

THE BRAVE STORM

by Roger Thomas

LORD CUTSHAW WINCED AS HE PUSHED OPEN the heavy back door to Cutshaw Manor and tottered his way out into the morning sunlight. The effort winded him more than he wanted to admit, but he kept himself erect, holding his cane more like the adornment it had once been rather than the prop it had become. Old age was succeeding where many Calormene Markaans had failed. But Wilbur Cutshaw was not one to yield gracefully to even an unstoppable foe. Inside that ageing frame he was still "Old Blood and Guts."

Nellie was chatting with some friends on the terrace when she spotted her father. "Excuse me, ladies." She put down her teacup and bustled to his side. "Father, would you like some tea? Or some nice cider? Come sit in the shade on the terrace and I'll fetch..."

"I'll sit nowhere and you'll fetch nothing, young lady," the old soldier said. "I shall walk about and be sociable. It's a holiday, my dear; a brave challenge which must be faced without flinching." He chuckled and holding his cane up like a sword added, "Into the fray, lads, and a pox on all deserters!"

"Very well, father", Nellie replied cautiously. "May I come with you?"

"Thank you, no. Just run along to your lady friends and solve the world's problems without me. I'll go find a nice spot to trip on an anthill and smash myself to bits."

"Father! You shouldn't say such things, even in jest!"

His face lit an a mischievous grin. He stared at her, toying with her resolve. Finally she had to break into a sheepish grin. "That's my little Nellie. Don't worry about me. I'll behave myself."

He started down the grassy hill to where the residents of Byron were enjoying the games and fellowship of the Regatta weekend. It had been Nellie's idea to open the Manor grounds for the picnic and games

after the race, and though it took away from the stateliness of the place, it certainly added fun and friendliness. There were long tables groaning with food and drink, and parties of children larking about in the bushes. Some of the bucks were playing a few ends of lawn bowling up on the sward below.

Someone came up from behind and put a paw on his shoulder. "What's this?? Oh, hullo Bellie!"

Bellweather Otter was every bit as old as Wilbur Cutshaw but a daily row in the Wells kept him in better shape. "Let's show those mooks how to bowl an end or two. A pint wager should make it interesting."

"I'd love to but...I have this old injury from a Calormene Markaan. It's acting up."

Bellie knew it was a more recent injury from Father Time, but he nodded politely and gave his cousin a pat on the back. "I bet the Markaan can't bowl worth a brass farthing, ay what?"

"Markaans never go lawn bowling. And where I sent him, he'll be too busy dancing down the golden streets with his three brides. Or whatever it is they do when I smite their head off."

"Garn, did you really?" Bellie said, watching Wilbur's face. Seeing his puckish grin, Bellie laughed

and said, "You old fakir you! You had me going there for a minute!"

Lord Cutshaw was not afraid of death, a foe he had faced a thousand times. Still when he thought of his dear wife went to bed one night a vital and alert doe and passed quietly in her sleep, he felt cheated. She had left him behind to slowly die off one ability at a time. He watched as the ranks of his old companions thinned, leaving him a relic of the past, an old sword hung above the mantle. Even the sweets on the banquet tables upset his ageing stomach. For the old otter, the Regatta festivities were not so much a celebration as a reminder of what he had lost.

He glanced about for somewhere to rest. There, that bench by the lilacs would be just the thing! He worked his way over to it and sat down more creakily than he used to. Finding himself a bit "blown" and warm, he reached for his straw hat to use as a fan only to find that he had come out without it. No wonder everything had seemed so bright! "Thunderation!"

Suddenly two laughing fox pups rounded the bush. "Rowan, give over! You promised!"

"Not till you...oh!"

They stopped just short of piling into the old otter.

"What's all this? Did I catch a major crime in progress?"

The older one said, "We're sorry, Your Lordship. We were just playing..."

Lord Cutshaw smiled. "Of course you were, lads." He looked at them more closely. "I say, you're Bramblewood's kits, aren't you?"

