

"Bringing in the empty bottles from Castle Vinpat, Master Pulas," the young boy called out.

"Very good," the wine maker responded. Using his cane, he tapped the cobblestones and made his way to the wagon.

The young boy stood and waited on the blind man. With uncanny awareness, Master Pulas reached out and patted the young man on the shoulder. "How many did they break this time, Will?"

"Only about half a dozen, sir."

"They must not have had any guests this month," Master Pulas grinned. "Well, you know what to do. Get these into the wash room and we'll start scrubbing."

"Yes, sir," Will began lifting the crates of bottles and carrying them into the wash room. Master Pulas had a staff of over fifty people who made their living with the making of his wine, but even so, the master wine maker seemed to be everywhere, checking the bottles, crooning to the grapevines, and sipping the vintage. Today, Master Pulas followed Will into the wash room. Before the washwomen in the room could begin to scrub the bottles, Master Pulas pulled out a few and with careful fingers traced over the glass.

"Dot, throw this bottle out. It has a crack. No good anymore," Master Pulas handed over a bottle.

"Ack, I won't throw it out. We can use it for ourselves for water. You can barely see the crack!" Dot answered him.

"Throw it out, Dot. I won't risk your pretty neck with an unexpected shard," he said.

Dot tittered, but the master could hear her toss the bottle into a bin of glass shards.

"Dot," he called. "There's something in this other bottle. Can you get it out?"

"Aye, I think I can manage with some tweezers," Dot replied.

He listened as she muttered and grunted to herself until a final, "Ah, finally. Difficult little bugger."

She slapped a tiny wad of paper into the master's hand. The clink of glasses and the cheerful chatter of the women filled the background with noise as the master moved to one side, out of the way of the women, as they took over checking the bottles and scrubbing them clean. With deft fingers, he unrolled the tiny wad of paper. "Dot," he called. "Is there anything written on it?"

"No, Master Pulas. Just looks like a bit of trash," she told him.

Dot went back to the wash tubs and Master Pulas quietly smoothed out the wrinkled bit of paper with his fingers. Gently, he probed as his fingers felt tiny bumps. Puzzled, he turned the paper around and traced over it again. With a start, he figured out a letter – H. He continued to trace over the other bumps and finally figured out it was two words: H E L P M E.

"Dot," he called. "Ask Will to come to my office."

"Yes, Master Pulas."

The boy walked cheerfully into the office, where Master Pulas' assistant handled all of the entries into the ledgers and read his correspondence aloud to him. "Whatcha need, Master Pulas?"

"Will, tell me about the Castle Vinpat. Describe to me what you see."

Accustomed to the master's requests for descriptions whenever something new caught his attention, Will did not see anything odd with his master's request. As an orphan, he had lived with his master for as long as he could remember and like the rest of the master's staff, he felt a deep affection for the wine maker.

"Yes, sir. It's a big castle, probably larger than the one at Cron, but not as big as some others. I don't know how many people live there, but they have at least ten people on the kitchen staff and the head cook is a mean old fart. He never shares any pot pies, but the second cook is kind of nice. She'll fill you up if he's not around. Um, I always put the new bottles of wine in their cellar. It's a big room where

they keep extras like tatoes and carrots and cabbage on one side, then a rack to put the wine bottles on the other side. But they keep the empties in the same room as their trash. There's always bins of wasted food that they have someone haul off. I hope there's some pig getting all that. It'd be a shame for it all just to get dumped, doncha think? Anyway, I always deliver the new bottles, let the cook do a count, then load up with the empty ones. Pretty easy, really."

"That's good, Will. So, anyone can put the empty bottles in the trash room?"

"Yeah, sure. Anyone that works the kitchen. And I always see the servants in and out. They probably bring down dirty dishes and bottles, I would think."

"But all of them would have access to pen and ink," the master said.

"What?"

"Sorry, just musing out loud. Do you know of anyone that they have shut away? Maybe they are sick? Or maybe they are a trouble-maker?"

Will shrugged his shoulders, then realized his master couldn't see it. "No, master. But they wouldn't talk about that with me, would they? I only ever hear them talking about the weather, the farmers, and who is stepping out with who."

"Oh? Anyone you know?" The master let the boy rattle on for a bit, sharing the castle gossip, but he didn't glean any details that would help him identify the author of the message.

"When do you go back?" Master Pulas interrupted Will's flow.

"Tomorrow. I delivered the first load today and the second load tomorrow. I couldn't get both done today because I had to make that delivery over to Sibray, and that takes almost the entire day." Will sounded slightly defensive.

Master Pulas smiled, "Will, I think you are doing a wonderful job. But our orders seem to be growing, so we may need to hire another delivery boy. What do you think? Any of your friends need some work?"

"Oh, yes, sir! I can think of a few who would love to work for you. Not just boys, some men, too. Everyone knows how you take care of your people."

Master Pulas grunted slightly. "Leave a list with Eman. We'll decide who we need and chat with your friends and anyone else who might need a position."

