

Epictetus

It was already dark when they finally got back to the hall. Lunch, of course, was never in question. No one would have dared to suggest stopping for a bite to Behavior Modifier Gourmand. So supper had been the hope of every stomach. They just missed it. That meant going to bed hungry, the term mid-night snack being unknown in Superbia.

Standing by his perfectly-made bed, Trevor knew his prospects were very bad. He tried not to look in Meno's direction, but it seemed like his eyes were drawn to the bully unwillingly. It was as if they were made of steel and Meno was some big pimple-headed magnet. When they fell on the neckless one, they found Meno staring right back at him. The mound of meat mouthed—*You're dead!*

Trevor began shaking and his knees got weak. He thought about trying to put up a fight, but that only made him feel worse. Then he bumped his big toe on a bed leg and that sent him hopping.

Everyone seemed to know what was coming and kept their distance. Everyone except for Maggie, that is. She was on a quest for adult intervention. Unfortunately, because of her inexperience with the Guardians of Hall 37, she approached a particularly fussy old woman, known behind the back as *Old Crusty*. Trevor couldn't hear what Maggie said, but as she spoke, she grew animated—gesturing at Trevor, then at Meno. Old Crusty simply pursed her lips and spun away without a word, leaving Maggie to

sit down in a huff with a pout on her face.

The lights were being put out one by one now, and the hall was growing darker little by little. After the last one went out, the remaining Guardians prepared to leave by the light of an open doorway. Just before they did, a large figure stepped in and without a word, took a seat in a corner. The door closed, and the last bit of light was snuffed out. A whirling noise followed, and the faint blue of an electric torch came on. The face of Epictetus shone against it.

A rustle came from behind Trevor. Then that light went out too. He felt burlap against his face, and heavy bodies wrestled him to the floor. It was hard to breathe, and he struggled with all his might, but his attackers just laughed.

That's when the unmistakable voice of Meno pronounced his doom through the covers, "Time for your lesson, punk."

His education began with fists, soon advanced to kicks, then graduated to the blunt edge of a bed slat across his back. Maggie screamed.

A booming voice thundered over the others, and bodies began flying off him. Trevor fell over onto his back, and the blanket fell away from his face. Panting for air, he looked up. By a sputtering torch-light, he saw Meno dangling from what seemed to be a post. After a moment a fog cleared from his mind, and the post became a man. It was Epictetus.

He was taller than he'd looked at a distance and what's more, a kind of electric energy seemed to sizzle from him. A deep, white scar ran from his grey-haired scalp under his eye patch to a bristling bearded jaw. A single sinewy vein-crossed arm held a pop-eyed Meno aloft like wet laundry.

With a gentleness that shouldn't have gone with that much strength, he set the human pimple down. "Child, there will be no more fighting tonight. Go back to bed," he said calmly.

When he realized the slave wasn't going to hurt him, Meno turned back on Trevor and glowered.

"Don't think this is over, punk. No slave will be there to save you the next time."

To the kids that had crowded in all around, Epictetus turned and said, "All right, children. The excitement's over. Now all of you, off to bed."

Everyone stood with mouths wide open, looking up at the enormous slave. After a moment, Epictetus said, "Shoo!" That sent them scurrying away as fast as they could go.

Maggie threw herself down on the floor next to Trevor and hugged him tightly. "Are you all right?"

He winced and let out a groan.

"Oh, I'm *sorry*," she said pulling back. "I hate those jerks. Why are they so mean?"

"Mean is easy to understand; it's kindness that has always puzzled me," said a deep voice overhead.

They looked up to see the long face of Epictetus looking down at them.

The slave bent down and placed a large, thick hand on Trevor's head. With the other, he held the electric torch up. After a moment he said, "Come. I want to take a better look at you."

They followed him to the corner where he kept his things.

There was a stool there and a writing desk with a few quill pens and an old ink bottle. Over these, there was a stand for the electric torch. The slave set the torch down and directed Trevor and Maggie to a bench.

Trevor had often wished for a better look at the torch, and now he had it. It wasn't like anything he'd ever seen in Superbia before. The crank he'd heard wound so often in the night was shaped like a twisting dragon, and the casing for the lantern resembled a mountainside. He saw now that the light came out

of a hole fashioned to look like the mouth of a cave.

