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CHAD, JUST

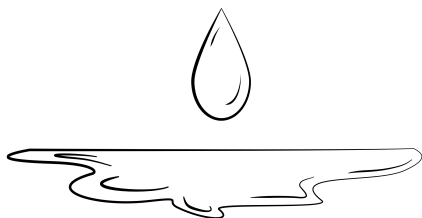
CHAD

The Many Adventures of Chad – Part
1

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Royal Forest Publishing

PART I



The rain struck the window in irregular staccatos as Chadwick gazed out to the yard. He wanted to work on the secret fort he'd been building in the woods west of the castle grounds, but the rain trapped him inside.

Puddles dotted the walk and lawn leading to the gardens, where he practiced his Batair patterns under the watchful eye of his father. The practice was intended to promote flexibility and help Chadwick come in tune with his essence, but he never felt *out* of tune with his power. His father always scolded him for moving through the stances too quickly. Well, scolded was too strong a word for how his father reprimanded him. No matter what, Lorrin's voice was always even,

almost lazy, like the tone Chadwick would expect from a bear after it'd eaten its fill of salmon and then had nothing to do but sit and digest.

"Chadwick?" Unfortunately, Mother also spoke in a bored-bear voice. "What are you thinking about?" Her rocker creaked quietly as it tipped forward and back again, accompanied by the gentle rasp of her thread pulling through leather.

What had he been thinking about? The answer returned to him, but he hesitated to say, knowing his father would disapprove of his response. He shrugged and scrunched his lips to the side.

His father, with his eyes now lifted to Chadwick's expression, cleared his throat, and Chadwick cringed. Throat clearing was the closest Lorrin came to yelling, and *the speech* usually followed. "You are almost ten and the prince of Efren. Compose yourself, Chadwick."

"Yes, Father." Chadwick turned his back to Lorrin and studied his own reflection in the glass. He struggled to smooth the creases between his brows and remove the downward arc to his mouth. It felt silly not to frown when his instinct said he should. Satisfied with his expressionless face, he turned back to his parents.

Lorrin had returned his attention to his work; thank Galen he had, or Chadwick might have received another sermon on the importance of mastering his emotions. His chest deflated a moment later when he noticed Mother, the leather blouse she'd been beading forgotten in her lap, waiting for him to answer her question.

He chewed on his tongue, trying to remember what the exact question had been. Idly, he tapped his fingers on his trousers as he traced back to moments before. He started counting the ceiling planks as he waited for the question to return to him. Really, he couldn't explain why he had a hard time concentrating. Twenty-three planks. How many planks would he have to scavenge to finish his fort? Nine would

probably cover it. Unless he wanted a peaked roof. He wasn't sure how to construct one, but he—

“Chadwick?” Mother said.

His brows bunched, and his eyes met her teal ones. Ever so faintly, her lips pressed together. What they struggled to hide, he hadn't a clue.

Mother strung a turquoise bead onto her thread. “What were you thinking about while you were staring out of the window?”

“Puddles!” That was it. Satisfied at catching the loose thought, Chadwick's lips quirked to the side.

Lorrin cleared his throat again, and Chadwick's lips fell back into a flat line, the sudden feeling of pride vanishing.

“Puddles?” Mother asked, her needle stilling again. “That is an odd thing to spend your time thinking about.”

Chadwick shrugged. “I was wondering what it would be like to jump in one.”

He imagined it wouldn't differ greatly from splashing in a river, though he hadn't done much of that. He almost smiled at the thought of cold water spraying against his ankles, but caught the expression before it betrayed what he'd begun to feel. Then again, he might hate it. The rain would pelt his face and drip into his eyes and his clothing would stick to his body. It was probably best he'd never jumped in puddles before.

Lorrin shuffled his papers, set them on the desk, and steepled his fingers. “Why do you know it would be a bad idea to jump in puddles?”

