



RAINIER'S LEGACY

CHAD CORRIE

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DARK HORSE BOOKS

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RAINIER'S LEGACY

1

The sun was sinking into a reddish-orange bank of clouds as the *Phoenix* made its way through the Yoan Ocean. The frigate had recently left the port kingdom of Elandor headed for the colder waters of the Northlands. Seasoned in waves far to the west, it flew the flag of Breanna from its mainmast. Few this far east had seen the white flag with a medium-sized powder-blue stripe across its center. And certainly no one in the Northlands knew the gnomish nation's standard.

The *Phoenix* had left Elandor in fine weather three days earlier. It was spring in the Midlands. The fresh winds were just gaining strength, aiding the vessel's voyage and cheering the crew. The captain and his men were mostly traders and adventurers who offered themselves as transport and guide for various clients, taking a share of the profits in addition to an initial fee.

The crew itself was a ragtag bunch, like most men of the sea. A majority were tall and tawny Telborians—with sharp green or blue eyes—whose leathery skin had been lashed by sun and cured in salty surf. Mixed among them were a varied host of dark-eyed, dusky-skinned Celetors; a few Patrious with pale gray skin and black or silver hair; and even a handful of Napowese, whose black hair accented their olive complexions.

All were loyal to their captain, a powerfully built Celetor named Hirim Koofehi. A skilled and accomplished sailor, he'd decided to embark on this

recent venture after learning of its potential gain. Just what this venture involved, though, Hirim hadn't revealed to his men. Only his lieutenants had any inkling but kept it to themselves. For now, the crew contented themselves with scrubbing the deck, maintaining the order of the ship, and dreaming of the rich reward awaiting them.

While they worked, Hirim and his guests rested in his cabin at the vessel's stern. The cabin actually comprised more than one room. Hirim wanted a larger area than was commonly found on such vessels and had the space custom fitted for his needs. None saw the spacious personal quarters but himself. The other room off his private area, however, served as a common room. Though smaller, it wasn't as cramped as one might expect, allowing comfortable seating for five people around an old circular oak table nailed to the floor in the room's center. Currently, one of those seats remained vacant.

"I see you're courting Saredhel now, eh?" Hirim's strong jaw clenched a thick cigar. The pungent smoke curled above his shaved head, adding to the hazy halo encircling the other men. Angular eyebrows outlined his dark brown eyes, which flirted with mirth. Dressed like many Celetors of the West, he was the most colorfully garbed at the table. Billowing red breeches, leather boots, and a large khaki shirt opened just low enough to outline the dark valley between the twin mounds of muscle on his large, hairless chest.

"One does the best one can." The gnome, Josiah Brookshire, fanned his playing cards wide before him. His deep blue eyes complemented a rather congenial face. He, like the others gathered here, spoke Telboros.

He wore a white shirt under a modest coat that was the same brown as his pants. His most distinguished piece of attire was a leather vest whose breast pocket housed an elegant ivory pipe. Josiah was slender but tall for his people, rising above a human's belt by a head. His height granted him just enough clearance at the table to function as his taller companions did.

"Well, read them and weep, losers," said a scruffy-looking halfling named Charles de Frassel. His wide grin highlighted pointed ears. "A full court."

He thrust the cards onto the table. They revealed colorful portrayals of a Telborian king, queen, prince, princess, and priest. Their suits weren't matching, however, revealing all five in the deck: clashing silver swords, a yellow circular shield, a green oak leaf, a bright red heart, and a soft blue four-pointed star.

"Looks like I win." Charles' bloodshot eyes lusted after the small pile of copper coins in the table's center. His combed-over wisps of auburn hair failed to hide the pale moon rising behind them. Dark stubble peppered his cheeks and neck, muddying his otherwise clear features.

He wore a rather simple outfit. Simple, that is, for a halfling: blue silken breeches with white stockings and black shoes. His white shirt was left slightly undone, showing off his hairy chest before stretching over a protruding belly. A wide black belt kept both it and his pants in place.

"Not so fast, Charles," said Corwyn Danther, a Telborian bard. Though tall for a halfling, Charles didn't rise above four feet, making Corwyn a giant in comparison.

"Got something on me then, do you?"