He was about to ask if he could hold it, but a surge of pain passed through him and he nearly fell over.

“Whoa, now,” said the old man, steadying him. “I have something here that I think will help that.”

The slave pulled a small, clay jar from a bag beneath the desk and removed a lid. A wonderful aroma wafted out of it.

“Take off that shirt and rub a little of this wherever you feel bruised or hurt. Use it sparingly though,” he said with a firm eye. With that he stood and walked out into the darkened hall.

“Go ahead, you can trust Epictetus,” Maggie said.

Trevor dipped a finger into the ointment. At first it was cool, but after rubbing it between his fingers for a moment, a warm sensation began in his hand and ran up his arm. It seemed to know where he hurt and went there and bathed his wounds in a strange, but wonderful wholesomeness. He wiggled out of his shirt as fast as he could and dipped his finger back into the jar.

“Not so much!” Maggie said. “Save some for others!”

Embarrassed, he scraped some off then starting rubbing it onto his arms and chest. Maggie helped him reach his back.

“What is this stuff?” he asked.

“It’s called *basme*. Isn’t it great? Smells good, too, doesn’t it?”

“It’s the best stuff I’ve ever felt.” His whole body seemed to be wrapped in a warm embrace.

Just then Epictetus emerged from the dark.

“I see you’ve discovered the joys of *basme*,” he said with a smile. “I think you’ve had enough. *Basme* doesn’t like greedy folks.”

Trevor’s heart sank as he placed the jar into the slave’s oversized hand.

Epictetus pulled up a stool, put a hand to his beard and stroked it thoughtfully. He looked meaningfully at Maggie.

“All the children seem to be asleep already. You’d think they’d

all be abuzz with excitement.”

“Everyone’s tired from therapy today,” she said.

“Therapy, eh? Well, that explains it. Good, no one will hear if we keep our voices low. This is as close to a private moment as we are likely to find in this part of Superbia. Well, Trevor—”

Trevor started at the sound of his name.

“Yes, I know your name,” he said with a bemused expression. “Maggie’s told me a lot about you. We’ve wondered when you and I should meet. I suppose Meno’s done us a service without knowing it. That’s often the way of things. Well, we have much to share, but you first. I can see you’ve had an eventful day!”

Maybe it was the ointment; maybe it was the cocoon of light made by the marvelous electric torch; maybe it was the manly benevolence of the old slave. Whatever the reason, Trevor felt no hesitation. He told him everything—not just the bare events of the day, but everything he really cared about—even about home—especially about home. He surprised himself with the flow of words that came out. But Epictetus didn’t look surprised. He didn’t even try to stop him like everybody else. Before long the dam burst and the tears were flowing.

“So, you think all your troubles are due to these dreams you keep having, eh?” Epictetus said, once Trevor had gotten a hold of himself.

“Yeah, they’re driving me crazy!” Trevor said, wiping tears away with a sleeve.

“And you see a bogeyman sometimes in these dreams?”

“Uh, yeah, sometimes,” Trevor said, sounding embarrassed. “But, I know bogeymen are our friends—really I do.”

“They are?” said Epictetus, with an eyebrow raised over his good eye. “And how do you know that?”

“The Guardians—they always say so.”

“And what do the Guardians say about your dreams?”

“They say they’re bad.”

“So, it sounds like you have a choice to make, Trevor. Either you must believe the Guardians or you must believe your dreams.”

Trevor sat in stunned silence. To hear his problem put so simply and directly made him nervous. “But, which should I believe?” he said. “I mean, how can I know which is right?”

“Goodness knows, Trevor.”

Trevor looked at the old man, blankly. “How does that help?”

“Listen closely to what I’m saying, Trevor. Goodness knows. An honest boy will know the truth when he sees it.”

Trevor looked over at Maggie. She was on the edge of her seat, and there was a strange, eager look in her eyes. She nodded slightly to him. He looked back at Epictetus. The enormous slave was leaning back against the wall and looking at him with a blank expression that provided no encouragement at all. He thought about it. Which did he believe? Which was true—his dreams or what the Guardians told him?

