



**I**t was a warm spring and the king and queen took their breakfast on the balcony outside their private apartments, enjoying the fresh air without the burden of any sort of protocol. The sun was warm without burning and the sky was bright without making them squint. For the queen it was almost perfect. The only thing spoiling the moment was the subject of their conversation. It was, however, a talk they both knew was overdue.

‘He needs to grow up,’ she said, sipping her tea. ‘We’ve spoiled him, I fear.’

‘It’s very hard not to spoil a prince,’ her husband, the king replied gruffly. ‘No doubt my father spoiled me. A prince must feel superior. How else can they ever become a good king?’

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The king's stomach was bursting free of his thick white dressing-gown and as he reached for another pastry the queen marvelled at how time changed them all. The handsome young prince she'd married had disappeared, swallowed up by this bear of a man. It had been a good marriage though, difficult as she found the endless pressures of royalty, and in the main he had been a good husband as well as a good king.

'Still,' she added. 'He's our only child. I think perhaps we've been too soft on him.'

'Perhaps you're right,' he grunted. 'He must soon marry and start a family of his own. He should attend more council meetings. Undertake more training with the generals for when he must lead the army. Learn to understand the revenue as he promised to.' He paused and frowned. 'What does he do with his time anyway?'

The conversation wouldn't have started if they hadn't seen their only child, the hope of the kingdom, their handsome golden boy, staggering up the castle steps in a wine soaked shirt as they'd taken their seats on the balcony that morning. It had become something of a habit, as a quick chat with the servants had revealed. Being out all night at inns and houses of ill-repute with various other young

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men of noble birth, then sleeping most of the day away. Occasionally riding out with the hunt, but too often not.

It was all, perhaps, to be expected of a young man, but it was becoming a lifestyle and that would not do. Their boy was going to be a king one day, and that would require a level of gravitas and respect that he currently did not have. The queen looked at her husband again. He was no longer a fit ox of a man. His face was red and veins had burst on his cheeks. He was carrying far too much weight. Her son's destiny might be closer to hand than any of them liked to think – and although no parent liked to think it of their own flesh and blood, the queen had become concerned of late that her boy would not rise to the challenge.

'We need to find him a good woman,' she said. 'Someone with a calm temperament and a clever brain.' It was easier to consider the qualities of a future wife than to discuss the flaws in the prince.

'He'll want a pretty wife,' the king muttered and then smiled at his queen. 'I was lucky. I found that truly rare creature: a woman with both beauty and brains.'

The queen said nothing but shared a contented

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moment with him, knowing that the king too felt they had spent their years together well. Yes, she suffered from terrible headaches and various forms of anxiety, but she had been a good advisor to him behind the closed doors of their rooms and when he'd strayed, as kings, the most spoiled of all men, were wont to do, she had shrugged it away and known that he would be back in her bed before long. It was a royal marriage after all, and she'd had romance before it, a long time ago. Romance and—

'He needs an adventure,' she said, the words out before she'd really thought it through. 'All these wild nights; they're not good for him. He needs a proper adventure.'

'Hmmm,' the king said. 'The thought had occurred to me. But to send him from the kingdom? Our only son?'

'A king needs to know the outside world,' the queen said. 'He needs to understand how the nine kingdoms are different. Why they are at war. Perhaps find a way to make peace with an enemy. He can't do any of that here.'

The king knew the wisdom of his wife's words and somewhere in the recesses of his mind a memory stirred. 'My grandfather had such adventures, you

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know. When I was a child he told stories of visiting a faraway land and rescuing a girl from a tower by climbing her hair.'

They both laughed at that and the queen's eyes twinkled. 'I hope he was a slim man at the time.'

'I'd break your neck before I'd got one foot on the wall, wouldn't I?' The king shook his head. 'A crazy story from a crazy old man. But still, I think there is something to this adventure idea.'

The queen watched as her husband slipped off into his own thoughts. His eyes were narrowed and she knew better than to speak and interrupt him. Her seed was sown and now he'd be trying to determine the best kind of adventure for their son to have. One that was important enough, not too dangerous, but which might benefit the kingdom. After all, the kingdom was the only thing that mattered when everything was said and done.

She sipped her tea and leaned back in her chair, gazing up at the turrets far above her and the many, many windows that glinted brightly in the sunshine. Her head was mercifully free of pain and today there were no official engagements or lunches with noble women for her to attend. Birds sang in the trees. Below them the city rumbled into life. She felt content with her lot.

