

## Beware of Strangers

*The Domain, the year 1255*

Paulo bolted straight from the market place and down the lane as fast as his legs would take him. Heavy footsteps pounded after him, the sound of hob-nail boots slapped hard on the cobblestones and echoed in the narrow street off the half-timbered houses, pursuing the boy like a premonition of danger.

Suddenly, a merchant stepped out of an alley leading a small horse by the halter and Paulo instinctively swerved to duck behind the animal; but he failed to see the long wooden cart it was drawing, loaded down with copperware and brass trinkets. He slammed against the side of the cart, tipping it violently, upsetting pots and ewers and basins in a deafening heap onto the cobbles.

*“Holy Maker! What on earth do you think you’re doing, boy?”*

The furious merchant let forth a barrage of insults above the metallic din of clanging pots and vessels, but the boy picked himself up and kept running.

The heavy footsteps fell closer behind him and Paulo tried losing the pursuer in a frantic dash to the left through a high stone archway. The path led into a small courtyard where he often used to play; from there he knew he could make a sprint through a small side passage and down to the river, across the stone bridge, along the bank, and eventually into the safety of the deep woods and the Forest.

But now it led only to a dead end.

Paulo ground to a halt in mid-stride and gazed stupefied before him at the passage on the other side of the square that was normally open. But today a wooden scaffolding had been erected across the exit from the square, and a number of busy workmen were repairing some dilapidated stonework on the adjacent building. The boy dropped his shoulders in desperate resignation and just stood there, waiting for the blow from behind.

Heavy feet pounded up to him and within seconds two strong hands gripped him hard by the shoulders and span him around. Paulo stared down at the ground, bracing himself, wincing before the blow actually came.

But nothing happened.

The man’s hard breathing beat in his ears, and Paulo could feel a hot sweat start to trickle down his back. He tensed further, clenching his hands, and grit his teeth till his jaw hurt, and waited.

Still nothing happened.

After a minute of terrified silence he painfully raised his head, slowly opening his eyes, and dared to look at his pursuer. But he was not what the boy expected to see.

Not at all.

In that instant, staring into the quiet face of the tall stranger looking down at him, the whole world turned around for Paulo. Nothing was ever to be the same again.

He stared transfixed as the purest, calmest eyes he had ever seen looked down upon him, the eyes of the gentle stranger in whose depths he found only the most sincere kindness and caring. Eyes that only moments ago he was sure were carrying an onslaught of condemnation and punishment.

And after a few more moments he heard a deep, soft voice ask him: “Would you like now to know the *Truth*, my young friend. Would you like me to explain the simple Truth to you, would that help?”

The tall stranger had spoken, but Paulo hadn’t understood. The words seem to hang in the air about him with some meaning he was missing, like an opening toward a mysterious place; a

question, coming from a far away wisdom that the boy couldn't possibly yet fathom.

Paulo shrugged his shoulders. He had no answer.

"Then let me ask, do you wish to be happier now? Do you wish to feel a little more peace, and freedom, in your life?" the kind voice asked sincerely. "It is the same question, and will also lead you to the Truth."

The young boy couldn't move. He didn't think of running away now; he didn't think of fighting anymore. Only one desire filled his heart and drowned out all the sadness: the desperate wish to believe the fantastic promise offered to him by the strange man.

"Yes, I do. I really would like to be happier now," Paulo replied thoughtfully in a quiet voice, hardly a whisper, after several moments.

The stranger spoke with Paulo for some long minutes then, and the rich, magical words that reached his ears made his spirit sing with hope, and engraved themselves in shining letters on his heart forever.

When the stranger had finished, he walked calmly away without looking back, leaving the boy alone in the courtyard feeling completely bewildered.

After a moment, Paulo looked down at his hand and at last opened his tightly clenched fist. There, in his grimy, sweaty fingers was still the bright silver ducat; the same silver coin he had stolen from the man in the market place just minutes before – an eternity ago – when he had come to make his purchase of wood at his kindlin' stall.

But this was no ordinary stranger, and this was no ordinary meeting.

Without having the slightest awareness, Paulo had just made his first hesitant step on the journey back to the magnificent Golden City lying just the other side of the Domain. All the villagers would make the journey, one day. But none knew it, and certainly none had any idea when the journey would begin...