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THIMBLERIG'S ARK

A NOVEL BY

NATE FLEMING

PROLOGUE

The colossal fig tree towered over the lush, green forest like a massive guardian. So enormous she could be seen from one corner of the forest to the other, the fig tree offered a place of coolness and shelter for all the forest's creatures.

The animals called her "Asarata", which meant "she who provides" in the old language, and after the spring rains she would sprout plump, juicy figs that would fill all their bellies. It was festival time for the animals of the forest, when they came together to enjoy the delicious fruit in peace and safety. The apes and birds enjoyed the first choice of fruit high up in Asarata's branches and the animals on the ground treasured the figs that fell to the forest floor. Everyone had plenty, and according to ancient forest law, no animal could harm another while under Asarata's branches.

"Who made the forest law?" the tiny young groundhog asked the older groundhog leading him through the crowds. They were on their way to the base of the big fig tree to see how many figs they could collect. Last festival they'd made a personal best record of six figs, a record they fully intended to beat.

"Nobody remembers who made forest law, Thimblerig," the older groundhog answered patiently, dodging a lumbering hippopotamus, and swiftly pulling the younger groundhog back before he could be crushed. It was just another question in a long string of questions her curious groundson asked, and since she knew that one only learned by asking, she didn't discourage him. "But you remember who kept the law and guarded us all, don't you?"

“The unicorns!” he shouted enthusiastically, hopping up in front of his groundmother, oblivious to the animals around him. He loved hearing the stories about the unicorns, those noble animals who had once been the guardians of the forest. “I want to see a unicorn, groundmother!”

“Of course you do,” she answered. She glanced nervously at a pair of badgers who’d looked their way when Thimblerig had shouted.

“Look at me!” he called, pointing a claw out from his forehead and galloping around. “I’m a unicorn! I’m Tannier Isa, the king of the unicorns!”

At that, Thimblerig’s groundmother grabbed him and pulled him into the shadow of an enormous ficus plant. Taking a quick look back, she saw that the badgers had continued on, apparently not caring about Thimblerig’s display. Realizing that she was holding her breath, she exhaled. “Sometimes it’s good to be a groundhog,” she muttered. “Nobody cares about what a groundhog does.”

“Did I do something wrong?” Thimblerig asked with a quivering tone to his voice. Had she really been so rough when she’d grabbed him? She looked down at Thimblerig and smiled.

“You did nothing wrong, cub,” she said reassuringly. “We just have to be careful that we don’t talk too loudly about the unicorns.”

“Because of the wild dogs?” Thimblerig whispered.

“Because of the wild dogs,” his groundmother whispered back, hating that the child had to be so fearful. But how else would he survive if he didn’t fear the wild dogs? They had ears everywhere these days, and you couldn’t be too careful.

Sighing, she pulled back the big leaves of the ficus plant and saw that the crowd was moving normally, a variety of animals – big and little, predator and prey – all heading for the base of the big tree. Everyone appeared excited about the festival, but the older groundhog could also sense the tension and anxiety that was always there with all animals, just under the surface.

All because of the wild dogs.

“I wish the unicorns would come back.”

Thimblerig had poked his head out underneath her own, and also looked out at the crowds. Realizing that she’d succeeded in frightening her young charge, she closed the leaves and took Thimblerig up in her arms, hugging him tightly.

“Don’t you doubt it, Thimblerig. The unicorns are going to come back any day now and set the whole forest straight,” she ruffled the fur on the top of his head, and set him back down. Since his parents died when he was a newborn, she’d raised him on her own. She’d been sharing the old stories with him since he was old enough to understand, and she hoped against hope that the stories would stick. The way things were going in the forest these days, it was a long shot, but she’d be faithful in loving her groundson, and faithful in the telling. At the end of the day that’s the best she could do for him. But she reminded herself that he was also still a cub, and while he was, she needed to let him be a cub.

“Now why don’t you hop on my back and let’s get a move on to Asarata before all the good figs are taken?”

Thimblerig smiled and nodded up at his groundmother. He climbed onto her back, and held on tight as they set out into the crowd. As they entered the steadily

moving stream of animals heading for the big tree, the young groundhog quietly put his paw up to his forehead, stuck out a single claw, and imagined the forest again full of unicorns.

CHAPTER 1

THIMBLERIG'S DREAM

Thimblerig lay sprawled out on his belly on the floor of his subterranean home with a sizable pool of spittle under his face. Half-eaten figs surrounded him, along with leftover bits of some sort of possibly edible leaf, shells, and peas of various sizes. Having unwisely overdone it the night before with rotten figs, Thimblerig was snoring loud enough that animals passing aboveground would think a small earthquake was rattling the forest.

Physically, Thimblerig was a typical adult male groundhog. He was about a foot long, and covered from head to toe in coarse, brown fur. With big buckteeth and small beady eyes, there was absolutely nothing that distinguished him from any others of his species. He used this to his advantage on a daily basis in his particular line of work, which involved quite a bit of cheating, a healthy dose of deceit, and a near-constant need to blend into the crowd. He was a grifter, a con-artist, a hustler, a swindler, and a crook, with two simple goals in life: first, to separate other animals from their figs; and second, to do so without getting caught.

At the moment, Thimblerig was so out of it that he didn't notice the breeze that began to blow through his ratty little burrow. It ruffled Thimblerig's fur, and had he been awake, he might have asked himself what a breeze was doing ruffling his fur in his underground burrow. But he was so comatose, just a step or two above being a corpse, that nothing short of a trumpet blast from an elephant's trunk would have even begun to wake him.