"Yes milord" the elder furling replied while his brother looked on wide-eyed. "I'm Rowan, and this is Westie." The younger nodded. "Our dad's down there doing a spot of bowling."

"Yes, I saw him", Lord Cutshaw said glancing at the bowling green. "He's quite good. Of course, his bowling will never be as good as it was before the brave storm..."

"The brave storm, sir?" Rowan was puzzled. "I don't understand."

"So, he never told you where he got that stiff arm, did he?" Lord Cutshaw looked at the two for a long minute, then he nodded slowly. "If you'd known your daddy as a furling, such humility would shock you. You're old enough, and I suppose it's up to me to tell you how Bramble saved the town one stormy night. But I

need two things first to do it justice. Please fetch my straw hat and a mug of cider. The cider is on the terrace, where my daughter Nellie will be happy to show you where my hat is. Shake it up, lads!"

Wilbur sighed, watching the two fox kits dashing off and turning his thoughts back to young Bramblewood Foxworth. He thought back to when he had caught young Bramble picking some of his lilies. This was a major offense because the one gentle art he learned in a lifetime of charges and sieges and iron-fisted negotiating was gardening, and the lilies were his favorite. He'd dismissed Bramble's apology as insufficient and said, "When you destroy something, you need to make up for it. Weed my garden for a week and I shall give you two crescents. I'd give you five if you hadn't spoiled my blooms."

Bramble had been very remorseful, and had showed up and discharged his duties faithfully and without complaint. At the end of the week when Wilbur gave him the two crescents he finally asked, "What were the flowers for, lad?"

"For my dad," Bramble had said. "They were mum's favorite flower and he's feeling a bit poorly. I thought it might cheer him up."

"Did they help him feel better?"

"Oh yes, Milord."

Wilbur took his small paw and put three more crescents into it. Yes, Bramble had a good heart even then. It made the otter smile to think his furlings would have the same good heart.

His reverie was shattered as the two youngsters returned breathlessly, barely spilling any of the cider. They sat at Cutshaw's feet in awe while he took a long pull at the mug, fanned himself with his hat, and sighed with contentment.

"Well done lads. Now...where was I? Oh yes. It was an early spring night just over four years ago. Winter had barely passed, and there was a brave storm out, a real howler sweeping down from the mountains. It struck in the afternoon, and as evening approached not a body was out and every house was bolted and shuttered tight against the wind and rain. Your mum and dad were buttoned up in the Moon and Hare, and they had no

guests that evening. Just as night was falling, there came a pounding at the door. Wondering who could be out in that weather, your father answered it. There stood a patrol of the Border Guard."

"The Border Guard? My dad..." started Westie, but his brother shushed him.

"Aye, lad, the Border Guard. You know of them, hmm?"

"Yes, milord," Rowan said. "They keep the dumb predators out of town."

"That's right. For generations, these faithful volunteers have patrolled the borders so lads like you could sleep safely with no monsters hiding under the bed. At least no real ones, aye what?" He patted on the bench for the kits to join him and as they sat on either side he put an arm around each. "Yes, my hearties, the freedom we enjoy is never free. Even in the dark times under the Telmarines, when Free Narnia was in hiding, the work had to go on.

"This particular patrol had just come back from the Southern Hills, and one of them, a beagle named Fielder, was gravely wounded, Corporal Laris, a fine lynx with steely gray eyes that missed nothing, asked if they could come in and care for him.

"Your father swept the great table clear while your mother spread a blanket. When they brought Ol' Fielder in, your mother nearly fainted at the sight. He was a mass of mud and blood, his left ear shorn off at the root and his head hanging limp. There were four great slashes down his side and large bite marks around his head and neck. His breathing was swift and shallow and hampered by a sucking wound on his side. His eyes, when they were open, stared blankly with the blacks big and round. He wasn't seeing us, to be sure. And though your mother is a skilled healer, she knew this was beyond her ability. She put a wet blanket on his chest wound and sent for Sophie Badger."