Corwyn was young and clean faced with reddish-brown hair and blue-green eyes, which added to his natural good looks. Unlike Charles, he wore more subdued attire: a common pair of pants and a cream linen shirt, a coin purse dangling from his side.

"This ought to be good," said Hirim, stroking his long mustache. "What you got, Corwyn?"

"The court of leaves," he replied, laying his cards on the table.

"Let me see that!" Charles hopped on his chair and leaned forward. All five cards bore the green leaf: a king, queen, prince, priest, and jester.

"Hmph." The halfling slumped back into his seat. "Jester's wild. Why does it have to be jester's wild?" Charles hadn't won a hand since they'd started playing after lunch. This wasn't that uncommon. During the infrequent games they'd adopted shortly after leaving Breanna, he rarely broke even and usually lost.

"So now I'm out of coin." Charles flung his cards into the center of the table. The others did the same. He tried not to look too longingly at

Corwyn moving the copper mound into his own modest pile. Even with this newest addition it remained about even with Hirim's and Josiah's.

"I'm surprised you've kept what you had so long, playing as poorly as you have since coming onboard," said Hirim.

"Just a run of sour luck is all. I'll be back on top and you'll be my debtor soon enough. I just need one hand to win it all back . . . and something valuable to get me that one more hand . . ." Charles' eyes darted back and forth between the players.

"You still got that map, de Frassel." Hirim poked at another of the halfling's sore points.

"And it's *staying* in my possession, thank you very much." Charles removed a slender cigarette from a rectangular silver carrying case in his shirt's side pocket. He tapped the end of the cigarette on the table and put it between his lips. Gaining a spark from the dying embers of his previous cigarette, still smoldering in an ash-and-butt-filled tin beside him, he took a lengthy drag.

"Ah." He exhaled a thin jet of creamy smoke. "Halfling-cut tobacco, the best there is."

"One would disagree," Josiah submitted between pipe-clenching teeth. The distinct fruit-and-nut aroma of his own smoke wafted past Corwyn, who, for his part, sought to avoid the mingling clouds. He was thankful at least one of the windows in Hirim's quarters was open. Yet even with this small boon, bluish-white smoke hung above their heads, strangling the copper oil lamp swaying over the center of the table before snaking out the open glass portal at the room's rear.

"So *now* what are we supposed to do for entertainment?" Charles took another slow drag. "If I can't play cards, how am I supposed to endure this godsforsaken boredom?"

"A troubling thought when you consider we have quite a long trip ahead of us, if your map is to be believed," said Josiah.

"You certainly believed it enough to take on this venture." Charles chased down his words with a swig of wine from an open bottle beside his chair. Finding the bottle empty after his assuagement, he returned it to the floor, crestfallen.

“Hey now! Try to ration yourself,” Hirim scolded while shuffling the cards for another game. “I don’t have enough booze to keep you going, if that’s what you’re seeking. We already had to stock up in Elandor after you almost drank us dry.”

“Then you should have bought more.”

“I want to make a profit on this voyage.” Hirim kept his gaze leveled against Charles. “Having you drinking all of it isn’t going to sit well with me or the rest of the crew.”

“Indeed, Mr. de Frassel, it would seem your indulgence has been quite excessive since we left Breanna.” Josiah adjusted some locks of his white hair; the longer strands, though thinning, had fallen down his crown as the boat rocked back and forth. They were touching the neatly trimmed but still thick and bushy sideburns descending from his jawline.

“Well, I have to do something around here to keep myself entertained if I can’t gamble anymore.”

“Why not help the crew?” Hirim asked sardonically.

“Pah,” Charles snorted. “Work like a dog with common men? You have got to be *joking*. Now, if your superstitious sailors allowed me to take aboard *all* my cargo, I might not be so apt to complain.”

“Mr. de Frassel,” Josiah began in a paternal tone, “you know full well Coggsbury, Elliott, Chesterfield, and Company is a moral enterprise, and your entourage of fallen persons of the weaker sex is not something with which Coggsbury, Elliott, Chesterfield, and Company wishes to be associated.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Charles said, using his free hand like a mocking puppet, opening and closing its mouth in time with the halfling’s words. This only raised Josiah’s dander.