“I think,” he said slowly. “I think my dreams are true.” There. He’d said it. It was what he’d always believed, but at last he’d told somebody.

Maggie was bouncing on the edge of her seat now, and a big smile had spread across her face. Epictetus leaned over and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Congratulations, Trevor.”

“I knew you could do it!” Maggie said.

“What are you talking about?” Trevor said.

“That is precisely what I intend to explain, Trevor.” The slave cleared his throat. “It’s these dreams of yours. That is what we are talking about. They are true. It is my considered opinion that these dreams are not dreams at all. In fact, I’m almost completely sure they are memories.”

“Memories?” The implications slowly dawned on Trevor. “You mean, I really do have a home and parents and all of it?”

“Now, now, slow down,” Epictetus said, with a hint of a smile. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. The universe is a mighty big place and it’s always changing. You *had* a home. That much seems plain to me. There’s just one more thing I must know. Tell me—this bogeyman in your dreams—how big is he?”

Trevor shuddered and closed his eyes. “Not big. Not much bigger than I am.”

“Good. Now, was there anything odd about this bogeyman, some distinctive feature?”

“Uh, yeah—he had a big nose. Huge even.”

“Well, that settles it,” Epictetus said, looking over to Maggie again. Maggie just nodded.

“The bogey was a Snatcher,” she whispered, looking a little scared.

Trevor for his part was just puzzled.

“You were stolen, child,” said the slave.

“Stolen?”

“Not just you, Trevor.” Epictetus looked up and swept his hand over the room. “All of these children were stolen. Trevor, Superbia is a terrible place, but it is even worse than you can imagine. I could say more, but I don’t want to frighten you.”

It was utterly fantastic. But, for some reason, Trevor didn’t doubt it. He knew it was true. Somehow, deep down, he’d always known. His mind was racing now; he had so many questions he wanted to ask. He started with the one he most wanted an answer to, the biggest of them all.

“Epictetus, can I get home?”

The old man shifted in his seat and glanced at Maggie.

“Anything’s possible, I suppose, but I’m sorry to disappoint you: it’s most unlikely. First of all, there’s the problem of getting

you out of Superbia. But, even if we got you out, where would you go? Do you know where your home is?"

Trevor had assumed the slave would know. "No," he admitted.

"I'm sorry, neither do I. Your home may not be in this world. I'd say it's probably not. The cravings of the bogeys exhausted our world's capacity long ago. Only a few of these children are locals. I assume you don't even know the name of the world you come from."

Trevor shook his head.

"No matter, even if you did, I have no clue how to get you back. I'm afraid records aren't kept as well as they once were."

Trevor's shoulders slumped and his eyes fell.

"Now, now, where there's life, there's hope, as they say. You saw a hole in the clouds. That's something. I'd say it's a good omen—a very good omen."

"Epictetus, how do you know so much? You're only a slave." Trevor immediately felt foolish for saying it, but the slave simply smiled.

"True, I am a slave. By law, I am the property of Superbia. But I am not only a slave," he finished with a laugh.

"Then, who are you?"

"That's a fair question. Unfortunately I can't answer it now. For the time being, the less you know the better. After all, the less you know, the less the bogeys will be able to get out of you. For although I can't see the future, I can see the past. I have seen others like you who have gained the attention of the authorities. It's always the same. Soon they will come for you, perhaps even tonight."

"Why?" Trevor said, with fear creeping into his voice. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing. You've done something right; that's the problem," the old man said with a grim chuckle. "Something's stirring in

you that threatens everything Superbia stands for. It is a germ of truth. Once caught, it spreads; first in your own mind and eventually to others. Superbia is false all the way down to the bottom, and a little truth—even from a boy—could bring it all down. That’s why they must come for you.”

Trevor didn’t understand fully, but he had seen it—kids going missing. You wake up one morning, and someone’s gone, and everyone pretends not to notice. The first he could remember was Janet. She was the best. When he was little, she’d protected him from bullies and told the best stories after lights out. Then one morning, she was gone. He’d cried himself to sleep for days after that.

Epictetus leaned forward and placed a hand on Trevor’s shoulder again. “Although I can’t protect you from them, I can at least arm you with a few things,” he said.