That, or a few drops of cold water.

Just such a drop of cold water plopped onto the face of the snoring groundhog, but it didn't faze him. Eating half-rotten figs way past their date of expiration is always a good way to ensure that a groundhog is not easily roused.

A second, more insistent drop of water spattered on the groundhog's face from the raincloud that formed near the ceiling of the dry groundhog burrow, but had the same effect.

And then a third drop fell.

And then a fourth.

Finally, the fifth raindrop stirred Thimblerig enough that he groggily wiped a paw across his now moist whiskers. As if encouraged by his slight movement, more rain began to fall, making little puffing sounds as it struck the dry ground around him.

"It's too early. I'm not ready to get up..." Thimblerig muttered, turning over on his side. Even more drops fell, and what started out as a gentle shower turned quickly into a pouring rain, like a flash summer storm.

In the groundhog's burrow.

Thimblerig's eyes shot open as the downpour soaked him and everything else in his nice dry burrow. He sat up, shocked by the clouds that had formed over the low ceiling, and put his paws down on the floor to steady himself. But the floor had taken on a definite unfloorish feel to it and rather than the comforting dusty feel of tightly packed dirt, he felt wood. Looking down he saw that it looked like wood, too. Not just wood, but more specifically, a tree branch.

“That’s just nuts,” Thimblerig muttered, fighting to find his way out of the fog of sleep. “Why am I sleeping on a tree branch?”

A bolt of blinding light flashed across the burrow, illuminating briefly that Thimblerig was no longer in his burrow at all. He was, for some inconceivable reason, sitting in the darkness on a tree branch, with rain crashing down around him in a furious thunderstorm. Yelping at the top of his lungs, Thimblerig started to slip off the branch and just managed to grab hold. It took all his strength and effort to pull up where he could cling to the branch like a cub to his mother.

Thimblerig braved a fearful glance up and saw rolling, swirling, and ominously dark clouds like he’d never seen before. Looking down, there was pretty much nothing *but* down as far as the eye could see, and the groundhog immediately regretted looking.

“Groundmother!” he cried, grasping the wet tree branch even tighter.

As if in response, the wind gusted harder and howled through the branches of the tree. The falling rain added to the chaos and made it even more intense and frightening.

Then, in the middle of the madness, Thimblerig heard his name, and it made his soaking wet fur stand on end.

“Thimblerig...”

It came as a whisper in the middle of the storm, and Thimblerig shouldn’t have been able to hear it against the booming thunder and crashing rain. “Who is it?” he called out. “Who’s there?”

Lightning flashed again, followed quickly by a crack of thunder, the growing howl of the wind, and another whisper.

“It’s coming soon, Thimblerig. You need to be ready.”

The whisperer was right behind him now, but whipping his head around, Thimblerig didn't see anyone. He was alone, in the middle of a rainstorm, high up in a tree, hearing a disembodied, whispery voice. This wasn't good. Either he was going nuts, having a particularly vivid nightmare, or he was the subject of an elaborate and cruel practical joke. Either way, playing along seemed to be the quickest way back to sanity.

"What's that?" he called out to the darkness. "What's coming?"

Lightning flashed again and illuminated something in the distance. At first Thimblerig thought it was the dark outline of the Edge, the mountain chain located to the north three or four days walk away. But as he watched, the outline of the mountains changed, and he could tell the mountains were moving back and forth, growing larger by the moment as if they weren't mountains at all, but a huge wall of water.

A huge wall of water rushing his way.

This was too much for the groundhog, and he started scrambling on the branch trying to find a way down from the tree, trying to avoid slipping and falling, but there was no way down. The terrible sound of trees being snapped and crushed in the distance stopped him in his tracks. One quick glance showed him that the massive waves were growing closer, quickly and destructively, like a stampeding herd of freakishly large wildebeests.

I should have paid better attention when my groundmother was teaching me how to swim, he thought as he clung to the branches of his tree, paralyzed with fear. The wave grew closer and larger, and Thimblerig gasped as it crashed into the tree, which

shuddered but held fast. Before he knew it, a sea of heaving, churning water surrounded him.

But the water was several feet below! It looked like the tree, which he'd been so terrified to find himself sleeping on, was going to be his salvation!

The tree... only one tree in the forest was big enough that it would survive a direct hit by a wave of that size. Only one tree towered over all the other trees of the forest like this one.

That one tree was the great fig tree, Asarata.

He was trapped on a branch on the crown of the queen of the forest in the middle of a raging flood?

Flood.

The word transported Thimblerig back in time and deep under the earth to his long-dead groundmother's burrow, where he saw himself as a young cub, sitting on the dry dirt floor, listening to her tell her stories. It had been so many years since he'd been able to sit at her feet, but it was as real as the storm and the tree and the flood, and seeing her again made him catch his breath.

"Things are bad, boy, and they're just going to get worse," Thimblerig's groundmother said, sitting on her haunches and chewing on a branburry root. She continued, pointing the root at Thimblerig to emphasize her point. "But you just wait and see, the unicorn won't let that happen forever. One day he's just going to clean house and start over fresh."

"What do you mean?" young Thimblerig asked, eyes wide with fascination.

"How could he do that?"

“Don’t you know?” she replied. “It’s in the old stories. It’s going to be a clean start. What makes things clean?”