"Did Old Fielder make it?" Westie asked.

"Who's telling this story? You or me?" The old otter gave his shoulder a pat. "Sophie came as quick as she could, with Buckthorn Badger in tow. While the two does worked on Fielder and Buck put on a pot of water, Corporal Laris told us what had happened.

"As you might imagine, spring patrol in the mountains is dangerous work, since many hungry animals wander over from Archenland in search of food. This patrol had been searching the wooded hills above the town, and they lads had scattered through the woods, staying within earshot of each other. When the storm

blew up, they started calling to one another, trying to regroup.

"It was then that Fielder started baying, and mixed with the bays were deep roars and growls. They heard him shriek. By the time the others could reach him, he was almost dead."

Lord Cutshaw paused to take a pull on his cider, his eyes twinkling over the edge of the mug at the wide-mouthed youngsters. He'd nearly forgotten how much fun furlings could be. "You know, I always said nobody can make cider like my Nellie. I think it's that touch of cinnamon, but she insists that the best cider is the result of aging in the proper kind of wood. Oak, as you know, imparts a certain bitterness while sassafras is smooth and sweet, almost like molasses..."

"What about Fielder??" asked Westie. "What got him??"

"There were large tracks in the mud and big claw marks on the body. No doubt it was a bear."

"A *bear!*"

"Aye, a bear", Lord Cutshaw nodded grimly. "And not one of our talking bears but a huge wild bear as big as a lion. Sometimes they winter in the hills, and when they wake up after a long sleep, they're grouchy and quite hungry. Anyhow when we told Vicar Mountebank, he

rang the warning bells..one high, one low..over and over. When you hear the bells ringing like so, it means take cover!

"Townfolk braved the storm to gather at the Moon and Hare. I strapped on my saber and came as quick as I could, and that's when I found the patrol standing vigil near the fire while the women worked on poor Fielder. Your Granddad Thorny tried to pass out blankets and some biscuits and tea but most of the folk were too upset to bother.

"We were planning our next move when we heard your mother shriek and she and Sophie had their arms about one another crying. Fielder lay there staring up at the ceiling with those lifeless eyes. Those eyes, how can I forget their empty stare! I've seen death a thousand times over, and I never get used to having a body looking right at me but not seeing me look back!" He trembled and held the kits the closer. "Laddiebucks, never think that I have no regrets because they call me 'Old Blood and Guts.' I think about those lads I've faced in battle. Sometimes I dream about them, bright flowers cut off by an early frost." He sighed. "Garn, maybe you **are** too young."

"It's all right," Westie said. "What happened to dad?"

"I guess I have to tell you now or you'll pester your poor daddy! Yes, well as I was saying lads, we took our leave of poor Fielder the way warriors do. Each of us touched his sword or arrow tips to the wound that killed him. Each of us carried a bit of his blood on the tip of our daggers. When we struck that bear down, a bit of Fielder was going to be there. Then your father and Buckthorn carried Fielder's body to a room for preparation while Corporal Laris and I got to making plans. As Commander of the Black Diamonds I would stay in Byron to defend the town. Corporal Laris knew the backwoods and he would lead his patrol into the hills to find the killer bear. With him was a sturdy boar, another hound, and a man armed with a light spear. Four against one sounds like good odds, but it's nothing against a full grown brown bear. Reinforcements were too far away, so it was up to those few. Corporal Laris looked about the room. 'We were a short patrol already, and now we're one shorter. I need another stout heart. Who is with us?'

"The only sound in the room was the wind gnawing at the shutters. Every town lad and father was staring at their feet or the walls or anywhere but meeting the eyes of Corporal Laris. They were all seeing

themselves lying on the bloody cloth on the table gasping out their last.

"By this time your father and Buck had returned, and were standing silent like the rest, though I noticed that both of them were glancing around with a firm set to their eyes. They didn't speak yet, though, and finally Corporal Laris did.

