

CHAPTER ONE

In which our story begins

The city of Stent sits snuggled beneath the towering slopes of Mount Stent, its walls wrapped tight in the soggy blanket of River Stent. Right in the middle of the city is St Radomir's Square, which on market day is full of stalls, animals, selling and arguments.

On the north side of St Radomir's Square is the Clock Tower. Everyday at noon, the mechanical figures of the red knight and the green knight come out and fight, and the green knight always wins. Above the clock is a golden disk, shaped like the sun and bearing the face of Duke Ambrosius the Brave. He looks towards the East Gate of Stent where he earned 'the Brave' by defeating the invading army of Shunt.

And that's the story I'm going to tell you now.

Hang on. The title of this book is 'Gilbert the Liar'. Nothing about any Duke Ambrosiuses.

Glad to see you are paying attention. Oh, that's you by the way, my intelligent reader.

What's me? And how do you know I'm intelligent?

The *italics* is you. There's no one else here is there? I'm only one book. And as for the intelligence, are you going to tell me you're stupid?

OK, it's me. So answer the question.

This is a story about Gilbert the Liar, and about Duke Ambrosius the Brave.

So it's a story about two people?

Three people, as we mustn't forget Anna Helman who turned out to be as important as the other two put together.

CHAPTER TWO

In which Gilbert is introduced

On one of the little streets running off St Radomir's Square is a shop. Today, it sells beautifully expensive shoes, but back in the day, when my Story happened, it was a baker's shop. There was a baker called Kurt, with a wife called Lily and a son called Gilbert.

And this is Gilbert the Liar?

He could be; this is a story about a lad called Gilbert who was a liar.

So it is him. And he's the hero of the story.

Hero's going a bit strong for someone who tells lies all the time. Let's just say he's an important character.

Gilbert was a nuisance from the beginning. As soon as he could walk he clambered everywhere in the bakery. He climbed into the flour bins and hid there for a morning, driving his parent's mad with worry until they heard coughing from the bins and found a ghostly boy inside. Just before Christmas he ate all the cinnamon straight from the jar, which meant Kurt's special Christmas buns were not as Christmassy as usual. He cornered the cat, covered it in jam and would have got it into the oven if Kurt hadn't heard the screeching and rescued the animal (which took a week to lick itself properly clean).

Gilbert became even more of a nuisance when learned to speak he, because he couldn't – or wouldn't – tell the truth.

He was a liar.

He was a liar. Where he got that from no one knew. Kurt was truthful, Lily

was honest, but Gilbert couldn't give a straight answer to a question.

When Mrs Rappen, his teacher, asked what the time was by the town clock he was always three hours out. When, to trick him, she asked if five and five were eleven, Gilbert either agreed or say they made twelve. It wasn't that he was stupid, or didn't know the answer, because he wasn't and he did. He just couldn't bring himself to tell the truth.

By the time he was twelve Mrs Rappen had had enough. One afternoon, after a dreadful geography lesson, she called on Kurt and Lily and told them everything Gilbert had been doing. When she had finished they were ashamed and shaking. The town clock was striking five when Gilbert strolled into the shop and snatched a bun off the shelf.

As he was heading out again Lily asked, 'How was school.'

Gilbert leaned against the counter and took a bite out of the bun. 'Mmm.'

Lily gave him another chance. 'Did anything happen at school?'

Gilbert nodded. 'There was a bear. It frightened Mrs Rappen away.'

Kurt's eyebrows sank low over his eyes. 'That's not what I heard.'

Gilbert shrugged.

'I heard you got all the european capitals wrong.'

Gilbert shrugged again. 'There's a lot of them and they keep on changing. I learnt them all when I was six, and now they're all different. I don't see why Mrs Rappen should get angry about that.'

'Oh Gilbert,' Lily said, 'they can't all have changed.'

Gilbert picked a raisin out of the bun, eyed it closely then popped it in his

mouth. 'When I was six, Paris was the capital of England. Now she tells me it's somewhere called London. I don't see why I should bother to keep up with that.'

'Well you won't have to,' Kurt said.

'Are they changing them back then?'

Lily took tight hold of Gilbert's arm. 'No Gilbert, Mrs Rappen has forbidden you to go back to school.'

Kurt glowered. 'Worse than that, she'll be buying her bread from Lazlo's.'