Chadwick thought back over his words. He'd never said it'd be a bad idea, had he? “I didn't—”

“Did not,” Lorrin corrected him. “You are not to speak like a vulgar human.”

Chadwick's chest swelled as he prepared to sigh. Lorrin's eyes pinned him, like he knew exactly what Chadwick was about to do. Lungs protesting, Chadwick released the sigh slowly, so it made only the faintest hiss in the back of his throat.

"I did *not* say it was a bad idea," Chadwick replied, "but I should *not* jump in puddles because it will get my boots wet."

"Any other reasons?" Lorrin tapped his pointer fingers together.

"I may get sick while out in the cold." Chadwick's face bunched. "That's a silly reason though, because Mother can heal my sickness with essence." Chadwick looked at the ceiling as he thought. Essence gave the elves the ability to heal anything, well almost anything. So far, Mother hadn't failed to heal any of his cuts, or bruises, or sicknesses. "Even if I slip and hurt myself in the rain, or—"

The sharp sound of a throat clearing cut him off. Chadwick's face became stone again. The real reason his father didn't want him to play in the puddles became clear; it'd probably be so much fun, Chadwick wouldn't be able to contain his reaction.

Casting his eyes to his boots, Chadwick said, "Jumping in puddles isn't—" He bit his tongue and corrected himself, "is *not* a good idea."

"I agree with your conclusion," Lorrin said, rising from his desk and gathering his papers. "I have a few items I need to speak with Master Barnum about. Chadwick, I expect you tonight for Batair practice. We will meet in the east hall. You are still moving through *Woodpecker Pierces the Grub* too quickly."

Chadwick nodded, but said nothing. He'd already tried to explain he'd seen Master Barnum travel through the same pattern at twice the speed as he did. Maybe when he was fully grown, he'd also be allowed to decide the speed at which he completed the pattern. Something felt right about removing the fluidity of those stances and making them crisp and powerful.

Making a blade with his hand, Chadwick placed it vertically against the tip of his nose and inclined his head, bowing respectfully to his father. Lorrin returned the gesture, brushed the top of Mother's head with a kiss, and left the room.

The rocker creaked again as Mother resumed her stitching. "Chadwick, do you have an answer to *your* question?"

He contemplated counting the ceiling planks again as he tried to recall the question, but then he remembered there'd been twenty-three, and that number wasn't likely to have changed.

She pushed her needle through another bead, and it landed against the others on the thread with the tiniest ping, a sound not much different from the drops pelting against the window. "What would you feel if you splashed in a puddle?"

"I am not sure." He unhooked the window latch and then quickly fastened it again. "I would hate it, or I would find it pleasant. Either way, I should not jump in puddles."

"Why not?" Mother set her needlework aside and came to join him at the window.

"I already have a hard time... concentrating. I fear I would not be able to contain myself, no matter if I hated or enjoyed puddle jumping. I do not wish to disappoint Father." Any more than he already did, but he kept that thought to himself.

"What's the worst he'd do?" A sharpness entered her tone. "It's not like he'd yell at you, Galen knows he wouldn't dare raise his voice or even twitch an eyebrow." The bite in her tone both intrigued and frightened Chadwick. Maybe he wasn't alone in the effort to keep emotions at bay. Mother traced her finger down the glass, following a rivulet's path. "When I was little, long before elves forgot how to feel, I used to splash in puddles. I think you would react as I did."

“What was it like?” His eyes widened. Catching the slip, he looked toward the ground, silently scolding himself.

Mother didn’t answer, only followed another raindrop as it raced down the window. Finally, she asked, “Why do you think we restrain our emotions?”

“Because we are more than our emotions. They do not control us. We control them.” That was a simple question. His father had recited that often enough.

Her lips pursed almost imperceptibly. “Long ago creatures came to Effen. They had let anger and sadness torment them into becoming monsters, who then slaughtered many elves. Despite wanting to seek revenge, your grandfather was determined to have the elves rise above such monsters, so Effen would never become like them. Without emotion, there would always be peace.”

