona's home, I'll be damned if I'll give it up." *They'd win then*, he added privately. *They won't win as long as I'm here.*

"Fiona is your wife?"

"Was, young Christine, was. As I mentioned earlier, there are dangerous things out there, which is why you should be on your way rather than listening to an old man complaining." He reached out to push her on her way, his hand coming to rest on a narrow waist. "Well damn, you're smaller than I was expecting from the way the boards creaked! No offence."

"None taken," said Christine.

"Is that a pistol I feel?" he asked. "I would have had you down as too well spoken to be toting a pistol about. You know how to use that thing?"

"Yes." There was not a hint of bravado to her voice, as if it was just a simple statement of

fact.

"Well, maybe you do at that, and maybe you're even good with them, but you should still be heading for the town. There's always something better than you!"

"Not always."

"You've got no idea, girl. There's a band of demons up in the hills you just rode past, they'll probably be watching you right now."

"There are, standing on top of the bluff."

"What?" He struggled out of the chair, fists clenched. "You know how I got this handsome face, why there's just me here? Because of those Sol-blasted demons, because of a big bastard with a lizard's face who spat at me, and the last thing I saw was his gang and my Fiona..." His throat closed around the words. "I've had those bastards mock me for the last forty years for what happened and I won't have it happen again! Ride out of here, damn your eyes!"

"You aren't the first to say that. Do not be concerned. You said a lizard-faced man, with blue-green skin. Was he quite tall, broad shouldered?"

"Yes, why?"

"He is leading his gang down the slope in this direction."

"Get on your horse and ride for the town, girl! Maybe they'll take their time here and you can still make it." He didn't believe it for a moment but he had to try.

A hand patted him on the shoulder. "It will be fine, Albert."

"Damnation, girl," muttered Albert, all but stamping his feet in frustration. "Get in the hut, they know they'll get a dose full of this," he brandished the shotgun, "if they come through the door."

"That won't be necessary. Go inside, keep your shotgun ready."

"You..."

She gently but firmly took his arm and lead him to the door. "Go inside, Albert." She pushed him inside and closed the door.

He heard her walking across the porch, down the steps and on to the road. He could hear the hoof-beats of multiple horses approaching, the jeering laughter that always set his teeth on edge. Heart pounding, he carefully felt his way across to the chair that he knew was set up facing the door and sat down, cocking the shotgun. Why hadn't she listened, dammit, he didn't want to have to hear this again! He reached down and yanked on the wire that snaked alongside the road to ring a bell in the nearby town. Help would come but far too late.

"What have we here?" said that hateful, hissing voice. It haunted his nightmares every night and mocked him at least once a week. "Old Albert's brought us a new toy to play with. It's about time, Albert, it's been far too long since the last one!"

"Leave her alone, you Sol-damned monster!" Albert shouted, trying and failing to keep the quaver out of his voice. He should go and help her. He might be as likely to hit her as he was to hit them but he might at least frighten them off. He stayed in his seat.

"Just passing through," said Christine. She sounded completely unconcerned.

Should have got her real name for the tombstone, thought Albert.

"What's your name, little girl?" said the Lizard. "Turn around, let's have a look at the face.

If you're pretty enough then maybe I'll keep you for myself."

"My name? See if you can guess it."

There was a long pause, and then confused shouting rang out. Guns fired in a thunderous barrage that shook his shack, bullets thudded into his outer walls and throat-tearing screams shattered the air. He could hear howling, like a beast in terrible pain, and whimpering voices begging for mercy. The cacophony died away, leaving behind the sound of someone crying like a child. The crying was cut off by a terrible scream.

There was silence and then something stepped on to the porch with a heavy footstep. Boards creaked from the weight, and it sounded like the feet were dragging across the wood. They stopped outside the door and Albert thought he could hear someone whimpering, a muffled, barely discernible voice repeating the word "no" over and over again. He raised the shotgun in trembling hands.

The door opened with a thump and his finger tightened on the trigger, filling the inside of his home with thunder and leaving his ears ringing. With fumbling fingers, he broke the shotgun open and tried to reload. He yelped and dropped the shell as fingers closed around his arm.

"Be calm, Albert," said Christine. "It is quite safe."

"H...how? What happened?" His mind reeled. This was impossible. Those Sol-blasted demons had terrorised the area for decades.

"Nothing for you to worry about. I'm afraid I must be on my way." Her footsteps headed towards the door. "You should consider moving into town, Albert. There's no sense in you staying out here."

"Who are you? What are you?" He had to know. Getting to his feet he moved uncertainly towards the door, only to trip on something obstructing the doorway. Strong hands caught him before he could fall.

"Something worse. There are people coming from the town, you should wait for them in your chair, and then let them help you." The hands guided him over to his seat on the porch and lowered him into it.

"But the Lizard!"

"Appears to have been shot in the chest with a double-barrelled shotgun, if I'm any judge." He heard his coin can rattle again. "How many were in this Lizard's gang?"

"Ten or eleven I think." His head was spinning, this didn't seem real. Could it be true, after all this time?

"And his camp was up in those hills? Don't worry about the rest, I'll go and have a talk with them."

Her horse snorted as she mounted up.

"Who are you?" he asked again.

"Good bye, Albert." The horse trotted off, back towards the hills. He could hear other horses approaching from the town, a posse of shopkeepers and farmers who had no business riding into battle against a gang of demons. From the smell that was surrounding his hut it wasn't going to be a problem today.

"Albert!" shouted someone as the horses skidded to a halt, surrounding him in a cloud of

dust. It had sounded like Jason, Bridget's husband, who occasionally came out to the hut to do odd jobs. "Are you okay?"

"I'd be fine if I wasn't choking!" said Albert, between hacking coughs. He was relieved to find his normal brusque temperament returning.

"This is...what in Sol's name happened?"

"What does it look like? One of you, look in the door and tell me what you see." He needed to know for sure.

"Oh my...is that the Lizard?"

A heavy cloud, one he'd carried for over forty years, lifted from Albert. "Is it dead?"

"Oh yeah, definitely! Didn't die easy, either. Looks like his leg's broken, and his fangs have been ripped out."

Albert found he was smiling. "Have a look in my money can, but carefully. Don't just stick your fingers in."

"What?" Jason brushed past him and he heard the clanking of the can. "Oh, that's nasty. Looks like you had a good day, mind. There's a good haul of coin in here, once you've washed the blood off."

"A very good day," said Albert.

"Who did this?"

"What, you don't believe a blind old man could do this?" said Albert. He could barely stop grinning, and there were tears running down from his ruined eyes.

"Come on, Albert."

Albert burst into almost-hysterical laughter - as if the truth was any less strange. "A woman stopped to water her horse."

"You can't be serious."

"It was, my boy, I promise you" said Albert.

"Can't just have been a woman, they've been torn apart! What could have done this?"

Albert smiled. "Something worse, she said."

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Albert sat in the comfy chair, a glass of whisky in his hand, and listened to Bridget bustling around in her kitchen; the whole house was filled with the smell of the bread she was baking. He had been living with Jason and Bridget for the last month, ever since what had become known as the Battle of Albert's Shack. People in the small town still whispered behind his back but now it was hushed awe and wild speculation rather than pity. He reached up and touched the two fangs hanging on a chain around his neck.

There had been many fantastical theories about what had happened at his previous home, and at the bandit camp up on the nearby hills. As Jason had brought Albert back to town, a group of men had gone to check it out and discovered it had been lain waste to by what looked like a force of nature. One of them said he could see a figure, not one that was especially big or imposing, sitting on a horse, watching them from a distant rise.

Albert raised a silent toast to "Christine", whoever and wherever she was.