“Water!” he shouted enthusiastically.

His grandmother reached down and touched the tip of his nose with her root, nodding.

“Not just water, little ‘Rig. But lots and lots of water,” she whispered. “A whole flood of water.”

A sudden flash of lightning forced Thimblurig to close his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, he was back in the branches of Asarata. How much time had passed? He looked down to try and see if there was any change in the water level below, and could just make out the surface of the water, which had risen considerably since before. With no help from the voice he’d heard earlier, he knew that there was no scheming that would save him from the waters when they finally reached him.

A wave crashed just under his feet, soaking his feet as it shuddered his branch again, as well as the remainder of Thimblurig’s confidence. He was cold, exhausted, drenched to the bone, and losing his grip. So it was no surprise when a monster wave rose from the darkness and crashed over him, pulling him away from his safe branch, and sweeping him into the deep.

The current sucked him beneath the water’s surface and he clawed his paws into the darkness grasping madly for anything to keep him from staying under. He knocked his head up against something solid, and he quickly grasped the object, which turned out to be a log. He pulled himself up and held on for dear life, sputtering.

It was probably the end, he realized. Even if he could keep holding onto the log, there was nobody to help him, and the storm showed no signs of abating. This was it. He was going to drown and die.

“Help!” he gasped in desperation, to the disembodied whispery voice that was out there somewhere.

“Thimblerig...”

It was back! “Who’s there? I can’t swim!”

“Thimblerig,” the whisper repeated, as calm as a quiet breeze. “I need you to lead my children.”

Thimblerig nearly lost hold of the log as an animal began to materialize out of the mist a fig’s throw away. It was big and dark, and stood on the water like on dry land. As the shape became recognizable, Thimblerig stopped struggling as he saw the single brilliant golden horn jutting from the animal’s forehead, shining out in the darkness of the storm as if on fire. Then, the groundhog looked into the new animal’s eyes, and they were so big and dark that they threatened to suck him in like a whirlpool.

It couldn’t be. It was impossible. The animal standing before him appeared out of the mists of the stories of his childhood, and it was impossible that it could be there, and yet there it was.

It was a unicorn.

“Thimblerig,” the jet-black unicorn was much too calm considering the circumstances. “This is coming, and I want you to lead my children to safety.”

“You’re not real,” Thimblerig muttered. There hadn’t been unicorns since well before he was born. What had been in those figs he’d eaten? “You can’t be...”

The unicorn ignored his protestations. “Lead them to the Edge. That’s where they will find the place of safety.”

Lightning flashed again and Thimblerig shielded his eyes. When he opened them, the unicorn was gone, and all that was left was the madness of the storm; dark, wet, tedious madness. Before he could try to call out again, a wave slammed into him, prying him away from the log and tossed him into the waters.

Thimblerig struggled for his life as the water attacked him from all sides; the rain hammering from above, the waves tossing him from side to side, the current sucking him down. The raging waters that were destroying the world were going to destroy him too, and send him to the fields beyond. But Thimblerig was too tired to care.

Finally, overwhelmed with fatigue, the groundhog gave up. With the unicorn’s words echoing through his mind, he stopped fighting and allowed himself to be pulled under, and he was overcome with watery darkness.

CHAPTER 2

GETTING THE RIGHT SPOT

Thimblerig slammed onto the dry, dusty floor with such force that it knocked the air from his lungs. Eyes closed, he curled up, wheezing, wondering that the fields beyond were dry and dusty like a groundhog burrow.

But at least they were dry.

Thimblerig opened his eyes. He wasn't in the fields beyond after all, but in his own burrow. He ran his paw over the floor and found that there wasn't a drop of water to be seen or felt. Pushing up to a sitting position, he wondered if it was possible that it could have all been a dream. It was so real!

"It couldn't have been a dream," he said to the empty walls of his burrow, but he had to see for himself.

Leaping to his feet he scampered up the dark, narrow tunnel that led to the surface. He poked his head out of his hole and saw that everything topside was normal; there were no giant waves, the morning sky above Asarata was typical cobalt blue with vast white puffy clouds, and most importantly there were no jet-black unicorns. The normal cast of shady characters were hanging about, munching figs, and shooting the breeze.

"Hey bud," he called to a wombat scurrying past. "Has it been raining?"

"Raining?" the little bear-like animal scoffed, not stopping as he scurried. "This time of year? And you call yourself a groundhog?"

Grumbling about groundhog stereotypes, Thimblerig turned and went back down to the base of the tunnel, where he stopped and peered cautiously into his lair. A skylight tunnel allowed a single shaft of light to enter the small room, and provided the groundhog with enough illumination to see shells and leaves scattered all over the floor, half-eaten rotten figs from the night before still lying on his bed of grass, and the regular layer of general griminess that had obviously not been cleaned away by a flood of water.

“Everything’s normal,” Thimblerig muttered. He collapsed on the bed of grass and absentmindedly picked up one of the offending figs from the night before. “It must have been the figs.”

He grimaced as he sniffed the fig, and then tossed it aside with disgust. He’d heard all kinds of stories of bad figs inducing all-night vomiting, endless trips to the toilet bush, bellyaches that floored a yak, and then there was that time Lenny the aardvark had eaten a couple of bad ones and tried climbing *in* an anthill. But vivid hallucinations like the one he’d had? That was a first.

It had all seemed so real; from the wetness of the water to the rough bark of Asarata.