He’d heard the story countless times, but it still didn’t settle right. He shook his head. “Why can’t we enjoy the good emotions while suppressing the bad?”

“Once you let one emotion in, it is much easier to accept others.”

“It doesn’t make sense.” Chadwick couldn’t keep the anger from his voice. “It’s like enduring the agony of eating all my broccoli instead of hiding it in my napkin and then being told I still can’t have dessert. I’m rewarded for controlling bad feelings by being scolded for wanting to experience the good ones.”

Mother brushed strands of long black hair from his face and tucked them behind his pointed ears. As her hands combed through his hair again, she froze and flicked her gaze out the window. Water still fell from the clouds in a delicate sprinkle. Her lips tugged up to one side in what Chadwick could only imagine was a smile. He couldn’t recall a time he’d ever seen a grown elf smile, but it filled his chest with warmth.

“Get your boots on, Chadwick,” Mother said hastily.

“But—”

Mother’s face fell back into place, cold as stone. “Boots. Now.”

PART 2



Chadwick slipped his arms through his coat as he walked under the covered path and stopped beside Mother. She crossed her arms, watching the rain gather into the puddles scattered across the yard. Each drop rippled the surface of the pool and created a small splash, prompting more water beads to further disrupt it. The puddle roiled like a miniature tumultuous sea. What it must be like to sail through a storm. Frightening, most likely. Still, the longing to survive a sea storm tickled Chadwick's curiosity.

"Well?" Mother asked, glancing down at him.

He wasn't sure what she expected him to do—just walk out into the rain? It seemed a rather illogical thing to do, and yet his limbs tingled with desire. Gently, she pressed against his back. Chadwick took sluggish steps forward. Rain tapped his head, and cold bullets of water pricked his face. His boots sank into the sodden earth with a squelch, a sound both disgusting and oddly humorous.

As he slowly lowered his foot into the first puddle he came to, his leather boots kept the water from seeping in, but they couldn't keep the pressure at bay as the pool squeezed around his foot. The sounds of the rain thankfully hid his sigh. Disappointment weighed on his chest. He hadn't known what to expect, but this, the cool weight of water against his foot, felt anticlimactic.

"Chadwick," Mother called from under the shelter of the walkway, "how does it feel?"

He took his foot from the puddle. "I am satisfied," he lied. "I do not like jumping into puddles." Indeed, his hair clung uncomfortably to his neck and cheeks, and his coat had grown heavy over his shoulders, the tassels across his chest losing their gentle sway as the rain weighed them down.

Through the veil of rain, he swore he saw Mother frown, but he had to be mistaken. She had too much discipline for that. He looked back at the little puddle, its surface still a torrent of miniature waves, and sighed again.

The puddle exploded as slippered feet landed in its center. Water sprayed across his face and chest, driving away the depressing thoughts. Instantly, he felt invigorated. He looked up, wide-eyed, into Mother's face.

She smirked. "Seems you don't know how to jump in a puddle, son."

An odd feeling, one he hadn't experienced in years, accumulated deep in his belly. It toiled up to his chest, pressed against his throat, and finally burst from his mouth.

Laughter.

His hands shook as he turned to another puddle, pushed off his feet, pulling his knees as high off the ground as he dared before driving them back down again. His boots slammed against the surface, which resisted him for only a moment. Chilled liquid flew into the air, further dampening his clothes, and though they grew heavier, his soul, the essence churning in his chest, soared.

He leapt again and again, from one pool to another, laughter bubbling from his throat until his sides ached and lungs protested. Still, he splashed. Mother kicked water at him, sending a frigid spray across his face. Wiping his eyes, he laughed harder and returned the attack with one of his own.

Shrieking, she shielded her face with her hands. "You'll regret that." She bared her teeth and growled playfully.