“Mr. de Frassel, I trust you are aware I am the representative of the company whose bountiful investment in your offer has made this whole venture possible in the first place. I will not be mocked. You were aware of the terms and conditions laid out in your contract, which, I might add, you signed quite readily. So I would ask that you conduct yourself with a modest amount of tact and decorum whilst we are on this journey.”

“Or what?” Charles smirked.

“Or I can find some creative places for you to spend the next few weeks.” Hirim’s reply brought some sobriety into the halfling’s face.

“Fine.” Charles extinguished his cigarette on the small tin dish. “Can anyone lend me some coin for another game?”

Hirim’s eyebrow rose. “You don’t know when to quit, do you? Why should anyone lend you anything?”

“Well, I would have won more if we had that bookworm in here.”

“So you think.” Hirim cut the cards one last time.

“Hey.” Charles jabbed a stubby finger at the Celetor. “It took him forever to get over being seasick. Shows he has a weak constitution.”

“And that would make him a bad card player? Seems to me you said similar things about Corwyn here before he came onboard, and now he’s mopping the deck with you.”

“Just a run of good luck,” Charles said dryly. “Which can and will change if I can get another chance here. So is anyone going to loan me some coin or not?”

“Fine,” said Hirim. “I’ll loan you some coppers if it’ll shut you up for a while.” He started dealing out the cards.

“Thank you.” Charles gave a slight nod, though there was little gratitude in the words.

“I’ll win it back soon enough anyway,” Hirim added with a smirk. “Oh, and jester’s wild.”



Sometime later Corwyn sought fresher air while checking in with a certain Patrician scholar whose quarters were in the ship’s lower deck. Mathias had been on board since the ship’s departure from Rexatious, the first place they’d stopped after leaving Breanna. He’d been hired by the gnomes for his insight into old languages and grasp of ancient history. Because of this, he’d been given the task of deciphering Charles’ map. And that map, Corwyn learned, had something of a history.

Charles had approached some gnomes on Breanna about a year ago with a moneymaking idea. The halfling was convinced the old document

led to some kind of treasure and tried enticing the gnomes with the promise of great wealth. The gnomes, though, were a practical bunch, and therefore hired a skilled translator and an expert document crafter—Mathias—to guarantee the map’s authenticity. It *was* coming from a halfling, after all.

Once the map had been authenticated, Mathias made a discovery that piqued the gnomes’ interest. A few lines of text near the image of an island in the Northlands, which none knew existed before, were translated to read: “The secret of eternal life here.” Naturally, the gnomes were more than willing to fund and assemble an exploratory venture with such documentation as motivation. After all, if they could corner the market on a product granting eternal youth and life, or at the very least keep people from getting any older, they’d be rich indeed. So Coggsbury, Elliott, Chesterfield, and Company was formed—named after the three largest contributors. Following that, the *Phoenix* made its way from its port in Rexatoius to Talatheal—and Corwyn.

“Mathias?” Corwyn knocked on the door to the elf’s room.

“Come in, Corwyn.” Mathias Onuis watched Corwyn enter. “I thought you were with the others, playing cards.” The elf sat amid a clutter of chests, scrolls, and stacks of books. He wore a rather common gray robe. It was darker than his pale gray skin but complemented his high-strapped black leather sandals, pale sapphire eyes, and short black hair quite nicely.

“I got tired of winning, and Charles’ whining wasn’t helping any.” It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark interior. There were no windows below deck, and the only light came from the dirty glow of an oil lamp hanging from a beam and the candle resting on Mathias’ desk.

“Halflings . . .” Mathias mused dryly.

“I needed some fresh air, too. Between those three chimneys, I think I know what a smoked pig feels like,” he continued, moving closer to the scholar, stepping over the precarious literary panorama in the process.

Corwyn had been approached by Waylan Coggsbury, one of his supporters, promoters, and organizers, to chronicle this venture. Though the company hired Josiah Brookshire to represent their interests, Coggsbury

didn't see any harm in safeguarding the safeguard, obviously appreciating a story or song as well to further capitalize on the expedition. That, and he didn't think Waylan liked leaving Charles alone with the map.

The halfling's bold demand to share in the profits by being made a junior partner was bad enough—hence the “and Company” appended to Coggsbury, Elliott, and Chesterfield—but his insistence on being the lone keeper of the map and remaining the sole owner was an annoying thorn in the gnomes' side. Corwyn didn't mind. The whole thing sounded interesting enough without any outside prodding. So far it hadn't been too bad, though he'd have some time to change his mind before they arrived in the Northlands.