"It would sure help to have another set of eyes and a good nose when we go out again', he said clearly. For a moment the silence thickened even more, then Buck shuffled his paws and cleared his throat. "I am no soldier,' the badger said, 'and yet...'

"Your father put a paw on his shoulder. 'No, Buck. Badgers dig in and hold ground. Lord Cutshaw will need you to help with the defenses, in case we fail.'"

"All eyes turned to your father. 'I'll come along, if you'll have me.'"

"'Bramble!' your mother shrieked, 'Get you back here, now!'"

"She and your father went to the office and shut the door. They had words, I tell ye. Even through the thick wooden door we heard snatches of talk about honor, duty, responsibility and love. There was a bit of shouting and some good old fashioned sobbing, I tell you. But when things grew quiet again, your father came out

leaving your mother standing there with her face in her paws. He'd told her plainly that love without courage is not love at all. He must volunteer **because** he loves her. To that, my young friends, there can be no argument.

"We raided the kitchen for sealing paraffin and melted it to put on torches. That sort of thing you don't light till the hour of need for it only burns a few minutes. The man would carry a lantern that would burn all night in the driving rain. The trick was if they found the bear they'd light one torch with the lantern and then spread the fire from torch to torch in a blink. Like all dumb animals, bears are afraid of fire, you know.

Your father was in the corner trying to calm your mother down. I seem to remember only one kit peering out from one of the back rooms, so that must have been you, young Rowan. I think she was still carrying you and your sister, Westie. It was hard for your father to go knowing he might leave your mother a widow with furlings to raise, but it was harder for him to think of a bear raging through the streets of Byron. This was no easy decision.

"Oh, that storm was a real mess, but I've never seen the townsfolk work with such a will! Mole and badger, otter and hedgehog, were delving in the mud and throwing up berms in the dark. Woodrow Aspinall

brought sharpened stakes for a palisade and worked logs to strengthen the trenches.

"Meanwhile, your father, who knew the lay of the land, led the patrol by meadow paths and hedgeways to the area of the attack. As they came to the edge of the dark woods, they decided to spread out a little – just enough to have a good sweep, yet not so far as to be isolated from one another. They also decided that the big ones – who'd be everyone but your father – would make as much noise and rustling as they could, in hopes of flushing and perhaps driving off the marauder. The man kept the lantern, while the beasts relied on their night vision to guide them.

"But your father knew that a fox's skill lay in stealth and silence, so he scouted on ahead. He slipped through the underbrush, weaving his way back and forth across the path of the patrol's advance, seeing if he could find trace of the beast. The rain was hindering his smell and the wind muffling his hearing, and his fur was soaking and tangled to boot, but he kept his pace.

"Even weaving as he was, he made better forward progress than those who came behind trying to make as much rattling and noise as they could. That's why he finally broke through into a small clearing, and there he

heard it. From the snuffling and rooting at the far end, he knew he'd found their quarry.

"The bear?" gasped Westie.

"A bear it was, and as hungry and sore-tempered as they come", Lord Cutshaw nodded. "Of course, it wasn't a talking bear, but it was hungry from a winter of lying up. Your father had to make sure it didn't come looking for dinner in the fields around Byron."

"Bramble stood stock-still and thought fast. The others were well behind by now, held back by thorns and thickets. If he started yelping to draw their attention, the bear would charge him. If he kept quiet, the bear might make off through the woods, and they could spend all of the dark, wet night finding it again. He had to keep the bear in the clearing and make enough noise to draw the others to them – all without getting himself killed."

Lord Cutshaw paused for another pull at the cider. The furlings gazed with gaping mouth and wide eyes. He was tempted to ask one of them to run for a refill, but decided he couldn't do that to them. He leaned forward with an appropriately grim look and continued.

"So your father did the bravest thing I've ever heard a creature of his size do: he decided he'd attack that ravenous bear. Of course he didn't expect to do it any harm, and didn't intend to get in a full-out fight – all he

wanted was to annoy it so it would start roaring and stay put. It was still rooting and pawing at the far end of the clearing, but sounded like it was getting ready to head off again. The bear hadn't noticed him yet, so he slunk as close as he could. Finally he was near enough to tickle the big bruin, so he braced himself, bared his fangs, and leapt.