Will left his master, who sat thoughtfully rubbing the corners of the piece of paper between his fingers.

The next morning, Will was startled to see Master Pulas sitting in the wagon seat. "Good morning, Will," Master Pulas called as Will slid to a stop in the courtyard. "I felt like taking a little outing, clear the cobwebs. Do you mind some company?"

Will said, "No, sir. I wouldn't mind. How did you know it was me?"

"Ah, no one else hear has such a cheerful step as you, my son."

The other men and boys loaded up the wagon with Will, as Master Pulas waited. His blind eyes stared out at nothing, but one hand twirled his staff as he traced over the designs a friend had carved for him. He decided to keep the news of the note to himself, especially from his young companion.

On their way to Castle Vinpat, Will kept up a steady stream of chatter. He was delighted to have the master to himself and the master was content to ride and listen. As they entered the castle courtyard, Will took it upon himself to describe everything he could see and the master smiled slightly at his enthusiasm.

Entering the kitchens, Will announced, "Everyone listen up! This is my master, Master Pulas, the wine maker." Normally, an introduction to a farmer or merchant would not garner much interest in the kitchen, but since everyone enjoyed a sip of the master's wine, he was welcomed with good cheer, even by the grumpy head cook.

"Come, come, my friend. Have a seat," the head cook cleared off potato peelings and guided Master Pulas to a seat.

"Many thanks, many thanks," Master Pulas murmured, putting on a guise of someone older and more feeble. Will's brow wrinkled as he watched his master.

"Cook Strome," the wine maker turned in the direction of the head cook, "I've been thinking about taking on more staff, as I get on in years. Tell me, what of the young people at the castle? Anyone who may want to learn the wine trade?"

"Well, now that you mention it, Master Pulas, I have one child who has not shown a talent for following in my footsteps. My boy, Tucker. He's about ten years old and needs a firm hand. But he'd be a hard worker fer ya."

Knowing the lad to be a mischievous bore, Will muttered under his breath, "Not bloody likely."

With his acute hearing, Master Pulas caught the comment and coughed slightly to hide a chuckle. "Indeed, Cook Strome. Does he perchance know how to read? Everyone on my staff must read so they can assist with the inventories."

Cook Strome glowered at the question. "Sadly, no, Master Pulas. The child has not mastered that skill as of yet."

"Ah, well, maybe in a year or so, we can revisit the boy as a possibility."

"Yes, Master Pulas." The head cook looked angry, and for a moment, Will felt a moment of pity for the ornery Tucker.

"Will," Master Pulas spoke suddenly, "We mustn't take up any more of the time in kitchen. Guide me down to this great cellar that you were telling me about and you can unload the wine bottles." As Will reached for the first crate of wine, Master Pulas said, "You there, in the corner. I can hear you breathing. Help guide a blind man down to the cellar."

A small figure scurried forward and offered an arm to the wine maker. "What is your name, child?" Master Pulas asked as they followed Will.

"Samtus," came a whispered reply.

"We are alone now, correct?" Master Pulas asked.

"Yes, Master," Will answered when it seemed that Samtus would not.

"Samtus," Master Pulas asked. "Did you have something to ask?"

"No, sir," he whispered.

"Can you read or write?" Master Pulas asked.

"No, sir."

Master Pulas sighed in frustration. He was getting nowhere with finding the source of the note.

"But my mama can," Samtus whispered.

"Oh? And where is your mother?"

"She is in the heavens, with my father, and my uncles."

Master Pulas placed a hand on the young child's head. "But you work here, in the kitchens?"

"Yes, sir. The second cook has taken me in."

"Good. That is good to hear. Good for you." Master Pulas turned to where Will has finished placing the wine bottles into the racks. "Come, Will, let's finish this job and go home."

"Yes, Master Pulas."

Master Pulas followed Samtus back up the steps and waited to the side as Will entered the trash room and loaded up the empty bottles. As he waited, he tried to think of another way to identify the source of the message. The kitchen staff moved around him and idly he leaned on his staff and enjoyed the sounds of their activities. Suddenly, someone stumbled into him and muttered, "Here's a bottle that was missed from my lord's rooms, master. My apologies."

Before Master Pulas could speak, the person was gone. "Will," Master Pulas asked, "who just handed me this bottle?"

"For a blind man, you have good eyes, Master Pulas," Will teased. "I don't know her name, but she sure is beautiful. I've heard that the castle lord has his eye on her as well. She won't be working the kitchen much longer, I wager."

"Is she still in the room?" Master Pulas asked.

"Yes, sir."

Master Pulas handed the bottle over to Will and then called out to the kitchen, "Cook Strome, thank you again for your hospitality for an old blind man. My boy and I are heading out now. I think we might stop at that inn in the next village over. I've heard they have a minstrel there, and I would love to hear some music."

"You're welcome, Master Pulas. Enjoy your day," Cook Strome said shortly before turning back to his task. But behind him, Master Pulas heard someone knock on the wall, two short knocks.