“So, have you made any progress?” He came up alongside the elf, glancing over his shoulder at what he was reading. “I wish I could be more help, but what I know about the Northlands would make a pretty short scroll.”

“You more than make up for it by keeping an eye on things, I'm sure.”

“I'm just helping him out, not spying for him, Mathias,” Corwyn explained. “Waylan Coggsbury can certainly take care of himself.”

“No need to convince me of that. He was the one who signed my agreement for payment. I don't think he'll be out on the street begging anytime soon.”

Of all those he'd gotten to know since coming aboard, Mathias was still unfamiliar to him. The elf didn't often leave his quarters and fraternize with the others. His days were filled with reading and transcribing, recording what he'd read, and then trying to pull out meaning from it.

This, of course, was all while keeping his stomach under control. He'd only recently been able to overcome seemingly unending bouts of seasickness. A scholar and scribe by trade, he didn't have much of a grasp of social skills, nor did he often put himself into places where such talents were needed. Even so, Corwyn liked their visits. He figured they did them both good, and he enjoyed learning more in the process.

“If you're looking for any fresh insight, I don't know much more than I did when last we spoke.” Mathias took fresh interest in his book. “I've been able to find a few faint leads here and there, but nothing has panned out yet.”

In their previous conversations, Corwyn discovered just how much progress Mathias had made since leaving Rexatoi. During the journey, he'd translated more of the ancient text on the map as well as having compiled an interesting background on the island itself. Though it was cobbled from myths and legends, the emerging tale remained intriguing and insightful.

Apparently, Nordicans had avoided the island for centuries. Only in the last three hundred years had a pair of adventuresome souls made their way to the shores of Troll Island, another locale not commonly frequented. This is where they had found Charles' map.

It had been buried in the skeleton of an ancient vessel long since beached, picked clean, and half-submerged in the soupy sand like the remains of some decayed whale. These same explorers had lost the map later in a game of cards with some fellow seamen, who then took it south from there. And so it traveled about for some three hundred years. That is, if what Charles said was entirely true. Though Charles declared he'd won it in a game of cards, the gnomes hadn't been able to verify how he came to possess it or even its supposed origins.

But however it came into Charles' possession, the map proved authentic enough. Mathias had been convinced of that much at least. The worn vellum displayed an island farther north than Troll Island, making this unknown landmass the northernmost of all the Northlands. Near this unnamed isle was the text which so excited the gnomes. The only problem was that at first, the island hadn't seemed to exist.

Mathias had been able to track down some Nordic legends supporting the claim of an icy isle off the shores of Troll Island. He'd informed Corwyn that he'd come by this information through a handful of sources, many located in the Great Library of Rexatoi. Through some of these sources he'd also found the name of their destination: Sigmundson's Isle—or, in some renderings, Rainier's Island.

The last time he spoke with Corwyn, he'd confirmed the island was small and almost totally covered with ice. None of his books and scrolls spoke of any Nordic sailors going on or near it. Once they sighted it, it seemed they'd always sail around, for some reason steering well clear of its frosty shores.

"The island is still real, though, right?" he asked.

"Oh yes. The island is certainly real."

"Good." Corwyn carefully took a few steps back from Mathias' squat desk. Elsewhere in the room was a bed Mathias uncovered each night where he could rest his eyes and dream about finding additional answers. "I'd hate to be on some wild-goose chase or lost somewhere in the middle of the Northlands."

"That remains to be seen," said Mathias, turning another page. "The island may be real, but I can't vouch for any of the other things we're seeking. It still seems more fantasy than reality."

"I thought followers of Dradin believed anything they recorded?" He hadn't yet met any Dradinite or scholar who believed what he read or recorded was entirely false. Even myths were seen by sages and priests of Dradin as holding some kernel of truth or as being true events that had become misunderstood over time.

"Most do, but I have a hard time finding any truth in what we're searching for," Mathias confessed. "Even if there is an island and people lived there at one time, I doubt we'll discover what your investor friends are seeking."

"Why not?"

