

Jono: A Dumfounded Val

Far away, a soundless Tvek perched on the short, heavy stool. He was lost deep in contemplation. Smoke from his censer curled lazily round his head wafting in spirals and dips. Finally, it shot straight up nearly to the very top of the chamber before disappearing into one of the many small drawers mounted high on the tree house wall.

Upon returning to his own cluttered house last eve, following his leaving Jula and The Lad, Marc, from the Outer World, there in the house near the edge of Tral, the aging wizard had come alone to The Smoke room.

Once he had arrived in that hallowed chamber, the old seer had carefully crumbled an extra large clot of soot into a container of fresh meadow dew. The ink was prepared for the note taking he was certain would follow the morrow's first revealing Censer Smoke.

Dressed in the longer, apple green jerkin, navy tam with flash and rank of office pin secured, and new black knee boots, constituting the dress uniform of a senior Val, Jono entered the chamber quietly, almost reverently. Unlike the

ensemble worn by 'dain and others of both the novice and beginning advanced ranks, Jono's ranking, dress jerkin, did not open down the front. The sleeveless sheath slid over the head, a navy leather sash tied rakishly at the waist, dirk, and, leather pouch completed the ensemble.

The usually rambunctious Val tiptoed to stand noiseless, ready, behind the archaic bird. Jono had been assigned to 'Old Feathers' for nearly 4 years now. He had grown to both love and respect the acrimonious, sometimes downright grumpy, revered master elder of the inner world.

The impetuous teenager clutched an attaching tool and the small, brass name plat his master had ordered in his usual, somewhat testy voice on past eve. Had ordered only moments after their arrival here at the house which was both home and teaching station for the old wizard. Jono realized Tvek had seen something which had certainly disturbed the old seer mightily when Tvek had read the cerulean, revealing, smoke there in the stranger's house.

The Stranger. Ah, now THERE is an interesting fellow', thought Jono, a dreamy expression

appeared on his face. His eyes brightened. He grinned remembering the events of past eve. 'I've never met any one from the outer world before. Wonder how he came to be here, and what the purpose of his visit is...'

Jono's reverie was abruptly broken by the irritable tap, tap, tap of Tvek's spectacles. 'Old Feathers' rapped the object loudly against the stool leg one last impatient tap before directing a choleric, glaring nod toward the plat. Tvek then turned and stomped huffily down the hallway to the fireplace. Grumbling all the while in a low hushed voice, the irascible old bird removed the bubbling pot from the blackened crane.

Chagrined, Jono made a hasty move to attach the plat to the drawer front at the very moment the last of the smoke was disappearing inside. With a carefree flourish, Jono swept the drawer shut. He carefully logged the time and date in the thick leather bound 'Smoke Record' before snapping the brass lock on the drawer.

"...cup, can't find a thing. Hope Julia STAYS at the stranger's house." Tvek's petulant grouching

was punctuated with the banging of cupboard doors, the slamming of lids. "I do. Always hidin' everything when she is here for more than five mins. Can't leave anything where it can be found..."

With a wide smile, Jono hurried to the niche where his master stood rummaging angrily among the contents of an open closet. The merry squirrel soon poured out the tea and held the steaming cup toward the grouching wizard.

"Here Sir. I set yr cup here on the sideboard along with these nice fresh scones 'dain had just brought. And," The patient Val spoke in a soft, soothing tone as he helped the still disgruntled old seer to his stool beside the disordered eating board. "would y like honey or the jam?"

"Thankee lad, Thankee. I'm somewhat discomfited, I am." said the almost mollified wizard. "Tis the stranger what has me so concerned. We'll go over," he paused, took a long draught from the enameled cup, looked thoughtfully at Jono over the rim of the container for several seconds. He then continued, "after we finish our duties here."

Jono hovered, solicitous, mindful, as the old owl slowly munched his breakfast. Tvek stopped often to sit and simply stare, sipping thoughtfully now and again from his cup, looking at nothing. He appeared to scarcely notice whether he had spread jam or honey on his toast as he chewed and sipped. A most uncharacteristic quiet settled upon the Val as he realized the old seer was deep in contemplation. And, apparently, a rather troubling contemplation it was too.

Jono tip toed as he moved about the eating area. Over all the years he had served the old owl, the youth had never known Tvek to be so preoccupied. 'Must really be a doozer for certain,' pondered the teenager. He gazed at the ancient seer. 'Wonder then just what the whole story about this stranger is. There have been other strangers for sure,' he considered. 'Can't be simply that he is a stranger.'

He shook his head, 'Nah can't be that, Tral is always filled with loads of strangers.' He eyed Tvek, 'humans and not, but, this is ummm different, really different. Nah, definite can't simply be because Marc is a stranger.' Jono refilled his cup and Tvek's. 'I expect it must be

because this stranger is from the outer world. Old Feathers wasn't this jazzed about the plague of gres last year. And THAT was about the biggest whoop I've ever seen ...'

Staring off into the distance, Tvek absently began polishing his glasses with the corner of his napkin. "Hah" The young Val jumped. Startled, he nearly dropped the tray he was carrying. "Jono!" the wizard's sudden shouts had begun quite unexpectedly.