“Asarata?” Thimblerig sat up quickly. “I’m going to be late!”

He jumped up, grabbed his pack of fake figs lying in the corner, and then tore back up the tunnel to the forest above.

Scurrying on all fours with his pack slung over his shoulder, Thimblerig dodged the suckers scrambling for figs. The festival of Asarata was always his most profitable time, and this year he wasn’t going to lose his favorite spot on the eastern side of the colossal fig tree.

The key was to getting to the spot early. He'd learned that valuable lesson last festival when he'd wasted time loitering around a booth run by a shifty-eyed marmot. He'd gotten so caught up haggling over the price of a warthog tooth necklace that he'd been beat to his favorite spot by that irritating gazelle, and he'd been relegated to the only open spot left: beside the toilet bushes.

Ugh. The toilet bushes. The stench of those bushes still lingered in Thimblerig's nostrils a year later, and he was determined that it would not happen again. And yet, here he was scrambling, again, thanks to that disturbing dream that had made him oversleep.

The groundhog entered the clearing near his favorite spot, and was pushing and elbowing his way through the morning crowd when he saw something across the clearing that made his heart plummet: Mullins, the gazelle con-wannabe from the year before, also heading for his favorite spot.

Again.

Not this year, Thimblerig thought bitterly. Picking up his pace, Thimblerig slammed into an old armadillo grandma and bounced off her leathery old shell.

He struggled to keep on his feet, even as she tumbled over on her side. Having missed a very important beat, he took off again. "Watch where you're going, grandma!" he spat back at her.

"You scum sucking pig! You dirty stinking rat!" The enraged armadillo screamed at the groundhog, shaking her tiny little fist at his backside as he disappeared into the crowd.

The gazelle had become a real burr in the groundhog's fur since the previous

festival, apparently having made it his mission in life to horn in on Thimblerig's territory. Every time Thimblerig would set up shop, he'd turn around to find the gazelle grinning that idiot grin of his, begging him to partner up, and blowing it for just about every mark that walked by.

But the gazelle was fast, Thimblerig had to give him that. And so with furious determination that one might not expect from a groundhog, he closed his eyes and dove, rolling to a stop with his back against the base of the big tree, dead center on his favorite spot.

"Made it," Thimblerig said victoriously, panting hard. He reached behind to pat Asarata, but the tree wasn't hard and rough. It was soft and fuzzy. Maybe it was just a patch of moss? He took a look, and was peeved to see that he was leaning against the gazelle.

"You okay, Thimblerig?" Mullins asked. How could such a naïve gazelle sound so snarky? The fact that he didn't mean to irritate made it that much more irritating.

"Can it, Mullins," Thimblerig shot back. He picked himself up from the ground with extreme effort. "This is my spot, and you know it. You knew it last year, too. Go find someplace else to stink up!"

Mullins shook his head mournfully. "C'mon, where's your festival spirit?"

"On this spot," Thimblerig replied, gesturing to the place where Mullins was standing.

"This really is a prime location," Mullins said as he looked at the masses of animals passing by. Suddenly, he turned back to the groundhog. "I've got an idea! Let's

work it together! With my good looks and your experience, we'll take these suckers for every fig!"

"I've told you before," Thimblerig grumbled. "I don't work with partners."

"Come on, Thimblerig, twice the team, twice the profits!" Mullins replied.

"I'll just find another spot," Thimblerig said. He lifted his pack from the ground and smacked it a few times to remove the dust.

"This time of day, you'll be lucky to get the toilet bushes," Mullins called as Thimblerig shuffled away. "If you change your mind, the offer stands!"

"There'll be a thunderstorm in my burrow before I change my mind," Thimblerig muttered, and he went in search of a decent place to set up for the day.

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The rhinoceros stared hard at the figs sitting on the stone table in front of him. He'd just won them playing a simple shell game with a groundhog where he tried to guess which shell hid a pea. It wasn't hard, and the groundhog was pretty bad at it, which meant the rhinoceros could clean up, if he played it smart. Finally, he made a decision.

"I'll bet both figs," the big beast rumbled.

"Going double or nothing?" Thimblerig asked, turning to the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a real player here! He's going double or nothing!"

The only open spot Thimblerig had been able to find after leaving Mullins had been the dreaded toilet bushes. So, he'd stubbornly set up his shell game and started trying to attract suckers. Unfortunately, just thirty minutes before, a hippopotamus suffering from a severe gastrointestinal virus had descended on the toilet bushes with a

vengeance, and it had been all Thimblerig could do to not pass out, even standing upwind. He'd had no choice, and so he'd packed up his gear and his pride and made his way back to the gazelle.

"Yes! Partners!" Mullins had shouted, jumping up and down like he'd just won the annual fig lottery.

"Just this once!" Thimblerig had barked back. "And let's get this straight: I run the operation and you are my shill. When it's done we divide the take seventy-thirty, and then this partnership is done. You got it?"

"Seventy-thirty? Who gets the seventy?" Mullins had asked, no longer jumping.

"I do, of course," Thimblerig said calmly.

"You've got to be kidding! It's my spot we're working, remember? It needs to be fifty-fifty."

"Fifty-fifty, eh?" Thimblerig sighed with relief. It was like taking figs from a cub, as if Thimblerig had written the lines himself. "To be honest, I was hoping you'd say that."