"It wasn't much of a bite, mostly a mouthful of dirty bear fur and loose skin, but your father's fangs sank just deep enough to give the bear a good nip. He didn't hang on, not he – he'd barely closed his jaws before he pulled away and jumped – right off the side of the bear – back across the clearing. And just in time, it was, for between the nip and the surprise, that bruin reared up and let out a roar that could be heard for a mile. The clearing was as full of howling bear as it was of raindrops, and in a flash of lightning your father saw the bear thrashing about every which way with its great claws. It was howling and shattering branches and gouging great tears in the trees with its talons, just as if it had been stabbed with a spear instead of being nipped in the side.

"Your father was crouching low at the clearing edge, all of a shiver with fright and cold, but he wanted to get in as many licks as he safely could – if you call doing anything in a small clearing with a raging bear 'safe'. A

couple more lighting flashes helped him out, and when the beast was turning it's back, he leapt again.

"This time the bear was more prepared, and felt him land on its back. It turned and twisted with surprising speed, grabbing for your father. But your father was too quick for him – just barely. He didn't even bother to take another nip, but just bounded away as the razor-sharp talons slashed the air where he'd been not a second before. He flew through the air and into a large branch, then fell stunned to the ground.

"Your father lay still for a moment, unable to move even though he could hear the bear charging in his direction. But in that brief time, his ears caught the sound he'd been hoping to hear – the crashing and hollering of the rest of the patrol making their way in his direction. But the sound was yet far off, which meant that he'd have to keep that bear occupied for a bit longer. Shaking his head and scrambling to his feet, he dodged behind a tree just as the bear arrived at where he'd been and started tearing up the turf.

"So began the most dangerous game of tag ever played around Byron, or anywhere in Narnia that we know of. Your father dodged and hid and leapt and nipped, trying to keep the bear occupied to give the patrol time to arrive. The bear roared and charged and struck

about with its great claws until the clearing was carpeted in bark chips and broken branches. It seemed like hours to your poor father, who was literally dancing with death, but in truth it was bare five minutes. The rest of the patrol had heard the bear's first roar and had rushed to the clearing. What took them a bit of time was getting the torches lit in the pouring rain and wind. They finally did, and made ready to charge the clearing with them, but by then it was too late."

"Too late?" gasped the furlings.

"Well", Lord Cutshaw admitted with a twinkle, "too late to get him off easy. Between the cold and the soaking wet and the danger, your father was growing a mite weary. He made a leap that he thought was onto the bear's back, but it was turning as he left the ground. He tried to wrench himself aside, but a flash of lightning betrayed him. One of the beast's great arms swept up and batted him aside like a gnat. A talon caught him right behind his right foreleg, gashing down his ribs. The blow sent him spinning into a tree and he was knocked out cold.

"Fortunately, it was right then that the rest of the patrol came charging in, torches waving. They saw the bear charging to where your father lay limp at the base of the tree, but the flames and the man's spear quickly

distracted it. Only the boar was strong enough to dare face a bear, and he had two flaming torches wedged in the harness across his back. He dashed between the bear and your father's body while the others moved in, waving their torches and howling. The bear made to fight, but the flames were too much for it. It turned tail and ran. The patrol could hear it crashing and howling all the way up the slopes, back the way it had come from. No one got blood revenge on poor Fielder, but there was no shame in that proud night's work.

"When they carried your daddy back to the inn, we were horrified. He was bloody, muddy and matted and looked worse than death. They laid him on the same table that the beagle had died on earlier in the night. Your mother didn't give him care, of course, her being too distraught, but I've never been so proud of Sophie and Buckthorn as I was that night – and Vicar Beaverlee as well, who'd fetched his medicinal herbs. They kept their feelings in check and did their duty, stanching his bleeding, sewing up his wounds and setting his broken shoulder. Even when he started to shudder and his breathing began to rattle they did not give up. They

packed him about with hot stones and put infusions of herbs under his nose and rubbed his legs and back, always calling to him. Your mother stood silent by the table, her head bowed. There was many a word that went overseas to the Emperor that night, I can tell you.