The question pulled Mathias away from his reading. "Because I believe we romanticize history too much and that over the years people have made a history of their own liking. Now, to be fair"—his tone became very respectful—"Dradin and his priests have done a very good job at sifting through false history and true tales. The Great Library of Rexatious has been very helpful, too, with keeping an accurate record, but what we're dealing with here are fragmented tales and dusty myths and legends."

"Legends with enough conviction behind them to pull together the investors for this venture and get you hired," Corwyn countered. "And you just said you believed our destination was real enough."

"Yes, the destination, but not necessarily the object we're hoping to find. Think about it logically for a moment. We're talking about the secret for eternal youth being hidden on some frozen island. Don't you think it sounds a bit far fetched?"

“It might seem odd and perhaps unreal,” he conceded, “but what could it *really* be? *That’s* what a true follower of Dradin would ask.”

“Would they now?”

“What if it really *is* something that helps restore youth?”

“Then why has no one gone after it before us?”

“Because *they* didn’t know where to look, and *we* do.”

“You have the makings of a good story.” The elf returned to his work. “But I’ll believe it when I see it. *If* I see it.”

“Well, I don’t want to give up hope just yet,” said Corwyn, surveying the mass of materials covering most of the floor. “I think you have enough to head us in the right direction. I just hope we’re able to get there without getting lost.”

“We won’t as long as Hirim can keep to the course the map conveys.”

“Great.” Corwyn backed up, meandering through the vellum valleys and hardbound mountains with graceful strides. “Say, it’s bound to be dinnertime soon. You want to get out and have some food on deck?”

“Thank you, but no, I have to keep at this.” Mathias kept his focus on his book. “The firmer the factual footing I can create, the better it will be for all of us.”

Corwyn managed to get back to the door without disturbing the contents of the room. He turned around once the door itself was in hand, using it to steady himself as the vessel shuddered. He’d almost gotten his sea legs, but every so often found himself needing a sudden refresher. “You’ve been in here since I’ve been on board. Stay any longer, and you’ll start sprouting roots.”

“I’m fine, *really*.” Mathias didn’t look up from his book. “I was hired to do a job, and I intend to see it through to the end.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any help? I can come back later and try narrowing the search. Maybe I could clear up some things with what I *do* know.”

“That’s okay. It’s easier having just one person in here at a time,” he replied, motioning around the cramped chambers for emphasis. “Besides, I work better alone.”

“Okay, let me know if you change your mind.” Corwyn closed the door behind him.



The next night Hirim's guests were invited to a meal celebrating the commencement of the second part of their voyage. It was a simple affair, with fresher food than they'd be eating for the rest of the trip, and a welcome respite before the monotony of life at sea returned. The celebration took place in the room off the captain's private residence, which allowed comfortable seating for all Hirim's guests.

The spread was plain but favorable, with wooden bowls of steaming-hot stew set before the four diners and a fifth seat still awaiting its occupant. Some loaves of bread were also in the center of the table—the freshest among the batch they'd acquired from Elandor.

"I say we start without him." Charles stared at his bowl with eager eyes, careful to keep any stray ashes from his cigarette away from it.

"Give him just a little more time," Corwyn advised. "I'm sure he'll show." He again found himself contending with the incessant smoking of his dinner companions. But he was confident he could manage for a short while, given tonight both windows in the room were open.

There was enough of a breeze to allow some fresh breaths now and again within the growing haze. All of them were seated around the table save Mathias. The food had been served almost a quarter hour before, and the courtesy of waiting for their missing guest was wearing thin.

"I do not think we should wait forever, though, Mr. Danther." Josiah did his best to look relaxed and unaffected, but Corwyn knew he was as hungry as the rest of them. With provisions rationed on journeys like this, the mind often invested more time meditating upon food and its consumption or the lack thereof. Josiah consoled himself with his pipe, slowly puffing away.

"I'm sure he's just—"

Mathias' entrance interrupted the conversation.

"*Finally.*" Charles watched the scribe make his way to the open high-backed chair beside Corwyn. "You forget the way up here?"

"I just had a few last-moment things to attend to." Mathias took his seat.

"Now that we're all here," said Hirim, picking up a clay jug resting beside him, "I think it's time we had a toast to set this evening off right and invite the continued good graces of Perlosa on the rest of our journey." He gently

placed the jug down on the table, pulled the cork, and grinned. “A fine vintage of port I picked up when I first bought this ship.” He poured a small amount into his wooden mug. “I’ve kept it with me to savor now and then. I thought it fitting we share some tonight, since this is the farthest the *Phoenix* has ever sailed.”

