

*“A quest? Surely you jest.”*

“A quest? Surely you jest,” Bayerd drawled from the chair where he was lounging with his feet propped up, while his latest manservant tended to his toenails.

“No, I do not jest. Nor does Queen Hellenor. She summons you to attend her. She will tell you all about the quest herself.” Kelp stood by the opened door of their chamber as if she expected Bayerd to jump to his feet like a little bunny and hop along to visit the queen that very moment.

He did not bestir himself. Instead, Bayerd reached for another pastry. His hand found nothing but an empty platter. Hadn’t there been a dozen pastries on it when Irvette carried it in? Surely he hadn’t eaten a dozen? No, Marsdale, his manservant, must have been sneaking pastries when Bayerd wasn’t looking. Now he would have to order another dozen. “A quest?” He chortled. “Ridiculous nonsense. You must have misunderstood your auntie, my love.” He scanned for the handy handbell he used to bring the servants running.

“I did not misunderstand, dearest,” Kelp said.

“Well, then she is rambling. She is getting on in years. Perhaps her mind is losing its sharpness. Like an old sword, it must be getting dull.” Bayerd spotted the hand-bell behind a bowl that was depressingly depleted of cheese curds or any other delectable nibblies. Perhaps Marsdale had had his sticky fingers in there as well. Bayerd rang the bell energetically to summon Irvette.

Kelp marched across the room and yanked the bell right out of his hand. “My auntie’s mind is not dull. It is as sharp as a freshly forged blade and she is waiting to tell you about your quest.” She seemed to be speaking through gritted teeth. Perhaps she had a toothache. Bayerd hoped not. Kelp had lovely teeth for a royal—for anyone, and he would not wish her beauty to be marred by a gap-toothed smile.

“What sort of quest?” he inquired, to humour his wife, who had surely misunderstood the queen.

Kelp looked a bit shifty-eyed when she said, “Um ... I’m not sure. Queen Hellenor hasn’t said much to me. She will reveal the details to you herself. She wants to see you in her private quarters without delay, as I have already said, twice. Now get up.”

Bayerd did not get up. He frowned. “Her private quarters? But they are located at the far end of the castle. If she wants to address me, shouldn’t she come here?”

“She is the queen, Bayerd. You go to her, she does not come to you.”

“Well, that doesn’t seem right if she is the one who wishes to speak with me. And why would she want to send me on a quest now? It seems highly unlikely. I’m sure you’ve misunderstood. The anniversary of our nuptials is fast approaching. Hellenor wouldn’t send me on a quest now. It might cause me to miss the grand celebration. I’m going to perform the tale of the night we met—the night I saved you from a herd of dragons.”

“Again?”

“I haven’t performed it for at least a month. High time the castle folk had a treat.”

Kelp appeared to roll her eyes, but surely that was due to a fleck of dust or dirt. She must have gotten something in her eye, blown in through the tower window on the light breeze. And it sounded like she sighed, but that was undoubtedly the same warm summer breeze gusting in through that very same window.

For a year now, Bayerd had lived like a prince, and why shouldn’t he live like a prince? He was a prince, although in truth, his title was an honorary one. He was lowborn and had lived a lowborn life until he and Princess Kelp had met each other one starry night in the forest, the night he had saved her from dragons—or at least one dragon. And she might have lent him a helping hand. Although that particular tidbit was rarely mentioned, at least not by him, and the rest was history—a history he had embellished quite lavishly for the sake of his reputation as a professional storyteller.

Since then, they had lived in wedded bliss, which is not great fodder for tales. He hadn’t scripted a new adventure since he had said ‘I do’, but his old stories were so wonderfully entertaining, and so well performed, that no-one ever complained when he hopped upon a tabletop to relive his glory days in

words. Well, no-one complained except for Orson, Bayerd's good and true friend from the time before he was a prince. And since Orson was inclined to be broody, he complained about everything under the sun anyway, hence his words were without merit.

Bayerd turned a deaf ear whenever Orson started comparing Bayerd to a plump pampered pussycat or some such indolent creature. Orson was presently away from the castle on an errand for the queen and Bayerd did not mind the respite from his good and true friend's disparaging comments, which were clearly inspired by jealousy, since Orson had not been dubbed a prince and had not married the most beautiful princess in the land.

Queen Hellenor still ruled the Golden Kingdom, but she was getting older and creakier by the minute, so Kelp stood by her side at all official functions now. Soon enough, Kelp would rule the Golden Kingdom with her golden-haired husband cutting a dashing figure by her side. Bayerd looked forward to the day when he could wear a kingly crown, rather than the small princely one he now had to make do with.

"Bayerd, Queen Hellenor is waiting. I will accompany you to hear what she has to say about this quest." Kelp tugged on his arm, trying to raise him up.

Bayerd glanced down at his toenails. The last one hadn't yet been trimmed and polished. "Oh, fine, if I must." He sighed dramatically, so she would know just how put upon he was feeling. "But wait until my last toenail is polished. Mr. Pinky needs to look his best for the queen." This time, he saw Kelp roll her eyes heavenward, and he knew it didn't have a thing to do with dust.