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'I think I have it,' her husband said eventually. 'I think I have the very thing.'



The king spoke to his son about it over dinner. Being a relatively wise king he invited several influential noblemen to dine with them, along with their sons. A prince was as likely to bow to peer pressure as any other young man, and now that the king and queen had made their decision he would brook no arguments from his son about the task he was about to set him.

'Plague?' the prince said after his father had started speaking. 'What kind of plague?'

'I don't know,' the king answered. 'It might just be a legend. All anyone knows is that deep in the heart of the forest, near the base of the Far Mountain, there was once a wealthy city. A tenth kingdom. The story goes that nearly a hundred years ago a terrible plague struck the city. The forest, rich with magic so close to the mountain's edge, closed in around it, the trees and brambles growing so high and thick that the city and all its people were sealed off and lost forever.'

'And no one looked for them?' the prince asked.

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His venison sat untouched on his plate and the king was pleased to see the story had his son’s attention. But then the boy had always chosen romanticism over practicality.

‘Perhaps they did, but the forest didn’t allow them to be found.’

‘Surely they could have cut themselves free from the other side?’

‘But they didn’t. Which leads me to believe that the entire population died very quickly.’ The king paused. ‘But of course, all the treasures will still be there. And if the city could be found, it would make a welcome addition to our kingdom. A lucrative discovery, a useful outpost for keeping an eye on our enemies or a perfect place to host peace talks between warring kings.’

‘And you want to find it?’ the prince asked.

The king smiled and sipped his wine. ‘No, my son. I want *you* to find it. Every prince should go out into the world and have an adventure before settling down. This will be yours.’

Several of the young men around the table burst into excited chatter and the prince, the jewel at their centre, grinned. ‘Then I shall find it for you, father! I promise you I shall!’

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The huntsman had been lost in the dream when his father woke him. It was the same dream he'd had for several nights and it was so powerful that the echo of it stayed with him during the days. There was a girl with hair that tumbled in thick curls down her back, as red as autumn leaves. She was running through the forest and he was chasing her, following the flashes of her hair and the echo of her laughter, but all the time her face was out of sight. He ran as he had as a child, with no sense of awareness of the changing shape of the forest around him and without the tracking skills that had become second nature to him as a man. Nature didn't matter. The beasts that lived around him didn't matter. The forest itself, so much a part of him, no longer mattered in his dream. All he cared about was finding the girl who stayed so elusive ahead of him. His breath rushed in his ears and his heart raced.

He sat up with a start, for a moment confused by his surroundings. His father grinned at him. 'The girl again?'

He nodded.

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‘I told you. She’s your true love. You’re lucky; not many get the dreams. But if you do, you have to find her.’

‘Well, she’s not in the village, that’s for sure.’ The huntsman stretched and yawned.

‘And a good thing too. You’ve had most of the girls here. Or they’ve had you.’

They smiled at each other, good-natured, easy with the natural way of men and women, and how frequently they tumbled into bed with each other until wedding vows claimed them. Men and women both were just animals after all, and life in the forest could be hard. Comforts had to be taken where you could get them.

‘Why did you wake me?’ The huntsman, said as he shook away his sleepiness and pulled on his shirt. Beyond the glow of his father’s torch, he could tell it was still dark outside and the air held the crisp scent of a chill spring night. It wasn’t dawn, but maybe two or three in the morning.

‘The king’s men want you.’ His father held up a hand. ‘It’s nothing bad. They want the best young huntsman and the elders have all chosen you.’

‘*I am* the best,’ the huntsman muttered. ‘But what do they want me to hunt?’

He peered out the window and saw several soldiers

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in shining uniforms, sitting high on thoroughbred horses.

'They want you to babysit the prince. Be his companion on a trip to the edge of the Far Mountain.'

The huntsman's heart fell. He had no time for kings or princes. From what he'd heard around the campfires on the long winter hunts, nothing good ever came from their company. 'Can't he take care of himself?' he asked.

His father snorted with laughter. 'He's a prince. He's no match for the forest. He'll be lost within a day. Starving within two—'

'—and eaten within three,' the huntsman finished.

The horses outside pawed at the ground, picking up on their riders' impatience.