"You were?" Mullins' eyebrow arched suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because that way, if the wild dogs show and decide to bust up the game, you get half of the blame, too. Otherwise, if you'd accepted the thirty percent, I would have to pretend like I don't know you, and then I would have to take all the blame myself. Fifty-fifty is much better. But I had to negotiate, you know."

Now, Mullins stood in the middle of a huge crowd of animals, happily talking up Thimblerig's game like a good shill, and probably imagining what he would do with his thirty percent of the take.

Thimblerig's heart pounded as he covered up the pea once more and started shuffling and sliding the shells. "Hey diddle-diddle, the pea's in the middle! One fig'll get you two, two will get you four. Play and play and you'll win some more!"

In the zone, Thimblerig was doing what he was created to do. The shells moved back and forth on the table so fast that he wouldn't have been surprised if they'd burst into flames. Finally, he stopped, and looked up at the rhinoceros's blank face. His right ear was twitching so much that Thimblerig thought it might twitch off his head and go running into the forest. He'd have to keep an eye on that twitching ear.

"Time to earn some figs, my friend," Thimblerig said. "Where's the pea?"

The rhinoceros glared at the shells like that would help him see through to the pea underneath. And as eager as he was to seal the deal, Thimblerig sat patiently and waited for the big predictable sucker to make his choice. The entire crowd leaned in to see what the rhinoceros would do.

"The middle. It's under the middle shell."

"Hey diddle-diddle, is the pea under the middle?" Thimblerig called out as he started to lift the shell. But before he'd completely raised the shell, he stopped, and looked up at the rhinoceros, alarmed.

"I'm so sorry about this... I don't know what happened..."

The rhinoceros scrunched his up as he prepared to hear the worst.

"I'm afraid to tell you..."

The crowd held its collective breath.

"...that you won! Again!" Thimblerig yanked up the middle shell to show the little pea sitting faithfully where the rhinoceros had predicted. The crowd went ballistic

and the resulting sounds of celebration were deafening.

But a single voice carried over the noise, and it whispered the groundhog's name.

"Thimblerig."

Again? The whisper from his dream? Thimblerig looked around but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, just the suckers celebrating. Connecting with Mullins, he saw that the gazelle was gesturing at the rhinoceros, who had stepped up to take his juicy winnings.

Forgetting the whisper, Thimblerig moved his tiny furry paws over the figs and got back into the game.

"How about we give it another go, Mr. Rhinoceros?"

"I think I'll quit while I'm ahead," the rhinoceros laughed.

"I thought you might say that," Thimblerig said, hopping onto the rocky table and gesturing to the sack of figs hanging around the rhinoceros's neck. "How many figs would you say you have in that nice sack of yours?"

"Dunno. Maybe fifteen?"

Thimblerig nodded his head and patted the rhinoceros's horn, which the groundhog noticed seemed to be a bit bent. He hopped back down on the ground and reached under the stone table. Huffing with apparent exertion, he pulled out a bag half as large as himself and heaved the bag onto the table.

In most ways the bag was the typical plain brown festival bag woven from dogbane fibers; the kind everyone carried around. It was also noticeably bursting at the seams with what appeared to be figs, but what was, in actuality, balls of tightly packed leaves and dirt.

“What we have here, my friend, is my savings account,” Thimblerig said, breathless. “It’s about forty figs, give or take. Good plump ones, too.”

The rhinoceros’s eyes grew wide at the sight of the huge bag of figs. The bag was bulging, ready to burst. “That’s a lot of figs,” he rumbled.

“That’s the understatement of the festival,” Thimblerig replied proudly. “I’ve been saving them up for my kids. But I tell you what I’m going to do. I’ll put up my forty against your fifteen. Whaddaya say? That’s nearly three to one odds in your favor!”

The animals in the crowd shuffled and stamped with nervous energy at the seriousness of the wager. Fifty-five figs in one place was an impressive amount, and while not a fortune, it was more than your typical animal saw during the festival.

“Oh, wow!” the gazelle exclaimed, doing his job, hopping up to the rhinoceros’s side. “You gotta do this! Look at the size of that sack!”

“It’s a big sack,” the rhinoceros agreed. “But what if I lose...”

The excited gazelle bounced around the rhinoceros, chanting, “Do it! Do it! Do it!” The other animals, wanting to see someone win big and someone else lose, joined in the chant. Soon, the echoes of the crowd’s chanting resounded across the base of the enormous tree. Thimblerig stood still serene grin on his face. He was extremely confident what the mark would choose to do.

The rhinoceros, meanwhile, looked the polar opposite of serene. His twitchy ear had gone eerily still, but his eyes were bugging out and looked as if they might explode from his head. At just the right moment Thimblerig hopped up on the table again and raised his hands to quiet the crowd. He turned to the rhinoceros.

“What’s it going to be, superstar? You in or out?”

The rhinoceros looked down at the tiny groundhog as if really seeing him for the first time. For a moment, Thimblerig thought that he might have misjudged the beast and was rapidly starting to think of a plan B when he heard what he’d been waiting to hear.

“I’m in.”

“We got us a player!” Thimblerig cried out, answered by the roars, yelps, barks, and caws of the crowd. The gazelle bounded madly between the watching animals, hooping and hollering louder than any.

The rhinoceros dropped his bag of figs on the table and smiled at the crowd as they patted him on the back, shouting words of encouragement. The gazelle was especially excited, and all the activity distracted the rhinoceros and kept him from noticing that Thimblerig had hopped off the table and quickly switched the rhinoceros’s bag with a similar looking bag pulled from underneath.