As they got into the wagon seat, Will asked, "Do you really want to stop for the minstrel? You know ol' Arry plays a better song than some old starving bard."

"Maybe he plays a song we haven't heard before," Master Pulas said.

Will shrugged, "All right, if you say so."

The two headed toward the inn. Handing over the wagon and horse to the stable boy, Will then guided Master Pulas into the common room of the inn. "Will," Master Pulas ordered, "I want to sit near the back of the room, please."

Will shook his head, but moved them in that direction. The two sat and listened to the minstrel for a long hour. Will began squirming in his seat. "Master Pulas, don't you think it's about time that we headed home?"

"No, it's not 2 o'clock yet."

"2 o'clock? Why do you want to wait until 2 o'clock?" Will asked.

Master Pulas smiled, "It is a good time for communication. That's all."

Will shrugged, and settled himself back onto the bench. "Yes, Master Pulas."

Master Pulas handed over a small coin. "Grab yourself something to eat, Will." The young man, who felt constantly hungry in his growing body, smiled with delight and headed toward the kitchen.

As the time neared 2 o'clock, Master Pulas sensed a rustle of cloth behind him. Taking a deep breath, he caught the same scent from before and murmured quietly. "I've always had a fondness for stories of the hero rescuing the damsel in distress. I am but a simple blind man, but my home is open to those in need."

"I would not bring the wrath of the lord down on your home and hearth." Her voice was a breathy whisper.

"I serve more than that castle. Worry not about my livelihood or my home." Master Pulas waited, then added, "There is space in the wagon. My young companion and I will leave shortly."

After a moment, he heard faintly, "As will I."

A half a candlemark later, Master Pulas called to Will and the two left the inn, with friendly calls of good day. As Will assisted Master Pulas into the wagon, he said, "Master Pulas, I think I see."

Master Pulas interrupted him, "Yes, Will. I know what you see." He squeezed the young man's hand urgently. "Be silent. Take us home."

Surprised by his master's tone, Will hesitated, then said, "Yes, Master Pulas."

No one spoke during the entire journey back to the winery. Each was lost in thought. As they neared home, Will said carefully, "Master Pulas, what would you like for me to do with the wagon?"

"Drive it into the stable, Will. We will deal with the contents tomorrow, don't you think?"

"Yes, sir."

The next day, Master Pulas made no explanation, but introduced a young woman to the staff of washer women. "My good women," he said, "I've hired someone to help out in the wash room. Her name is Deborah. Please see that she gets everything that she needs."

Eyebrows rose on the women, but they made no protest at the new addition, who was very quiet despite their quizzing. Deborah, however, was a hard worker, and while they still burned with curiosity, they accepted her into their circle.

It was mid-afternoon when there was a thunder of hooves as several soldiers approached the winery. "Master Pulas!" Will called urgently to his master.

The blind man stepped confidently out into the courtyard. "Greetings, soldiers!" he called to them. "Where do you travel in such a hurry?"

"Our Lord of Castle Vinpat is seeking a young woman who left his care. He's concerned for her safety."

"Indeed?" Master Pulas said.

"We heard that you were at the Castle yesterday. Did you see anyone?"

"Me? No, no, I haven't seen anyone in many a day. Not since my youth," Master Pulas smiled. The soldier grunted uncomfortably, but asked, "What about the boy with you?"

Before Will could speak up, one of the workers came into the courtyard. "We've not had any new women come here in a long time, soldier. None except that Deborah who joined us yesterday."

Master Pulas' shoulders slumped. For the first time, he was aggravated with his policy of honesty for his staff.

"Aye?" asked the soldier. "Let's see her then. She may be the one."

Master Pulas could hear the shuffle of feet. The soldier said, "This is her? This is your Deborah?"

Clearly, Master Pulas heard Dottie, in her screechy voice, say, "Yes, I'm Deborah! What do you need soldier, love?"

"You just started here yesterday?" the soldier asked, his tone full of doubt.

"Yeah, me old husband passed away two months ago. Happy I was to get this job and a place to stay. But I think no one's looking for me," Dottie answered.

"No, you are not the one we are looking for," the soldier replied. "Master Pulas, we apologize for the interruption to you and your workers."

"No worries, my friend. Safe travels," Master Pulas smiled vaguely at the soldier.

As soon as the hoofbeats had faded into the distance, Master Pulas called, "Dottie?! What was that about?"

"I don't know the story of that girl and I don't need to know. But I know you. You take care of all of us. If she's here, it's for good reason," Dottie said. She patted him on the cheek with her warm, meaty hand, and said, "But that's enough of that. I have four more crates of bottles to be washing."

Master Pulas smiled. He stood and listened to the clink of bottles, to the calls of the men in field to each other, and to the chatter of Will as he loaded another wagon for delivery. He took a deep breath, catching a faint scent of grapes and yeast. Tapping his cane on the courtyard stones, he made his way back to work.