'I don't have a choice, do I?' he said, reaching for his knife and his axe and his old leather bag for carrying food and water.

'No, son, you don't. The king's decided his boy needs an adventure.' His father's tanned, wrinkled face looked like a craggy rock face in the gloomy light. 'But maybe you do too.' He smiled. 'Maybe you'll find that redhead of yours out there.'

'The girl of my dreams?' the huntsman said, wryly.

'Stranger things have happened.'

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'If this prince doesn't get me killed first,' he said and stepped out into the night. He didn't look back at his father, or at any of the huntsmen and women who had gathered in front of their small cottages and huts to watch him leave. Long farewells weren't their way. He'd either come home or he wouldn't. Huntsmen knew each other well enough to know the things that were so often said by other men – and to know how rarely they were meant. He climbed up on the back of a waiting horse and patted its neck. The beast whinnied as nature recognised nature, and then they were gone, leaving the the village behind in the pale pre-dawn light.



The huntsman had been to the city before but had only visited the markets on its edges. The castle at its heart glittered like a diamond when the sun hit the banks of sparkling windows, but it had always seemed like an illusion in the distance. It was beyond him how men could build such edifices and he wondered how many ordinary people had died cutting, dragging and lifting the thousands of quarried stones that made up its smooth, perfect surface. He wondered if the king ever wondered that.

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Now that he was standing in front of the man, he doubted it. Gruff and ageing as the king was, he had sharp, cool eyes within his fattening face.

'They say you're the best of the huntsmen,' the king said as he studied the man before him. 'That no one knows the forest as well as you.'

'I know the forest, that's true,' the huntsman answered. He had no intention of expounding upon his own skills. The king had already formed his opinion, otherwise they wouldn't be face to face. Boasting just set a man up for a fall, and the only reason to boast would be to somehow ingratiate himself with the king for personal favour or political gain. The huntsman wanted nothing from the king for, unlike so many, the glittering life did not appeal to him. He neither understood nor trusted it.

'And you're good with a knife? And a bow?'

The huntsman shrugged. 'I'm a huntsman. Those are my tools.'

'You don't say much,' the king said, smiling as he leaned back in his vast, ornate throne, inlaid with rubies and emeralds so large that the huntsman could almost see his reflection in them. 'I like that.' He waited for a moment as if expecting the huntsman to respond to his praise, and then his smile fell to seriousness and he continued.

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‘The prince is my only son. He needs an adventure. He also needs to come back alive. He is my heir and the kingdom needs him.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ the huntsman said. ‘But I am only one man.’

‘If you were to return without him, it would not end well for you.’ Any pretence at warmth had vanished from the king’s face. ‘Or for your village.’

His father, not without an adventure or two of his own below his belt, had warned him about the merciless ways of the rich and royal, and the king’s threat came as no surprise. ‘As I said: I’ll do my best, your majesty. My best is all I have to offer.’

The king frowned for a moment as he tried to work out whether the huntsman was being ignorant, obtuse or just speaking plainly in a place where every sentence was normally laden with subtext, but eventually nodded and grunted.

‘Good.’ He ran thick fingers over his ruddy cheek. ‘The prince must never know about this conversation. He knows you are to be his guide, and that your skills will be needed to pass through the forest, but he must believe that he’s the hero in this tale, do you understand? Your role in protecting him must never be spoken of.’

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The huntsman nodded. He had no time for heroes or stories or tales of true love, despite his own dreams.

'Good,' the king said again. 'Good.'



The huntsman met the prince down by the stables where he was choosing their horses, fine steeds whose muscles rippled under their glossy dark hides. The prince was as blond as the huntsman was dark and his easy smile charmed all those around him. At least he looked fit, the huntsman thought, and they were of a similar age. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad journey. The prince shook his hand vigorously and then pulled him close, patting the huntsman heartily on the back.

'We leave at first light,' he said and then winked. 'Which gives us all night in the taverns to give this city – and its maidens – our farewells! There will be wine and women for us, my new friend, before we leave to find a new castle for the kingdom!'

The huntsman forced a smile as his heart sank. He had no problem with wine and women – especially not with the women – but it appeared the prince was in danger of believing the legends of his princely deeds even before he had done any. That was never

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good. When huntsmen got too cocky they normally ended up gored. What would happen to this fine, handsome prince, he wondered. And how on earth was he going to save him from it?