“Let’s clear the table!” Thimblerig shouted, getting the rhinoceros’s attention again. He grabbed the bags from the table and set them on the ground beside. “You ready, friend?”

The rhinoceros nodded confidently. He’d won twice already, so he knew he could do it again. He could just imagine the fig high he’d have after eating fifty-five figs...

“We’re playing for the big figs now!” Thimblerig said loudly, as he started shuffling the shells around the tabletop.

The animals crowding the table were leaping up and down, patting the rhinoceros on the back, as enthusiastic as any crowd he’d seen at any festival. If he shifted his shells

right, he could walk away from this with enough figs to pay back the wild dogs and disappear into his burrow for the rest of the festival.

“Time is running out, Thimblerig...”

The whisper was back, loud and clear, and Thimblerig could easily hear it over the noise of the crowd. He glanced back and forth among the animals to see who might have spoken, and then he saw him.

Standing behind the rhinoceros, staring directly at him, golden horn gleaming in the morning light, apparently unnoticed by everyone else, was the black unicorn from his dream.

“Let’s go, groundhog!” the rhinoceros shoved his enormous leathery face into Thimblerig’s line of sight, blocking his view of the unicorn. Thimblerig jumped up, but couldn’t make out anything with all of the animals leaping back and forth again.

“Move it, you big galumph!”

Before Thimblerig could say anything more, a panicked voice cried out from the edge of the crowd, “The wild dogs! The wild dogs!”

Already? Why had Mullins sounded the alarm so early? What had happened to the unicorn? Had he imagined it? But there was no time for going insane. Thimblerig had a con to finish.

“Wild dogs?” Thimblerig cried out theatrically, falling back into his routine.

“Everyone scatter before they catch us!”

The simple mention of the wild dogs was enough to strike terror into the hearts of anyone in the forest; such was the sway that the pack held. The unnerved animals started pushing and shoving and running in every direction in an attempt to vacate the area

around the illegal shell game. Thimblerig jumped in front of the confused rhinoceros, holding up his bag.

“Hey mate, don’t forget your figs!” He tossed it around the rhinoceros’s neck, chunked him a military-style salute, and hoisted his own bag onto his shoulder. “Stay safe, Mr. Rhino! We’ll have to continue the game at another time!”

With that, Thimblerig disappeared into the rapidly dispersing crowd like a puff of smoke on a windy day. The big beast was left standing quite alone in the now quiet and empty spot under Asarata.

“Where’d everyone go?” the rhinoceros asked the empty spot.

As if in response, a solitary fig plopped to the ground, fallen from the branches high above.

CHAPTER 3

RUNNING FROM THE RHINO

Under a shelter of foliage, safe from the nosy eyes of prying animals, Mullins the gazelle lay on his side, breathing hard from leaping back and forth among the “stiffs”, and causing general mayhem. He didn’t move when Thimblerig, lugging the rhinoceros’s bag, broke through the safe canopy of musky leaves and branches and collapsed on the forest floor beside Mullins, and lay gasping for breath.

“Finally!” Mullins said. “I was starting to think you’d skipped out on me!”

“I gave it serious thought,” Thimblerig wheezed, his head lying on the cool mossy ground, eyes closed.

“Fig me,” Mullins said.

Grumbling, Thimblerig sat up and reached into the bag, pulled out two figs, and tossed one to Mullins. He hesitated, but he had to find out if anyone else had seen the unicorn. “Hey, Mullins, did you see anything strange out there?”

“Strange?”

“Yeah, like anyone out of the ordinary?”

“Oh yeah,” Mullins replied, laughing. “That guy’s horn!”

“You saw that?” Thimblerig asked, relieved. Maybe he wasn’t insane after all. “I thought I imagined it! What was that all about?”

“I know! How does a rhino get a bent horn?” Mullins asked, examining his fig carefully.

“Rhino?” Thimblerig replied.

“Yeah, the way that rhino’s horn was bent. He must have caught in a rock when he was little. Are rhinos ever little?”

Thimblerig shook his head back and forth. It was exhaustion. He’d been working too hard, and eating too many fermented figs at night. He’d have to slow down on that. Meanwhile, it was time to change the subject. “Why’d you cry ‘dog’ so early? I could have taken that crowd for another fifty, easy!”

“You gave the cue,” Mullins answered, more interested in munching on the fig then debriefing the con they’d just run.

“What do you think the cue was supposed to be?”

“You were jumping up and down,” Mullins answered, with mouth full of fig.

“That was the cue.”

Thimblerig pulled his ears in frustration. “That wasn’t the cue, Mullins. We only went over this a dozen times.”

“Then why were you jumping up and down?” Mullins asked, fig juice running down from his mouth.

“Never mind that,” Thimblerig groaned. “The point is, the cue was ‘eenie meenie’, as in, ‘eenie, meenie, money, me, now you have to find the pea’.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. That’s way too complicated,” Mullins said, matter-of-fact. He was a simple gazelle, concerned primarily with two things: finding his next meal and staying alive. He didn’t have time for such complex cues. “A cue should be something simple, like jumping up and down. Or a buzz word.”

“A buzz word?” Thimblerig asked.

“That’s right, something easy to remember,” Mullins answered. He thought for a moment, watching a fly buzzing around his head, attracted by the scent of the fig. “How about ‘razzamataz’?”

“Razzamataz?” Thimblerig repeated.