Gilbert twisted free from his mother's hands. 'Well,' he said, as he reached the door, 'that's one less delivery to make.'

The next morning Gilbert was sleeping soundly when someone shook him awake. Gilbert rolled over and pulled the covers over his head. The horrible person pulled the covers off him.

'Come on Gilbert, time to get up.'

Gilbert rolled over again. 'Get off. I'm not getting up, I don't have to go to school.'

Kurt opened the shutters. 'Just because you aren't going to school doesn't mean you can stay in bed. It's four o'clock and there's work to do.'

Gilbert sat up. 'You've let me sleep all day?'

Kurt laughed, far too loudly. 'No, it's four in the morning. You need to come and fire the oven, we need to start baking.'

Gilbert slumped back. 'There's no such time as four in the morning.'

Kurt chuckled. 'Just be glad you haven't start in the winter when it's dark

until ten.' He opened the window. 'Be downstairs in five minutes. Or else.'

Normally, Gilbert would have ignored Kurt, but there had been an unusual edge to him this morning. Gilbert gave it quarter of an hour, then stumbled downstairs.

'What's for breakfast?'

Lily looked up from the bench where she was rolling dough for gingerbread men. 'Fresh warm rolls, jam and coffee so strong you can stand a spoon up in it.'

Gilbert twisted his mouth. 'Is that all?' he said, even though his mouth was watering.

Kurt was kneading a mound of dough. 'That's it, or at least it will be once this,' he pushed the heel of his hand into the dough, 'has become rolls.'

Gilbert was indignant. 'We have to make the rolls?'

Kurt kept his rhythm. 'No one else is going to.'

'This is stupid,' Gilbert said, and turned his face to the wall.

That didn't do him any good. Kurt set him to work. Gilbert fired the oven, floured trays and set out rolls and buns, sprinkling poppy seeds over the buns, and sesame seeds over the rolls. When the town clock struck eight and Lily set out the rolls, jam and coffee, he barely had strength to eat and drink. He didn't notice Kurt and Lily smiling at each other.

But with his breakfast inside him Gilbert felt much better, much more himself. So when he had to help Lily serve the people of Stent their bread, cakes and biscuits he was not the help he was supposed to be.

When they asked him for sesame rolls he filled the bags with poppy buns. When they wanted white bread he gave them rye. When they opened their bag of cream horns they found cup cakes. And none of it was Gilbert's fault. The people were stupid, had a poor memory, couldn't ask for the right thing. Even when they turned up with a shopping list Gilbert blamed their handwriting - after all, hadn't he been made to leave school because the teacher said he was too clever. There was only one person who ever got exactly what she came in for, but she deserves a chapter to herself.

It took three days for Kurt and Lily to realise that if they let Gilbert serve their customers they soon wouldn't have any left. So they set him to making the morning deliveries. But Gilbert got lost (in the town he grew up in) couldn't find the house or mixed up the parcels: the mayor's daughter's birthday cake ended up at the cobbler's and the orphans' bread was left with the town guard. Even when Gilbert got the right parcel to the right house he took so long that everyone was hungry. After a week of that, Kurt and Lily didn't dare send him on any more deliveries.

The only thing they could let Gilbert do was work the ovens, and even then he needed watching, to make sure he didn't let the fire die or leave things to burn. Most of the time they had him cutting firewood at their woodpile against the town walls, but it took him five times as long to chop a basket of kindling as anyone else. But what did they expect? The wood was always too dry, too wet, too knotty, too straight and the axe was too heavy, too light, too blunt and too sharp.

When Kurt and Lily heard that Albert, the son of the fishmonger, had run away from home to become a soldier they sighed and almost wished that Gilbert would do the same. But Gilbert gave no sign of doing anything so useful.

CHAPTER THREE

In which we learn about someone else

In the last chapter I told you there was one person who always got the right bread, buns or biscuits. Her name was Anna, she was the clockmaker's eldest daughter and she lived next door to the bakery.

So why did Gilbert give her the right cakes?

Well, let me tell you how lovely she was.

Ah.

Anna was as slender as a pencil, her hair was as black and glossy as a beetle's wing case, or, at a stretch, coal.

Coal? That's not attractive.