"Quickly, Lad, quickly. For the very sake of goodness, we must hurry." Tvek was simply babbling, Jono could only stare in amazement as his normally taciturn master let go with an absolute volley of words. "A course, a course. What else could it be then? What other could it possibly be? Why, none, a course. Open drawer plat 17D."

Tvek, a steady stream of words gushing nonstop, had quite suddenly sprung from his stool, burst from the room and at present, with an agility quite belieing his years, was rushing pell mell along the passageway toward the 'Smoke Room.' Jono stared at his master in consternation for a moment before he too

began trotting along the passageway behind the suddenly garrulous bird.

'Whatever is up with 'Old Feathers' now?' he pondered. The wizard hopped expectantly onto his stool where he kept up a continued exhortation to Jono to "hurry Lad, hurry" whilst all the time anxiously bouncing from one foot to the other. He did not even notice the snaps holding his spats together were coming undone one by one.

'pears, Old Feathers must have muddled around with the keys when he came in for the early Smoke,' Jono thought upon eyeing the hodgepodge mass tumbled into a heap on the small console. Frowning from the concentration, the bemused squirrel hurried as he sorted among the tangle of keys. 'I know I left these things laying in nice neat rows, and now, would y just look at this jumble. And, 'Old Feathers' thinks I can do this in a hurry. 'blameless diety over all' Oh well,' at last the val located 17D and rushed to open the drawer. He darted up the wall using the heavy brass locks as a mountain climber uses foot holds.

He waited breathlessly. No matter how many times the young squirrel had seen the Smoke,

Jono still felt that same rush of excitement he had experienced the very first time he was finally allowed into this chamber.

The drawer now stood fully open. The at last soundless Tvek settled down on his stool while Jono stood behind quietly. Nothing at all happened for several seconds, nearly a minute. Suddenly the Smoke burst from the drawer. There it hung near the ceiling, unchanging for several seconds more. Eyes wide, Jono stared open mouthed, " 'blameless diety over all', I've NEVER seen purple smoke before," He breathed softly.

Tvek sat quite, with uncharacteristic patience at the present moment. Waiting as he was for the wafting to begin. To be sure, waiting for Smoke was one of the few, very few, times Tvek waited patiently for anything at all.

The Smoke hung suspended, a small round pale lavender cloud, just there overhead and all. Jono quite held his breath. Finally then, a faint, almost indiscernible 'boop' signaled the beginning of the wafting. Abruptly the Smoke seemed to blast forth as though it were escaping from a bottle. It leaped, swirled and

gained in volume until the vapor nearly threatened to fill the whole room.

The captivated Jono simply stared in fascination. The Smoke whirled, it rose, dived and rose again. Tvek peered intently into the wafting, lavender haze, he muttered quietly to himself several times before grabbing his note pad. The old seer scribbled a good many hurried notations across a full page and a half before he stopped to peer earnestly into the haze again. Suddenly he began chuckling loudly.

"Well, a course. A course. Why, I should had knew it, 'tis that plain. I quite should had knew it, why the old..." the aged owl exclaimed in a happy excited voice whilst chortling out loud. It was a tone the concerned Jono did not recognize at all.

Tvek simply bobbed, twisted, almost he was performing a little dance there on his heavy carved stool as he peered, scribbled, and peered then scribbled even more furiously. And all whole the time he chattered aloud to himself. "Twas ust as I finally had thought then. Wal, just as I should had thought right from the first. Indeed. Why, explains it all. It

does, certain. Explains it all. The messenger, packets and such. Well. Well. So tis, so tis ..."

Jono, his mouth fully ajar, simply gaped dumbfounded at the amazing sight. The young Val was quite that astounded at the jocund humor his usually forbidding, dour master was at present exhibiting. Tvek, and he of all persons, why, he simply tittered and chortled. He actually waved his wings madly before leaping off his stool and made merry one full jigging turn around the room. Finally then, the old wizard sobered, removed his glasses, wiped his eyes and turned to stomp quickly toward the door.

"Hurry now wi'ye lad, y'must return The Smoke. Times a' wastin'." Gone was the merriment of a moment before, in it's place the acrimonious, frowning Tvek grumbled, "Tis late it is. Tis late."

A cheerful grin settled upon Jono's countenance. The The old bird was back to normal. With a last nod, frown, wave of his wing, Tvek dashed through the arched doorway and disappeared, with flapping spats and all, right down the narrow hallway. Shaking his head, Jono listened to his master

proceeding along the passageway. All the while Tvek kept muttering excitedly to himself.

The young Val's wait lasted only a moment longer before The Smoke was once again locked securely in the drawer. The squirrel pondered what in the world the old wizard must have seen in such an old Smoke. "Guess Old Feathers will tell me what this is all about, in his own good time of course, in his own good time." The teenager muttered quietly to himself while reaching for the now near empty vial of ink. Jono carefully logged this latest entry before he, too, exited the Smoke Room and hurried after Tvek. He fair trotted himself toward the Lecture Hall.