Charles’ eyes lit up. “Now you’re talking.”

“To *savor*.” Hirim hammered the point home. “Not to drink bone dry.” He rose and poured a small portion into each diner’s mug. When he’d finished, he recorked the jug, placed it back down beside him, and took his seat.

“A toast then.” Hirim raised his mug. “To fair seas and prosperous ventures.”

“Fair seas and prosperous ventures!” Corwyn and the others raised their mugs.

“Fine stuff, eh?” asked the Celetor.

“A most well-rounded flavor,” Josiah agreed, taking a final pleasing puff from his pipe before placing it beside his meal.

“I’ve had better,” Charles replied flatly, though no one seemed to hear.

“Just how long have you had this ship?” Corwyn asked.

“Close to twenty years.” Hirim extinguished his cigar by pinching it between his thumb and index finger. “Some days it seems longer, others like I only got it yesterday.” He rested the cigar beside his wooden spoon.

“Can we *eat* now?” Charles’ tone became an almost caustic whine.

“This would be one of those long days.” As soon as Hirim picked up his spoon, Charles dug into the stew with reckless abandon. He would have swallowed his half-spent cigarette too if he hadn’t remembered to take it out of his mouth and crush it out on the table.

“So how long have you been a bard?” Hirim asked Corwyn between bites.

“I’ve been back in the Midlands for a little over two years but I’ve been a bard—getting trained and practicing my skills—for the better part of ten years.”

“You have to be *trained* to tell stories?” asked Charles, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I thought you just made up stuff. How hard can that be?”

“If you want to be good at it, you’ll seek training. Not just that but musical training and voice lessons and basic knowledge of myths and legends.”

“Pah.” The halfling dismissively waved the notion away. “Waste of money if you ask me. So, that all we get to drink tonight, Hirim?”

The captain bent down and retrieved another ceramic jug from beside him. The halfling's eyes lit up once again. It looked newer and slimmer than the previous jug, but its obvious heft in Hirim's hand told all it was full. “There.” He placed it on the table near the bread with a heavy thud. Charles made an effort to grab it, but it was out of reach.

“Here.” Mathias brought the jug closer to the other's searching hands.

“Aha.” He pulled out the cork with his childlike fingers.

“Just remember it's for *all* of us tonight,” Hirim warned.

“I know, I know.” He lifted the jug and, after some skillful maneuvering, filled his mug to the brim.

“Is there anything of note you have discovered in your studies, Mr. Onu—”

“Hey,” Charles shouted in disgust. “What kind of game you playing, Hirim? This is *water!*”

“What did you think it would be? *Wine?*”

“Yeah.”

“Not tonight.” Hirim reached for a hunk of bread and tore off a piece. “You can be sober for one night.” The halfling's face contorted into a scowl but he said nothing else, merely contenting himself with finishing his stew.

“As I was saying,” Josiah continued, “have you found anything of note in your studies thus far, Mr. Onuis?”

“Not anything more than I've already told you.” Mathias took a piece of bread for himself.

“I, for one, am most intrigued by the notion of this venture,” said Josiah, sitting back in his chair. “Think about what could be at stake and your mind does indeed travel far in the field of speculation. Immortality,” he continued, taking the jug and filling his mug. “What wonders one could work and see and even accomplish, I daresay, if one could indeed not have to worry about his best years slipping away from him.”

“Do you want to know what *I'd* do with immortality?” Charles inquired.

“No,” Hirim returned curtly, receiving the jug from Josiah.

“And why not?”

“Because I'm trying to enjoy my meal.”

“I sense a real fear of imagination here.” Charles managed to secure his own loaf and angrily ripped it apart. “I bet you couldn’t think of *half* as many things to do with immortality as me.”

“Let’s just take your word for it.” Hirim passed the jug Corwyn’s way.

“So did you learn any good tales in your training?”

“A decent amount, I guess,” he replied.

“Then why not share some with us tonight? Maybe you have something that might fit with our current venture.”

It actually sounded like a good idea. “I think I have a few tales that might fit . . .”