I've got a problem here: the Rules of Story-telling only let me use the good similes for important people. If she had been Princess Anna, Duchess Anna, or even Lady Anna, then I could have told you she was as graceful as a willow, had hair as black as ravens' wings and lips as red as blood, or berries. But as she was only the clockmaker's daughter I have to settle for telling you her skin was pale as paper and her lips red as red as a very, very red, red crayon.

Very, very red, red crayon. Is that the best you can do?

I can't use 'blood' or 'apples'. Them's the Rules.

Oh come on. Try a little harder.

Lips as red as tomatoes. Skin as pale as a Caerphilly cheese?

No, stick with the crayon and paper.

Thank you. She was as slender as a pencil, her hair black as a beetle's

wing case. Her skin was pale as paper and her lips as red as a very, very red, red crayon. Her voice was as gentle and tuneful as a well-played recorder and her smile as cheering as a glass of lemonade on a hot day.

I can picture her now.

Anna was also becoming a very good clockmaker and she had practiced grinding lens for spectacles or telescopes until she was better than her father.

Useful skills.

Indeed. Now, Anna had played with Gilbert when they were children, and she had been to school with Gilbert. She knew him very well, too well.

So, she didn't like him?

Not one little bit. But in a place as small as Stent it wasn't very easy to avoid someone completely, unless you wanted to spend your whole life in the cellar. So Anna saw Gilbert most days. Sometimes she would find him hovering by the door of the bakers when she came to buy bread. He would bow very low and ask 'what her desire was?' At other times she would bump into him on her way to the market in St Radomir's Square and Gilbert would walk along beside her and try to start a conversation.

Anna was both polite and kind; she was, by the standards of Stent, a lovely young woman (actually, by most standards she was a lovely young woman), and she didn't like to upset anyone, even Gilbert. As it was very difficult to tell someone to go away without upsetting them, she would let him walk beside her. The worst thing was not his occasional attempts to hold her hand, but his stories.

As his classmate, Anna knew Gilbert had left school because Mrs Rappen refused to teach him any longer, not because she had taught him everything she knew. Anna knew, because she lived next door, that Gilbert rarely did what he was told, and that his parents sent him to chop wood to keep him away from the customers. She knew his parents' despaired of him (because they told her parents over a glass of wine and a cake of an evening), so she couldn't believe that they were going to send him to university in the capital. She also knew – because she wasn't stupid – that Gilbert hadn't wrestled a wolf, had dinner with the Duke, or invented a new type of cake.

She might have felt a little sorry for him, except that Gilbert showed no sign of being sorry for himself: quite the opposite, he seemed to believe all his own lies.

CHAPTER FOUR

In which we mainly learn about Castle Stent

One May morning, shortly before his seventeenth birthday, Gilbert was stoking the fire in the bakery oven when Kurt was called away. Gilbert took his chance. He grabbed a couple of warm rolls from a tray and headed out to chop firewood, at least, that's what he told Lily.

In fact, when Gilbert reached the woodpile he settled himself into a little nook he had created out of the larger logs and a sheet of canvas rescued from a backyard. He ate his rolls and wondered if anything new would ever happen to him in the utterly dull town of Stent.

He was still wondering, when something new did happen. A largish log clipped off the pile and struck him hard on the head. Gilbert stumbled to his feet, rubbing his head and swearing, ready to punch whoever had thrown the log (so long as they were smaller than him).

But find out who threw the log at Gilbert's head we need to go back to the previous afternoon, and up to Castle Stent, which clung to the side of Mount Stent like a grey fungus.

It was lunchtime in Castle Stent, and everyone was eating, resting or having a short rest before eating again. Except in the little back room, behind the Honourable Ambrosius' dressing room, which was behind his bedroom, which was behind his sitting room. In that little back room, someone was packing a bag. He wasn't putting too much in it, mainly pants and socks, a couple of

books, a shirt, spare trousers, an extra pair of boots (and some thick socks to go with them), another shirt, and a third, in case was a long time between washes, a jacket and a few more pants, another book and a towel.

So who was doing the packing?

It was the Honourable Ambrosius, the heir to the dukedom of Stent.

Why was he packing his own bag? Surely he had a valet or a steward, or a footman, or some kind of servant.

He had all of those, but he thought it was a bad idea to ask his valet to pack his running-away bag. So today, for the first time in his life, as part of his running away plan, the Honourable Ambrosius was packing his own bag. Given it was the first time he'd made a plan and packed a bag it wasn't a bad plan and the bag was tidy.