“Yeah, razzamataz!” Mullins perked up with excitement. He didn’t usually come up with such good ideas.

“That has to be the worst cue I’ve ever heard!” Thimblerig griped. “How the heck am I supposed to use ‘razzamataz’ naturally during a con?”

The two grifters were so wrapped up in their conversation that they didn’t notice that the light inside their undergrowth sanctuary had dimmed, as if a cloud had passed over the sun.

“It’s easy! You just look at your mark, like that sucker rhino back there, and you say, ‘it’s like razzamataz!’ when you’re doing your thing with the shells. It’s gold, Thimblerig!”

“You’re right, Mullins, it’s brilliant,” Thimblerig replied sarcastically. “But I have an even better idea. Why don’t I just look him in brainless eyes and say, ‘and now, Mr. Big and Ugly, watch as I take all your figs from under your nose and run away!’”

Thimblerig didn’t hear the snort that came from just outside their hiding place because he was too busy making his point. Had he heard it, he would have thought that it sounded like the rush of a geyser under terrible pressure, erupting bursts of hot water and steam. Mullins heard it, and warily cocked his ears in that direction while Thimblerig continued talking.

“I’m so sorry that you’re so brainless, Mr. Rhino, that you fall for the oldest con in the book, but it is the *shell game* after all...”

“Um, Thimblerig...” Mullins started.

“No, listen!” Thimblerig interrupted, fully enjoying painting the absurd scene.

“I’d say, ‘But Mr. Rhino, if you will please just stand there like the oversized chump that you are while I pick the figs out of your mouth, I would really appreciate it!’ How’s that for a cue, Mullins? Do you think you could remember all of that?”

Thimblerig sat back with a satisfied grin, picked up a particularly plump fig and fingered it, enjoying the way the shifting rays of light played off the dark purple and blue skin.

Mullins whimpered.

“Seriously, Mullins?” Thimblerig said. “If you’re going to get all upset over a little criticism, you’ll never make it in this business.”

Mullins couldn’t speak, but simply gestured behind Thimblerig. The groundhog turned and stared directly into the giant angry bent-horned face of the rhinoceros. The rhinoceros’s eyes were slitted like a snake’s, and he was shoving each breath through his enormous nostrils with the force of a small hurricane. “You called me brainless,” the rhinoceros rumbled. “That hurt my feelings.”

“Ah, Mr. Rhinoceros! We weren’t talking about you,” Thimblerig started to say, slowly rising and turning around. As he turned, he bumped into his bag, spilling out the rhinoceros’s bag, and several of the rhinoceros’s figs rolled out onto the ground. All three animals looked down at the figs and the rhinoceros snorted again.

“You took my figs?” the rhinoceros asked in an even lower pitched voice, so low that the vibrations hurt Thimblerig’s two big front teeth.

The forest closed down on Thimblerig, as if being shrunk around him, and it was hard to breathe. But Thimblerig was at his best in high-pressure situations, and so he forced a deep breath. It was time to use his golden tongue, which had saved him countless times before, and which would save him countless times to come.

“Mr. Rhinoceros, it’s not what it looks like...”

Thimblerig’s fur blew back as the rhinoceros snorted a wave of hot, angry air that smelled like the inside of an angry rhinoceros. Staring into the face as big as his body, Thimblerig’s composure started to crack.

“You see, it’s really that...” he stumbled. “...it all started when...”

A low rumble built inside the rhinoceros. It was a menacing sound, especially if you were the cause of that building rumble, and most especially if that menacing rumble was aimed right at you.

“It all started when I was a cub,” Thimblerig sobbed, covering his face with his hands. “I had a really difficult childhood...”

Thimblerig peeked out at the rhinoceros through his claws to see if he was having any effect. The rhinoceros didn’t look the least bit moved by the groundhog’s performance. In fact, if anything, he looked even angrier. Apparently he wasn’t as gullible as Thimblerig had supposed. It was time to alternate strategies.

Catching his breath on a particularly heavy sob, Thimblerig looked up at the rhinoceros with the biggest, doe-iest eyes he could muster. Paws shaking, he pointed at Mullins.

“It was his idea...”

In the second it took for the beady eyes of the rhinoceros to shift towards the gazelle, Thimblerig grabbed the bag of figs and bolted. It was a move so quick that it surprised all three of them, Thimblerig included. He zipped under the tree-trunk legs of the rhinoceros, and shot out of the shelter like a bat out of a burning bush.

“Every mammal for himself!” he shouted as he disappeared.

But Mullins had already scrambled, not waiting for Thimblerig’s shout, leaping through the underbrush in the opposite direction.

The rhinoceros yanked his head out of the thick wall of leaves and vines. Furious, he scanned the forest to the left and right, squinting as he tried to find the little groundhog in the middle of the festival crowd. He spotted him ducking behind a family of warthogs.

“Groundhog!” the rhinoceros thundered, the volume of his shout making every head turn, and then every animal attached to each turned head scattered as the rhinoceros charged.

#

Thimblerig’s first rule of escape from large, angry, charging animals was get out of sight, and do so quickly. He was a good twenty minutes away from his burrow, so escaping underground wasn’t an immediate option. Making a snap decision as he raced past the warthogs, he chose his next, best possibility – between the flabby brown legs of an overweight sloth.

The sloth had stopped slowly walking to slowly watch all the excitement. A large and surprisingly fast rhinoceros was charging after someone who had irritated it to the

point of making it want to charge. Someone, quite possibly the one the rhinoceros was after, had hidden between his legs.

