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Chapter 22 The House with No Flags

And so a monthly tax of two gold ducats was imposed on every household in Cornucopia, to protect the country from the Ickabog. Tax collectors soon became a common sight on the streets of Cornucopia. They had large, staring white eyes like lamps painted on the back of their black uniforms. These were supposed to remind everybody of what the tax was for, but people whispered in the taverns that they were Lord Spittleworth's eyes, watching to make sure everybody paid up.

Once they'd collected enough gold, Spittleworth decided to raise a statue to the memory of one of the Ickabog's victims, to remind people what a savage beast it was. At first Spittleworth planned a statue of Major Beamish, but his spies in the taverns of Chouxville reported that it was Private Buttons's story that had really captured the public imagination. Brave young Buttons, who'd volunteered to gallop off into the night with the news of his major's death, only to end up in the Ickabog's jaws himself, was generally felt to be a tragic, noble figure deserving of a handsome statue. Major Beamish, on the other hand, seemed merely to have died by accident, blundering unwisely across the foggy marsh in the dark. In fact, the drinkers of Chouxville felt quite resentful towards Beamish, as the man who'd forced Nobby Buttons to risk his life.

Happy to bow to the public mood, Spittleworth had a statue of Nobby Buttons made, and placed it in the middle of the largest public square in Chouxville. Seated on a magnificent charger, with his bronze cloak flying out behind him and a look of determination on his boyish face, Buttons was forever frozen in the act of galloping back to the City-Within-The-City. It became fashionable to lay flowers around the statue's base every Sunday. One rather plain young woman, who laid flowers every day of the week, claimed she'd been Nobby Buttons' girlfriend.

Spittleworth also decided to spend some gold on a scheme to keep the king diverted, because Fred was still too scared to go hunting, in case the Ickabog had sneaked south somehow and pounced on him in the forest. Bored of entertaining Fred, Spittleworth and Flapoon had come up with a plan.

'We need a portrait of you fighting the Ickabog, sire! The nation demands it!'

'Does it really?' said the king, fiddling with his buttons, which that day were made of emeralds. Fred remembered the ambition he'd formed, the morning he'd first tried on battledress, of being painted killing the Ickabog. He liked this idea of Spittleworth's very much, so he spent the next two weeks choosing and being fitted for a new uniform, because the old one was much stained by the marsh, and having a replacement jewelled sword made. Then Spittleworth hired the best portrait painter in Cornucopia, Malik Motley, and Fred began posing for weeks on end, for a portrait large enough to cover an entire wall of the Throne Room. Behind Motley sat fifty lesser artists, all copying his work, so as to have smaller versions of the painting ready to deliver to every city, town, and village in Cornucopia.

While he was being painted, the king amused Motley and the other artists by telling them the story of his famous fight with the monster, and the more he told the story, the more he

found himself convinced of its truth. All of this kept Fred happily occupied, leaving Spittleworth and Flapoon free to run the country, and to divide up the trunks of gold left over each month, which were sent in the dead of night to the two lords' estates in the country.

But what, you might ask, of the eleven other advisors, who'd worked under Herringbone? Didn't they think it odd that the Chief Advisor had resigned in the middle of the night, and never been seen again? Didn't they ask questions, when they woke up to find Spittleworth in Herringbone's place? And, most importantly of all: did they believe in the Ickabog?

Well, those are excellent questions, and I'll answer them now.

They certainly muttered among themselves that Spittleworth shouldn't have been allowed to take over, without a proper vote. One or two of them even considered complaining to the king. However, they decided not to act, for the simple reason that they were scared.

You see, royal proclamations had now gone up in every town and village square in Cornucopia, all written by Spittleworth and signed by the king. It was treason to question the king's decisions, treason to suggest that the Ickabog might not be real, treason to question the need for the Ickabog tax and treason not to pay your two ducats a month. There was also a reward of ten ducats if you reported someone for saying the Ickabog wasn't real.

The advisors were frightened of being accused of treason. They didn't want to be locked up in a dungeon. It really was much more pleasant to keep living in the lovely mansions which came with the job of advisor, and to continue wearing their special advisor robes, which meant they were allowed to go straight to the head of the queue in pastry shops.

So they approved all the expenses of the Ickabog Defence Brigade, who wore green uniforms, which Spittleworth said hid them better in the marsh weed. The Brigade soon became a common sight, parading through the streets of all of Cornucopia's major cities.

Some might wonder why the Brigade was riding through the streets waving at people, instead of remaining up in the north, where the monster was supposed to be, but they kept their thoughts to themselves. Meanwhile, most of their fellow citizens competed with each other to demonstrate their passionate belief in the Ickabog. They propped up cheap copies of the painting of King Fred fighting the Ickabog in their windows, and hung wooden signs on their doors, which bore messages like PROUD TO PAY THE ICKABOG TAX and DOWN WITH THE ICKABOG, UP WITH THE KING! Some parents even taught their children to bow and curtsy to the tax collectors.

The Beamish house was decorated in so many anti-Ickabog banners that it was hard to see what the cottage beneath looked like. Bert had returned to school at last, but to Daisy's disappointment, he spent all his breaks with Roderick Roach, talking about the time when they would both join the Ickabog Defence Brigade and kill the monster. She'd never felt lonelier, and wondered whether Bert missed her at all.

Daisy's own house was the only one in the City-Within-The-City that was entirely free of flags and signs welcoming the Ickabog tax. Her father also kept Daisy inside whenever the Ickabog Defence Brigade rode past, rather than urging her to run into the garden and cheer, like the neighbours' children.

Lord Spittleworth noticed the absence of flags and signs on the tiny cottage beside the graveyard, and filed that knowledge away in the back of his cunning head, where he kept information that might one day prove useful.