Never mind the tidiness of his bag, why was he running away? Surely being Duke of Stent was something to look forward to. Being in charge, having a castle, telling everyone else what to do. I bet half the people in Stent would like the job.

They would. But if you talked to the other half you might find a few reasons why you might not want to be Duke of Stent.

And are those the reasons the Honourable Ambrosius is running away?

No. It isn't so much a thing as a person.

Did he hate his father?

Stop guessing, I'll tell you who it was later. And don't nag, because I won't tell you until I have to. But back to the Honourable Ambrosius.

Can we drop 'the Honourable' for the moment?

He packed his bag and put it back into the cupboard. Then he wandered through the castle, apparently aimless until he crossed the Great Courtyard and went into the Western Ramparts, where the carpenters and stone masons had their stores. The ramparts were deserted as the carpenters and stone masons were having lunch in the servants' hall along with Gustav the steward, Eduardo Ambrosius' valet, the footmen, bandsmen and most of the guards. Ambrosius walked into the stores – he didn't creep, not round his own castle – and lifted a long rope off a hook. There was a sack, so he put the rope in the sack and returned to the little back room, where he put the sack in the bottom of the cupboard, next to his bag and set of old clothes he had collected over the last fortnight.

The Great Clock in the Great Courtyard tolled two. Gustav, Eduardo, the cooks, carpenters, stone masons and guards grumbled out of the kitchen and went back to stewarding, valeting, cooking, carpentry, masonry and guarding. When Eduardo reached his master's rooms he found Ambrosius was reading, as he had been before lunch.

One of the things about castles, one of the main things about castles, is that they are designed to stop people getting in. Castle Stent had a pit with real bears between the first wall and the second wall, not to mention the cannons, gun-loops, and the very, very, tall third wall, but Castle Stent was not designed to stop people from getting out.

Late that night, or early the following morning – depending on whether you are the sort of person who goes to be early or stays up late – Ambrosius slipped out of his bed and crept through his dressing room (where Eduardo was sleeping on a fold-away bed) to the little back room. There was a glimmer of moonlight which was enough for Ambrosius to get dressed in the old clothes from the cupboard. He unlatched the window and pushed it silently open: he had oiled the hinges earlier in the week. He pulled his rope out of the sack and fed the two ends around the mullion.

Ambrosius watched the ends crawl down the castle wall like grey worms. Suddenly he felt a light sweat on the back of his thighs and his legs tingled unpleasantly. He had never liked heights and tonight he was glad his room was on on the south wall of Castle Stent, where the ground rose highest. He hoisted his bag on his back and took a last look around the closet. It was a shame to be leaving Castle and not to be the next Duke of Stent, but he was certain it was the Right Thing To Do.

He took hold of both parts of the rope and clambered very carefully out of the window. He hung on the rope for a moment, surprised at how heavy he was, then paid the rope out slowly, half walking, half bouncing his way down the walls of Castle Stent. He daren't look down. More and more rope passed. Was there going to be enough?

Soon his feet were no longer bouncing off the stones of the walls, but off the rock of Mount Stent. A few bounces more and he had reached the proper ground, where the ground sloped away to the first of the meadows. Ambrosius

got his footing and leaned against the rock until his arms stopped twitching. After a few minutes he pulled down one side of the rope until the whole lot cascaded on top of him like a mound of snakes.

The rope didn't feature in the plan again, but leaving it would make it too obvious how he had left Castle Stent. He coiled up the rope, put it over his shoulder and slithered down the rest of the slope until he came to one of the rough goat tracks that ran around the crags of Mount Stent.

The rough track took him through a wood, where there was a little stream. Ambrosius knelt down and peered at his reflection. Even in the broken water, his face was far too clean. He smeared a little mud across his cheeks and forehead, and, to complete the effect, he ran a streak of mud along the ridge of his nose.

He walked on through the wood and out into the meadows above the town. Below him, the town of Stent was waking up for the day (although the bakery chimney had been smoking for hours). He found a broader path which joined up with the main road to Stent. In less than an hour Ambrosius, heir to the dukedom of Stent, arrived outside the West Gate of Stent on a beautiful May morning.

He found the gate was shut, because he was too early.