"My aunt will not be examining your toenails, dearest, especially since I am sure you will wear your favourite golden jewel-encrusted slippers to her rooms."

Bayerd sniffed. "True enough, but I'll feel unbalanced if only nine of my ten toenails are in top form." Kelp rubbed her temple. "Have you another headache, sweetling?" he inquired.

"I do feel one coming on."

"You seem to be getting more and more headaches of late. Have you seen the castle physician?"

She nodded. "He wants to bleed me, and that is not the cure for my headaches."

"I don't think that is the cure for anything other than blood poisoning. And has he said anything about why you've not conceived?" Bayerd asked. Kelp had been hoping to be blessed with a child in her belly by now, but it had not happened, and truth be told, that was fine by Bayerd. Children were whiney and sticky; he thought of them as a curse rather than a blessing, and he was a man who knew all about curses. A howling babe was a curse he could well do without.

Bayerd's attempt to distract Kelp with conversation long enough for Mr. Pinky to get polished was unsuccessful. "Marsdale, get out now," she snapped at his manservant.

The fellow should have checked with Bayerd before he hightailed it from the room, but he did not. He fled without even a glance in Bayerd's direction.

"So much for loyalty. I think I'll have to replace him," Bayerd huffed, studying his unfinished toenail with regret.

"It is not proper to keep the queen waiting," Kelp said, nostrils flared and arms crossed. The frown line between her eyebrows was becoming a permanent fixture.

"Oh, I suppose it isn't. Although I'm sure you've quite misunderstood her about this quest business, or Hellenor is losing her marbles." Bayerd stuffed his toes into his golden jewel-encrusted slippers and rose. He stretched and donned his finest fur-trimmed cape before he sauntered over to Kelp's side and kissed her between the eyebrows. She grabbed his hand and started marching. He was towed along in her wake all the way to Hellenor's private rooms.

The queen's oversized guards, one on each side of her doorway, did not bar their entrance, proving they were expected. The queen's ladies whisked them inside without delay, and then made themselves scarce. Hellenor was waiting on her upholstered couch, which was sagging with age, just like her face.

"Queen Hellenor," Bayerd said with a graceful bow that almost popped the button on his trousers. They had been let out twice by the tailor already, and there was no more spare cloth in the seams to let them out a third time. His wardrobe had gotten uncomfortably snug over the winter. Perhaps it was time for a new wardrobe. Fashion was an ever-changing beast, and Bayerd certainly shouldn't be behind the

times. The castle folk needed someone to hold in esteem in regards to what should and should not be worn.

“Bayerd, have a seat.” Queen Hellenor waved a bejeweled hand at the opposite couch.

He sat and glanced around at the nearby tabletops. They were all disappointingly empty. “No tea? No pastries?” he inquired.

“Not this morning, Bayerd.”

“Are you sure? Because my butler ate all my morning pastries, and I’m feeling a might peckish.”

“I’m sure you can survive without pastries until the noonday meal,” she said more crisply than was necessary.

“Well, so much for the social niceties,” he muttered.

Kelp narrowed her eyes at him. “Listen. Don’t speak!”

“Aren’t you going to join me, sweetheart?” He patted the place beside him—close beside him.

“I would rather stand.” Kelp looked at her aunt most beseechingly. “Pray continue, Auntie. Tell Bayerd why you have summoned him.”

The queen inclined her head once, with regal aplomb. “Yes. Bayerd, I am sending you on a quest.”

Bayerd chuckled. “Oh, I think you’ve made a little mistake there, Queen Hellenor. Surely you meant to summon someone else, not me. Perhaps it is Orson you want. He is a fine chap to send on a quest, what with his long strong sword arm, and he does so enjoy a good quest. Why, I’m sure he’ll be back from his errand in a day or two. How about I send him to see you as soon as he turns up? And you can tell him all about this quest.”

The queen’s lips tightened, making them look as wrinkly as a dried prune. “I have not made a mistake, little or otherwise. I am sending you, Prince Bayerd, on a quest. You will leave the castle on the morrow, at first light.”

Bayerd stopped smiling. “What? Leave? Tomorrow?” Panic wrapped around him like a dragon’s tail, squeezing until he could barely draw breath. He had rarely ventured outside the castle walls this past year, since he had learned in the most painful ways imaginable, exactly how dangerous it was out there, what with the fire-breathing dragons, and hellcats running wild, and murderous men in miniature, and then there were the harpies. No man was safe from their clutching talons, their beaky lipless mouths, their scaly black-tipped breasts, and their unholy appetites.

“But ... but...” he sputtered, “I’m not really in the mood for a quest. The dog days of summer are upon us, and travelling in the heat can make a man quite sweaty and overheated. Horses don’t like it either, or dogs, I shouldn’t think. Probably why they’re called the dog days, because dogs don’t like the heat any more than men. And of course it is much hotter outside the castle walls.” Not to mention dangerous, but he didn’t say that aloud. He did not want anyone, especially Kelp, to think him a coward. No, he was simply rambling, or ranting, or some unflattering combination of the two.