He reached for the jar of basme, then he produced a small pouch with a drawstring from his bag and poured a little of the ointment into it. Then he pulled the drawstring and handed it to Trevor.

“Here, take this with you.”

Trevor hefted it and turned it over. It was wonderful, like everything else the slave seemed to have. It had a little lip for pouring, and the drawstring was long enough to put around his neck. Embroidered onto the pouch was a tree of some sort.

“Basme can do more than heal. Not even I know all of its powers, and I know more than most. Use it sparingly, though. There’s a rule for everything, and the rule of basme is this: it borrows from tomorrow to meet the needs of today.” He paused. “How do you feel?”

Trevor thought about it and realized he didn’t feel any pain. Instead, he felt warm and comfortable.

“I feel good—better than I can ever remember feeling.”

“Good. But basme hasn’t given you anything that you don’t have a right to. It’s only taken what was to be yours and given it to you now. It’s taken tomorrow’s healing virtue to heal you today. You’ve paid a price though. Your ability to heal yourself will be weak for a while.”

“How long?”

“I’m not certain. It depends on several things: how much you used, the extent of your injuries, how much healing virtue you’ve been given, but most importantly—how long you have to live.”

“How long I have to live?”

“Naturally. If there is no tomorrow for you, then basme can’t help you. Indeed, it will only speed your demise. But, you’re young; basme can be fatal for an old man like me.”

“Now you know why you should only use a little, and only when you really need it,” warned Maggie.

“Nevertheless, it is wonderful,” said Epictetus. “It can do more than heal. If you’re brave, it will make you braver. If you’re wise, it will make you wiser. But, it can’t give you anything you’ve no right to. It can’t make cowards brave or the foolish wise. It always knows what you need, and it draws upon tomorrow’s virtue to meet it. Remember though, weakness follows each use.”

“Thanks,” Trevor said with a gulp, as he put the drawstring around his neck and hid the pouch beneath his shirt.

“Now, I’ll dare to tell you two more things. Listen closely. Soon you will be taken where you do not want to go. Someplace awful. But, take heart, not everyone who dwells there is to be feared. One will come to your aid. Just keep your ears open and listen for a small voice in an out of the way place.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have spoken as plainly as I can. The Behavior Modifiers have ways of uncovering secrets and you’ve not been tested.

How long do you think you could resist the bogeys?"

Trevor didn't know and said so.

"Good," said Epictetus, with a quick glance to Maggie. "He is honest."

"From the look of you, you're bright, too," he said looking back at Trevor. "My meaning will be plain when you need to understand it.

"Lastly," he continued, "when the time comes for you to flee, make for Olton and look for this sign." He reached once more into his bag and pulled out an enormous book. It was old and leather-bound, with gilding on the pages. Right in the center of the cover, there was a round face with tongues of fire radiating from it.

"Those who live beneath this sign will help you."

"What do you mean when you say flee?"

"I mean run. For flight is your only hope. But do not fear! Those who listen to the small voice always make it to safety."

"How will I recognize the voice?"

"You just will."

"But—"

"Enough. I have told you as much as I dare. It is late, and you will need your strength for what awaits you. Maggie, take him back to his bed."

The slave's authority was impossible to resist. Maggie stood, and Trevor got up and reluctantly followed her.

When he lay down, a sudden weariness came over him. The last thing he saw before falling asleep was Maggie and Epictetus talking quietly in the light of the electric torch.

Maggie looked toward him. "I think he's asleep already."

"He's had an eventful day and basme is strong in him. His sleep will be dreamless tonight."

Maggie kept her eye on him.

Epictetus read her mind, "Don't fret over him, my child. What will be, will be."

"I just wish there were more we could do to help him."

"I know; I wish it too. Remember, he's not the only child to save. We must remain hidden and help as many as we can. Besides, I have a good feeling about this one. I think I see something in him," the old man said, rubbing his good eye.

Maggie smiled. "Will he make it?"

"Who can say? For some reason, I believe we will meet him again. Sometimes belief is better than knowledge. Now, off to bed, Granddaughter."

"Oh, okay. Good night, Grandfather."