CHAPTER FIVE***In which there is an unusual meeting***

Ambrosius didn't hammer on the West Gate, he didn't need the attention. Instead he sat on a stump by the side of the road and gnawed bits off the half loaf he had in his bag. While he was eating a farmer arrived at the gate with a horse and cart, and two old women turned up with baskets of vegetables for market.

High above St Radomir's Square the clock on the Clock Tower struck six. The gate rumbled open. Ambrosius went up to the oldest of the two old women. 'Let me give you a hand with your basket there.'

The oldest old woman squinted at him. 'You're going to make off with it aren't you?'

Ambrosius blinked. 'No, madam, I merely thought I could be of assistance.'

The oldest woman pushed him away. 'Your smooth words don't fool me, you young villain.'

The youngest old woman sidled up to Ambrosius. 'You can carry my basket, young man.'

There was something in her voice which made Ambrosius a little uneasy, but he took the basket. The youngest old woman clamped her arm around his and they walked through the West Gate of Stent together. Later that day, when the guards were questioned about a lad entering the town on his own, they hadn't seen one, because they had seen a grandmother and her helpful

grandson.

The youngest old woman kept a tight grip of Ambrosius' arm even after they had reached the town square. 'Can you help me set out my veg now, ducky?'

Ambrosius set down the basket in the shade of the fountain. 'I am afraid not, old woman, I must be about my business.'

He wriggled out of her grip and walked briskly across the square and down one of the side streets. And it was at the moment he left the square, that he got to the end of his plan. He had put a lot of effort into packing his bag and getting out of the castle, but he hadn't worked out what was going to happen next, except that he was going to his cousin Vladimir's castle which was somewhere on the far side of the mountains. He walked down the narrow street, where the upper stories of the houses jugged out over his head, wondering exactly what he was going to do next.

Stent was not a big place, so it didn't take him long to reach the town wall. Very importantly for our Story, he turned right.

Why is turning right so important?

If he had turned left his father's guards would have found him by lunchtime and he would have been back at Castle Stent and the thing that he was trying to avoid would have happened.

And what exactly was he trying to avoid?

All in good time.

He turned right and followed the town wall for a while. When he came to

a pile of wood stacked against the wall he sat down. It wasn't very comfortable, so he pulled out the log that was sticking into his buttocks and threw it over his shoulder. There was a woody clunk, an 'Ow' and a lot of swearing. An angry young man stood up in the middle of the wood pile.

Ambrosius jumped back, surprised. It wasn't just that the angry young man had appeared from the woodpile, it was also that the angry young man looked exactly like him.

Gilbert saw lad of his own age staring at him. He held out the log. 'Did you chuck that?'

The stranger stood there, eyes wide and mouth hanging open, but oddly familiar.

'What are you staring at?' Gilbert snapped.

'You'.

'Nobody told you it's rude to stare?'

The stranger blinked. 'I can only apologise. I can only imagine the magnitude of the surprise robbed me of my manners.'

Gilbert rubbed his head. 'I don't see why it should be a surprise, everyone knows I bed down here of a morning.'

'Finding someone hiding in a wood pile is unexpected, but it is more astonishing to find a person hiding in a woodpile who looks exactly like oneself.'

Gilbert didn't like it when other people lied to him. 'You're talking

rubbish. No one looks like me.'

The stranger laughed, but in a strained sort of way. 'I'd have said that a few minutes ago, but now, I'm not so sure.' He glanced around, then pointed at a dank puddle, 'Come with me and I'll show you.'

Reluctantly, but intrigued, Gilbert went with the stranger and looked into the puddle. Two faces stared back at them. Two faces which were very much the same.

Hang on. How come Gilbert and Ambrosius look the same, when one is the baker's son and the other is the son of the Duke of Stent? It seems like a bit of a coincidence.

I wouldn't call it a coincidence, more one of the WONDERS OF STORY-TELLING.

Hmm. I'd still call it a lucky coincidence.

And what's wrong with a coincidence? Show me a story without a coincidence and I'll show you a story which is dull and unrealistic.

Never mind what you call it: how did it happen?

Well now, the Honourable Ambrosius was not the first of his family who didn't want to be Duke of Stent. About ninety years earlier, the Honourable Alfred, who was the Honourable Ambrosius' great-great-great-great-uncle, ran away from the palace and eventually became a baker, leaving his younger brother to be Duke Anton.

