

Introduction: In Which We Meet Our Hero (Sort Of)

"The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose. It's also apparently run by someone with a very peculiar sense of humor and an alarming fondness for paperwork."

— Ancient Wisdom, probably from a filing cabinet

A Brief Word About Brevity

Dear Reader,

If you've picked up this tome expecting a straightforward tale of heroic derring-do, noble quests and sensible protagonists who make reasonable decisions at appropriate times, then I'm afraid you've wandered into the wrong story entirely. You might want to try the Fantasy section, third shelf down, just past the self-help books on *How to Befriend Your Inner Dragon* and *Meditation for Anxious Wizards*.

No, what you hold in your hands (or peer at through whatever mystical scrying device you prefer) is something altogether more dangerous: a story that dares to ask the important questions. Questions like "What if Tom Jones had been raised by bureaucrats with good intentions?" and "Is it possible to file a proper insurance claim for damage caused by a philosophical troll?" and most importantly, "Why does everything always happen to foundlings, and why are they never found somewhere sensible, like a nice accounting firm?"

The World You're About To Enter

Our tale unfolds in a realm where the Department of Magical Affairs requires wizards to have proper licensing before practicing any enchantments more complex than lighting birthday candles, where dragons must submit their hoarding activities for annual tax review, and where the Guild of Adventurers has implemented a strict workplace safety policy regarding dungeon exploration (hard hats are mandatory, and all treasure must be properly itemized before removal).

It is a world that operates on the fundamental principle that bureaucracy is the only true universal constant and that even the most epic of quests can be derailed by the proper application of Form 27-B: *Request for Permission to Request Permission to Embark Upon a Heroic Journey (In Triplicate)*.

Our Hero (With Significant Reservations About That Term)

At the centre of this particular maelstrom of organised chaos is one Thomlin Jupp, a foundling of uncertain parentage and even more uncertain judgment. Found as an infant in circumstances that were both suspicious and poorly documented (the paperwork was apparently eaten by a bureaucratic gnome), Thomlin grows into exactly the sort of young person who would, given the choice between a sensible apprenticeship in a respectable trade and embarking on a quest that could end in either glory or being turned into something unpronounceable by a cranky sorceress, choose the latter without hesitation.

This is, as you might imagine, both his greatest strength and his most profound character flaw.

What You Can Expect (And What You Probably Shouldn't)

In the pages that follow, you will encounter:

- **Characters** whose names may ring familiar bells, though you'll quickly discover that this Squire Westerton is not the same fellow Fielding wrote about (this one has considerably more scale, both physically and vocally)
- **Romance** of the sort that can only flourish between individuals when at least one of them isn't entirely human and the other has strong opinions about the proper way to organise a spice rack
- **Adventure** that adheres strictly to all relevant safety regulations while still managing to be thoroughly inadvisable
- **Humour** of the variety that emerges when you take the human condition, add fantasy elements and let the whole thing marinate in absurdity until it achieves the perfect consistency of organised pandemonium
- **Philosophy** disguised as footnotes, which is where all the best philosophy lives anyway

A Word of Warning

Before you proceed, it should be noted that this story contains scenes of bureaucratic absurdity, metaphysical discussions conducted by characters who probably shouldn't be trusted with sharp objects and potentially three instances of someone trying to explain the meaning of life while hanging upside down from something.

If you are allergic to irony, satire or the notion that maybe, just maybe, the universe is playing an elaborate practical joke on all of us, you may want to consult your physician, philosopher or local librarian before continuing.

The Beginning of Our Beginning

And so, with all appropriate disclaimers filed in triplicate and the proper permits obtained for the commencement of a narrative involving one foundling, several questionable decisions and a cast of characters who would probably be denied insurance coverage in any sensible universe, we begin.

Our story opens, as all the best stories do, with paperwork.

End of Introduction

"And thus begins a tale that proves, once and for all, that bureaucracy is indeed stranger than fiction. Mainly because fiction has to make sense."
— Chapter 1, waiting in the wings with considerable trepidation