"And it seemed the Good Lord listened. Just as the eastern sky was lightening and the wind and rain were dying down, your father slipped into a deep sleep. Sophie and Buckthorn stepped back and put their arms round each other, and Vicar Beaverlee just put his head down. There was no telling for fevers, but it seemed like your father was past the crisis. He slept like a kit, and I tell you, the rest of us felt the same. Fresh hay was brought and makeshift mats were made up for the patrol. A couple of the goodwives had cooked up a great pot of porridge and we all ate like we'd not eaten in months, then each made for his bed – though a constant watch was kept on brave Bramblewood, and Sophie Badger slept right by the table.

"Your poor father slept for three solid days and fought off a fever, and when he finally awoke he could hardly move for the soreness. He was ravenous hungry and was furious when Sophie wouldn't allow him anything but broth for the first two days. When he finally could eat, the Aspinalls brought in a whole roast chicken

and he devoured every bit. He was a bit astonished at how everyone kept dropping by to look in on him and wish him well – it didn't occur to him that everyone saw him for the hero that he was. When he learned that the Crown was awarding him an Order of the Lion, he was stunned. He honestly couldn't figure out what it was for.

"It was high summer before he was well enough for the ceremony, which was held right here at the Manor. I paraded the Black Diamonds as a Guard of Honor, and the medal was presented by Mage Chios as representative of the King and by Solen the panther, High Commander of the Border Guards. The Order was presented for 'undimmed courage in the face of great peril.'"

"Wow!" interrupted Rowan. "You mean Dad's got an Order of the Lion?"

"Yes indeed. And knowing your father, I bet the medal is stashed in a drawer somewhere. Your father was installed as a member of the Border Guard, and an made a reserve officer. I think he was prouder of that than he was of the Order. So was your mother, though she still has trouble dealing with her bad memories. Mostly she won't talk about it.

"It took a full year of hard work and courage before your father was able to move to his satisfaction,

and to this day his arm still twinges him. He does his week with the Border Guard every six months, and as you know occasionally pitches in if a district is short a corporal. He still bowls, and though his scores aren't what they once were, he doesn't seem to lose any more than he used to. Not that I'm saying his friends would cheat to lose, but maybe when they see his stiff arm, and remembers how he got it, their vision blurs just a little..."

"Oh I get you," Westie said.

The otter sighed. "Did I tell you that I could see into the future?"

"Really?"

"Yes, really." He hugged the kits and kissed each one. "It's a bright future. A worthwhile sequel to a glorious past. Isn't that right, Bramble?"

"I'm Westie, milord."

"Yes, and also Bramble and Thorny and Rufus, and a hundred generations back and a hundred generations hence. Not a bad legacy, is it? Each of us are keepers of the flame for our day. Keep it lit, pass it on, Lord bless you, and thanks much."

"For what?" Westie asked.

"For listening to an old otter who needed to be heard. And for the cider and the hat."

Bramblewood stepped in front of them. "Boys, boys! Are you pestering His Lordship?"

"Sometimes an old otter needs pestering," Lord Cutshaw said with a smile. "So Bramble, are you up for a couple of ends?"

"Are you sure you're up to lawn bowling, milord?"

"Hah!" the otter said, waving his cane. "I'll stake five crescents on beating you up, down and sideways! Am I up to it, indeed! Stow that bilge, you fond mook!"

"A mook am I, you old breezer?"

"Who are you calling a breezer, you mook! Make that ten crescents and a Jack Flat!" He held out his cane like a sword, laughing. "Into the fray, lads, and a pox on all deserters!" The friends made their way down to the bowling green with the furlings in tow. It was by all accounts a very successful regatta.

THE END