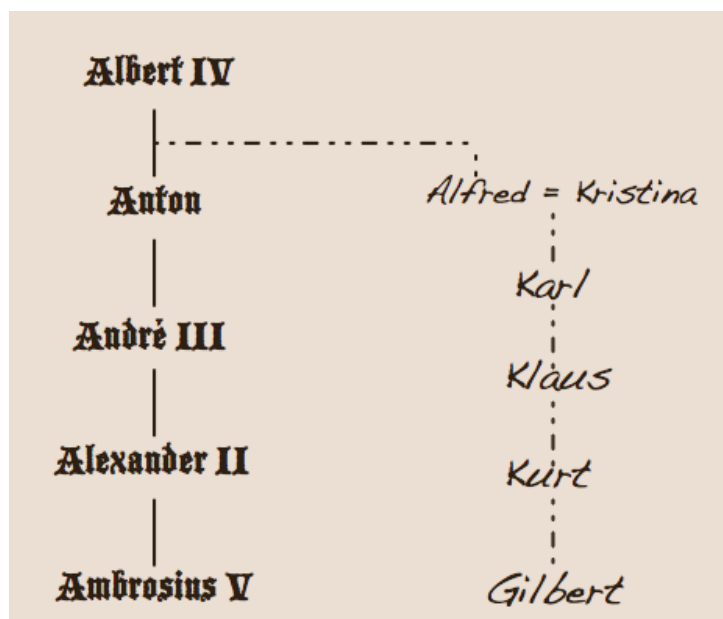
Did no one want to be Duke of Stent?

A few, but most people didn't fancy the job. Anyway, that isn't the point of

the story. Alfred ran away from the palace and became a baker. He married Kristina a girl from Stent and they had a family. And the family had a family. And that family had a family. And in that family there was a little boy called Gilbert.

You've lost me there.

This might be easier with a family tree:



So, Duke-to-be Ambrosius and baker's son Gilbert were sort of cousins and, by the WONDERS OF STORY-TELLING, looked almost identical. The only real difference was the scar on the Honourable Ambrosius' forehead, where his nurse had clipped him with the edge of a spoon. Remarkably, the log which Ambrosius had thrown – unknowingly – at Gilbert, had made a mark on his forehead which had exactly the same shape.

CHAPTER SIX***In which someone has a bad idea***

Gilbert grinned. 'We look exactly the same. How much fun can we have with that.'

The Other Him stared. 'I don't have time for pranks and japes, I need to leave Stent as soon as I can.'

Gilbert slapped him on the shoulder. 'You can leave Stent as soon as we've played one prank.'

'I'm sorry, I really don't have time.'

'It's simple. All you've got to do is to walk down the street and wave at the baker as you pass the bakery. Then just go round the corner and wait for me.'

The Other Him frowned. 'What is the point of that?'

Gilbert hugged himself. 'Don't you see? They'll think it's me. Then I'll walk by, really soon after you, and they won't understand how I've got round that quickly.'

'So there isn't any point.'

Gilbert raised his arms in exasperation. 'The point it they'll think it's me but it won't be. Isn't that enough?'

He watched the Other Him, who seemed to be thinking: that or he found his own feet fascinating. Finally the Other Him looked up. 'I suppose walking down a street pretending to be someone else won't hold me back for long. Very well. I shall pretend to be you and wave at the baker.'

'And if there's a girl by the counter of the clock-maker's, give her a

friendly wave, but don't be disappointed if she doesn't wave back.'

'Why won't she wave?'

Gilbert shook his head sadly. 'Her mother disappeared last year and so she's taken a vow not to wave or smile until her mother comes back.'

'Goodness. Should we be teasing her then?'

Gilbert leaned in. 'Her doctor told me it's the best possible treatment.'

'Then it would be unkind not to.'

'Exactly.'

The Other Him took a couple of paces towards the clockmaker's then came back.

'Lost your nerve?' Gilbert sneered.

The Other Him ignored the comment. 'What's my name, in case anyone speaks to me?'

Gilbert was so surprised at the question that he told the truth. 'Gilbert.'

'Thank you, Gilbert,' said the Other Him and walked towards the bakery.

Gilbert watched. The Other Him had a certain confidence, he didn't skulk around the edges of buildings or stay in the shadows, but walked straight down the middle of the street. The Other Him slowed at the clockmaker's and waved through the door. He seemed to have a conversation with whoever was inside. Then he walked on. Or tried to. Because, just as Gilbert had expected, Kurt came storming out of the bakery and dragged the Other Him inside, berating him about the temperature of the oven.