A spike of fear—no, not fear, excitement, maybe—shot through him. He yelled and ran away, feet sticking to the squishy grass. Three steps into his flight, he slipped and landed hard on his rump. He threw himself back to lie on the ground, and he let the rain drench him from above and the puddles soak him from below as he enjoyed the smell of a freshly washed earth. Surprisingly, it smelled a lot like mud.

Chadwick struggled to place what he was feeling. Happiness felt too content. Fear, too strong. Excitement, too weak. And mirth, not scary enough.

He propped himself on his elbows, gazing up at Mother, her raven hair a tangle of knots, her face flushed, and he asked, "What am I feeling?"

She smiled. No, she beamed, like a sun that couldn't be hidden by clouds. She lifted her arms and stared up into the rain and laughed. The sound was so beautiful, his ears ached for more. It was a crime his people rejected such pure expression.

"What you are feeling is called exhilaration." She pulled him to his feet and darted across the yard, splashing in every puddle along the way.

"Exhilaration," he whispered. The word tasted delicious. He craved more. He didn't think he'd ever stop wanting more.

"Chadwick," Mother called in a singsong voice.

He turned just as another spray of water hit him. He lifted his foot to return the favor, but Mother froze, and her head twitched to the side—a sign not to. Fingers dug deep into his shoulder and he had to clamp his teeth to keep a yelp from escaping.

The sound of a throat clearing swiftly crumpled his joyous feelings and rammed them down his throat, deep into his belly.

"Get inside, Chadwick."

He met the frosty blue eyes of his father. The grip on Chadwick's shoulder spoke of Lorrin's anger, but his face betrayed none of it.

"I need to speak with your mother."

PART 3



Chadwick stared out the window again. The sun shone brightly through the pines and bathed the forest in a warm glow. Outside, his father oversaw several elves, who leveled the low places in the lawn, filling them with dirt and sprinkling them with seeds. A sigh threatened to escape Chadwick, but he restrained it.

In the glass, he could barely make out his own face, forever molded into an expressionless mask. Never mind that on the inside, Chadwick's emotions twisted in a confusing slush. He couldn't decipher one from the other. Perhaps that was the point of this practice. If he

couldn't identify the feelings, then maybe he'd stop feeling them. His chest only burned hotter, though.

"Chadwick?" Mother said from the door. He barely heard her steps whisper across the woven rug. "What are you staring at?" Her voice didn't pique at the end of her question. It didn't sound like she wanted to know the answer, but he knew she did.

Turning, Chadwick shrugged, and Mother clasped her hands in front of her. It was a subtle sign that meant she wasn't satisfied with his response.

"Father is filling in the low places in the yard." He looked at his bare feet and wiggled his toes over the rug, remembering the cool sensation he'd felt when the water had finally soaked into his boots. "I do not think I will be jumping in puddles again."

He turned back to the window, his eyes focusing on the glass rather than through it. An emotion showed on his face, and he struggled to iron out his brows and lift the corners of his lips. Jumping in puddles was ridiculous, anyway. Why should he want to jump in them?

Because it was exhilarating, and he wanted to feel that again.

Mother placed a hand on his shoulder. He dared to catch her reflection in the glass and was surprised to find her expression mirroring his. Her mouth curved downward and brows pinched. Turning to study her, he found hers wasn't exactly like his. There was a sharpness there, an intensity to her eyes that frightened him.

She knelt and pressed her palms to his cheeks. Mother's teal eyes bore into his, and she smiled, white teeth bright against her russet complexion. "There are many kinds of puddles in this world. Splash in every one of them. Get into mischief, Chad. Lots of mischief."

After a kiss to his forehead, she stood and left the room, closing the door quietly behind herself.

Chadwick looked out the window again, to his father nodding his approval of the now flat, patchy yard. *Get into mischief, Chadwick.*

No. Not Chadwick. Mother had shortened his name. He liked that. He focused on the glass again just as his lips slowly crept up, revealing his teeth.

Chad. *Just* Chad.