He'd just been thinking that coming down from his tree for the festival was a big waste of time. After all, he moved too slowly to get any good figs, and nobody helped anybody these days. And then, just when he was about to go home, excitement had happened! The sloth couldn't remember having such an interesting time since the bananas fell.

Relieved to see the rhinoceros thunder past, and even more relieved to scurry out from underneath the sloth, who had apparently not bothered to dip himself into a bathing hole for quite a while, Thimblerig grabbed his bag of figs to head home. He was stopped in his tracks by a half dozen wild dogs standing in his path.

The wild dogs were not adorable floppy eared, warm-hearted, lick-you-in-the-face-and-play-fetch-with-sticks kind of dogs. They wouldn't curl up beside you and beg you to rub their tummies. These were the *wild dogs*, brutal authoritarian thugs, corrupt mafia, and anarchist hooligans, all rolled into one bloodthirsty pack. They would shake down animals of any shape and size for the last bite of a fig, or just for the sadistic pleasure of it. And now they were surrounding Thimblerig.

"What's that you have there, groundhog?"

A good half-dozen groundhoggian expletives flew through Thimblerig's brain as he stood before the wild dogs, but he quickly pushed them aside. Using any of those would be a good way to make sure his head ended up on a pointed stick in front of the wild dog's lair as a warning to other mouthy animals. Instead, he smiled broadly while subtly moving in front of the bag of stolen figs.

“Good afternoon gentledogs! It’s a fine festival day, isn’t it?”

“Lupo asked you a question,” one of the other wild dogs growled, moving much closer to Thimblerig than the groundhog appreciated. “What’s in the bag?”

“What, this bag?” Thimblerig answered, gesturing nonchalantly at the bag behind him. “Oh, it’s nothing, just some knick-knacks for the burrow. You know, just sprucing up the place!”

The one called Lupo laughed a decidedly joyless laugh. “Knick-knacks? Do we look like fools?”

Yes you do! Thimblerig really had to bite down on his tongue to keep from saying this. But it didn’t really matter, because Lupo wasn’t waiting for an answer. He nodded at one of the other wild dogs who shoved Thimblerig out of the way, picked up the bag by the teeth, and dumped out the contents. The rhinoceros’s figs rolled across the forest floor.

“I’ve really got to get a bag that cinches at the top,” Thimblerig muttered as the wild dogs looked from the figs on the ground to him.

“Well, well, well. What have we here?” Lupo asked. “You wouldn’t happen to be the groundhog that runs the shell game over on the east side, would you? The one that just took a rhino for a bagful?”

Any transaction, legal or not, was subject to a festival tax of fifty percent, payable to the wild dogs immediately. Of course the term ‘festival tax’ was just the wild dog’s fancy way of saying they got half of whatever you made, whether you made it legally or not. Everyone paid it because the alternative involved ending up on a pointed stick. And Thimblerig hadn’t paid the festival tax in quite a while.

Someone ratted me out, Thimblerig thought, and his options now were limited. Making a run for it was not a choice, as groundhogs were nowhere near as quick as wild dogs. If he denied being a con, they'd take all his figs and he'd probably end up on a pointed stick. If he confessed to being a con, they'd take all his figs and he'd probably also end up on a pointed stick. No matter what he did, a pointed stick was in his future.

Unless I can talk my way out of it...

"That's exactly who I am," he admitted with confidence. "You should have seen how I took that sucker! Had him right here in my paw from the start. I was just on my way to pay Kid Duffy when you stopped me. He and I have a private arrangement and he's expecting me."

At the mention of Kid Duffy's name, Lupo's eyes grew wide and the other wild dogs started whimpering. This was exactly the desired reaction. Kid Duffy was the wild dog known as "Blonger's Enforcer." Second in command of the wild dogs, and universally feared throughout the forest, Thimblerig was taking a huge risk. If Lupo called him on the bluff, he might be taken directly to Kid Duffy, and that would not go well. But one of the important rules of being a con is that you dare your mark to prove you wrong. So Thimblerig decided to up the ante.

"Actually, if you don't mind, maybe you could take me to Kid Duffy yourself? To help explain why I was late? That would really help me out. He doesn't like it when I'm late with his taxes."

Sweating profusely, the groundhog stood his ground fighting the urge to shift his feet. He stared at Lupo impassively, doing his best to project an air of confidence as he

waited to see what Lupo would do. The wild dog stared back for a few moments, sizing him up, and he began to think that his con might just work.

Lupo walked up, and stood right over the groundhog, his muzzle just inches from Thimblerig's face. His breath smelled like rotten meat. "Kid Duffy wouldn't waste time or energy on a nobody like you." He turned to the other wild dogs. "Boys, get the figs."

The other wild dogs obediently collected his winnings and dropped them into the rhinoceros's bag. Thimblerig hardly noticed what the wild dogs were doing as the words "a nobody like you" echoed in his mind. Finally, when all the figs had been collected, Lupo turned to leave.

"Wait," Thimblerig said. "You're letting me go?"

The wild dog paused but didn't turn back. "Lupo don't waste his time on nobodies either. Enjoy the festival, groundhog."

Lupo and the six wild dogs sauntered off into the crowds in possession of Thimblerig's legitimately conned figs, nipping at any animal that came too close, leaving behind a groundhog with a devastated ego, only marginally relieved to still be alive.