Gilbert fished the last roll from his pocket and settled to watch the bakery

door. He pulled pieces off the roll and rolled them into pellets which he popped in his mouth.

Gilbert waited for an hour, but the Other Him didn't come out. He must have cheated by sneaked out of the back door of the bakery and running off. Gilbert shuffled to his feet. It was time to see what was happening in the square, with luck there might be a stray cat to torment.

He went the long way round, to avoid the bakery. As he rounded the corner onto the square one of the Duke's guard pushed past, flattening him against the wall. Without thinking, Gilbert pulled the last half of roll out of his pocket and lobbed it at the guardsman. It was a good shot and the half roll caught in the brim of his hat.

Gilbert whooped, then wished he hadn't. The guardsman turned and blew on a whistle. Gilbert wasn't waiting for a beating. He turned and ran. Straight into the arms of two more guardsmen.

But they didn't beat him. They didn't even touch him. They stood around him, very close, until more guardsmen arrived, together with a sergeant.

The guardsman with the half-roll in his hat spoke up. 'This is him, sarge, he threw something at me.'

Gilbert laughed. 'It's still in your hat.'

While the guardsman took off his hat to find the roll the Sergeant looked at Gilbert very carefully. 'It looks like him right enough.'

'Yes sarge, he's even got that scar on his forehead.'

The Sergeant walked round Gilbert. 'He's not in the right clothes.'

'But that doesn't mean nothing sarge, he could have traded them.'

'True enough Hans. He's grubby though.'

'Could just be the clothes, Sarge.'

'Could be, Hans, could be.'

Even though he was unnerved by the guardsmen, Gilbert couldn't keep quiet. 'Who do you think I am?'

The Sergeant took a step back. 'Well, your honour. I think you are Ambrosius, only son of Duke Alexander of Stent.'

Gilbert held in his grin. The Other Him was going to be more fun than he had expected. 'As if Ambrosius would be wandering the streets of Stent.'

The Sergeant's face twisted. 'Seeing as how your honour climbed out of your closet window and down the walls of Castle Stent while your valet slept in the next room, I'm not surprised to find your honour in Stent.' He took a pace closer and lowered his voice. 'Although, I would have thought your honour would have been able to get further than the town square in a morning.'

Gilbert smiled his most annoying smile. 'Would you Sergeant? Well, you should know by now that I don't do anything to keep in with your expectations.'

The Sergeant stiffened. 'No sir. No reason why you should, sir.' He turned to his men. 'Let's escort his honour back to the gate. There's a horse waiting there.'

The guardsman who had had the roll in his hat nudged the Sergeant's arm. 'Are you sure it's him?'

The Sergeant wiped his moustaches. 'And who else could it be?'

'I don't know Sarge, but there's something about him.'

The Sergeant took another long look at Gilbert. 'Now you mention it, there is something.'

The soldier who wasn't Hans agreed. 'Yes, it's. It's.'

The Sergeant sucked his cheeks. 'Exactly.'

Gilbert looked from one to the other. He wasn't losing his dukedom that easily. 'Is there a problem, Sergeant.'

'A problem your honour? There's only a problem if you aren't Ambrosius. We wouldn't want to bring the wrong person back to the castle. There'd be all sorts of trouble.'

Gilbert tilted his head in what he hoped was a ducal gesture. 'What sort of trouble?'

The Sergeant grinned so broadly his face wrinkled like a walnut. 'You know the bear pit?'

'Between the first and second walls of the castle?'

'That's the one.'

'What of it?'

'If, just if, some who looked like the honourable Ambrosius, pretended to be the honourable Ambrosius, and then turned out not to be the honourable Ambrosius, that person would end up in the bear pit. Eventually.'

Gilbert didn't like that eventually.

The Sergeant looked him up and down. 'So, your honour, bearing in mind the bear pit, and eventually, are you indeed the Honourable Ambrosius heir to

the Dukedom of Stent?’

Gilbert’s brain said ‘no’, his common sense said ‘no’, but out of habit, out of a general desire to be annoying, but mostly out of sheer perversity his mouth said ‘Yes’.

The Sergeant stamped to attention in front of Gilbert. ‘If you say so sir. If we march briskly we can be back in the castle in time for lunch.’