“Regardless,” the queen’s wrinkled lips pulled into a tight little smile, “you will do as I command and you will leave tomorrow on this most important quest.”

“But Orson’s not back yet. I can’t go on a quest without Orson, now can I?” Everyone in the land knew that Bayerd was easy pickings without Orson’s sword to protect him. And even Orson had not been able to protect him from what lurked outside the castle walls.

“This quest is not a dangerous one, so you will be fine without Orson,” Kelp said, which was odd, since she had claimed to know nothing about the quest.

“But ...but ... our anniversary fete is fast approaching. I can’t miss that. You wouldn’t want me to miss that, would you, Kelp?”

She did not reply and avoided his gaze.

The queen said, “The quest should not take more than a month, so you will be back in plenty of time for your anniversary fete. Perhaps you will even have some new tales to tell for the occasion.” Her words sounded like a command masquerading as a hint. “You do know how I love a good story.”

“Yes, Queen Hellenor, I do. Why, I could tell you one right now, if you like,” Bayerd said, hoping to distract her from the silly quest business.

Alas, she was having none of it. "I will choose two of my royal guards to ride with you. That should suffice," she said.

Bayerd was fast running out of excuses to stay safely inside the castle walls. "But ... I have obligations here." It was a blatant falsehood and they all knew it.

"Then we will simply have to muddle along without you until you return," the queen said gently, but with final authority. A crook of her baby finger would see his head lopped off, so she could certainly order him on a quest. And if he didn't leave willingly, she could have him catapulted over the battlements in a fantastic bloody display that would end his quest before it even began.

He slumped, knowing when he was beaten. "Well ... I will leave tomorrow then. But two men? Perhaps I should take a hundred, just in case we encounter ... bandits or some such."

The queen glanced at Kelp before she said, "Four of my knights will ride with you."

Four didn't seem like nearly enough. "Perhaps fifty, in case we meet a whole band of murderous cutthroats."

The queen sighed. "Six and not a man more."

"Six? Are you sure six will be enough for this quest? Uh ... what is the quest?"

"Did you bear witness to the fire that streaked down from the heavens last evening?"

"Not with my own eyes, but Kelp saw it. She claimed the ground shook when the heaven fire impacted with the earth." He adjusted his vest, which was riding up, allowing several rolls of fat to loll out. "I was already abed, so I missed the excitement." In truth, he had been passed out from too much drink, to keep the nightmares of harpies at bay. It had become his nightly ritual.

"You have told tales about such fire coming down from the heavens," the queen stated.

"I've told a few such tales." Bayerd could guess where this was going. "T'is a precious piece of the heavens sent to earth dressed in a coat of flame. The crystal will have magical properties that will bless the lucky man who possesses it. Why, I once met a man who had charge of just such a magical rock - " Bayerd was about to launch into one of his most fantastical tales when Kelp cut him off.

"We have heard that tale, more than once, more than twice and more than thrice. Now listen to your queen," she ordered in her steeliest tone.

Queen Hellenor cleared her throat. "Bayerd, I charge you to find the spot where the heaven stone hit the earth. Find the stone and bring it back to me. Guard it with your life - "

"Perhaps not with his life, Auntie," Kelp cut in.

"Oh, well, not your life, Bayerd, but do your best to find it and get it back here to me."

The quest didn't sound too hazardous, except that it required venturing outside the castle walls. Yet with six of the queen's knights to protect him, Bayerd supposed he could manage it. And it's not like he had a choice. A royal command was just that—a command. Unless he feigned an illness. Yes, a sudden illness might well discharge him from the quest.

He rose and bowed. The button finally lost the battle to hold his trousers closed. It popped off and flew across the room to land in the queen's lap. Bayerd pretended he didn't notice. The queen pretended likewise.

He said, "As you wish, Queen Hellenor. I shall seek this heaven stone, I will find it and bring the precious gift to you. And I will guard it with my very life." He was lying through his teeth. He fully intended to wake up so very ill the next morning that he would not be able to crawl out of bed, let alone go on a quest.

Kelp tucked a hand under his elbow and turned him toward the door. "You leave tomorrow, Bayerd. You must pack, and arrange a horse that is steady and won't toss you off at every turn. You had best get to it."

He crossed the room, one hand discreetly holding his pants in place. He expected Kelp to accompany him, but she did not. He was herded right out the door, and that door closed behind him, rather hard, with Kelp on the opposite side.

"I'll return to our rooms and await you there," he called through the thick wood, ignoring the two oversized guards who were looking down at him with just a touch of smirk. He marched away, holding up his trousers and mulling things over. Something was not right with his Kelp. Perhaps he should have

noticed sooner, but he was a man and he had not. He usually had to be told things, and she had not told him that something was amiss. Yet in his heart, he suddenly knew there was.