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The Lost King

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Chapter 1

CHAPTER ONE

"Moo."

Moo? King Bewilliam frowned. What was a cow doing in the throne room?

"Moo."

King Bewilliam no sooner had set his gaze on the Bell Castle's richly-veined marble floors, the opulent woven tapestries, the straight lines of courtiers resplendent in their gold-braided uniforms than it all vanished.

His heart jolted and he felt a pervasive icy chill.

"Moo."

I'm asleep, the King thought. I'm dreaming. I need to wake up. He opened one eye. He had been dreaming but what vanished was not the cow but the throne room. Instead, the sight that greeted him was another eye: big, brown, and deep.

King Bewilliam opened his other eye and found himself face-to-face with a large Guernsey regarding him with mild curiosity.

"Moo, moo," said the cow although to the king it sounded distinctly like "Who, you?" which, it seemed to him, was an excellent question given the circumstances. Was he not King Bewilliam, ruler of the Chalklands, master of Bell Castle,? So what was he doing here staring down a cow? He shook his head to clear the fog of slumber. One by one, the details of his surroundings impressed themselves on him: the cool, moist dawn air; the dewy grass on which he lay; the dark canopy of the oak tree arching over him. And the cow.

King Bewilliam eased into a sitting position and looked about. In the thin light of daybreak he saw many cows grazing in the pasture that surrounded him. What was he doing sleeping in a cow pasture? his waking mind struggled to know.

Oh yes, it was where he had come to rest after walking all day. He hadn't talked to a single person, having kept his distance, avoiding questions about who he was and what he was doing here. He knew who he was: first-born son of a noble line, raised to rule, trained to lead and now, a grown man, husband to Queen Daya, and father of princes. What he was doing here in this unfamiliar place, his crown nowhere to be found, his fine tunic and leggings tarnished and soiled, his boots scuffed, was a

mystery to him.

Well, an inquisitive cow wasn't all that unfortunate an encounter. At least there would be breakfast. He rummaged his mug from the pouch at his belt, then hesitated. He scanned the area for onlookers who might accuse him of poaching. There were none.

"Here, Boss." He stroked the cow's sturdy flank to gentle her, then milked her. As he worked, he observed how strange many might find it that a king would, much less could, milk a cow. Certainly, Bell Castle's milkmaid who had shown him how had thought so. Yet even as a young prince, the workings of things fascinated him. He would pester every maid, knave, squire, knight, and lady to show him the why and how of what they did.

His meager breakfast done, he turned the ermine-lined cloak that had been his bed inside out and knotted the ends together, making it into a shoulder sack. It would have been easier to wear the weighty cloak across both shoulders than to lug it on one but he knew he mustn't be seen wearing it. No one would believe that a vagabond like him rightfully owned such a fine garment. It would be seized and he might be imprisoned as a thief. Nevertheless, he was reluctant to part with it. The cloak had served well as bedding when he found himself sleeping out in the open.

He finger-combed the grass from his red curls and observed that his hair had gotten unseemly long. So had his beard, he discovered as he ran his hand over his face. When he reached a town, he would need to visit a barber. First, however, he would need to raise some money to pay a barber, not to mention buy a decent meal. His stomach growled in agreement. Apparently the birds had beaten him to the berries. He quickly banished from his mind the image of the generously-laid groaning boards to which he was accustomed before it could further exacerbate his hunger.

He sighed, hefted his improvised sack, and set off.

The morning sun had strengthened by the time King Bewilliam spied the first sign of civilization. In the distance, a farmer's oxcart made slow progress across the horizon. King Bewilliam strained to see clearly. It was headed toward town, he surmised, as the wagon was laden. He aimed his feet in the same direction and hurried his pace in hopes of overtaking the cart and begging a ride. He was already tired of walking and the day had barely begun.

"Eh! Friend! Where are you bound?" he called when the driver was in earshot.

The cart slowed but did not stop. The driver turned his head, showing a long face shadowed by a broad-brimmed hat.

"To market, of course, stranger," the driver replied.

"Is it far?" asked Bewilliam.

"Far enough." The driver sounded weary. "And my long day truly begins only when I get there. I don't have time to waste chatting with strangers."

"Perhaps some entertainment would make your journey pass more enjoyably." King Bewilliam withdrew a harmonica from his pouch and whistled a phrase, light and sweet as chirping of the red-breasted robins roosting in the trees that lined the wagon way.

The cart slowed yet more.

"A pretty tune, but how do I know this isn't some ruse to rob me?" the driver asked.

King Bewilliam flung his arms away from his body. "I have only this knife for a weapon which I would entrust to you for the length of the journey." He was close enough now to see the driver's eyes narrow in concentration.

"And that sack of yours?"

Were it not for his sack's ermine secret, Bewilliam would have offered to allow the driver to search for weapons. "I'll give you custody of that too," he said and came alongside the wagon.

The wagon stopped. "Hand them over, then," the driver said, "and climb aboard. And play another tune. You do pull some fine notes from that thing."

King Bewilliam did as bidden. He settled himself in the rope sling strung from the cart's side and appraised the cart's load. "Radishes," he said, inhaling the spicy, earthy aroma.

"Aye."

"I like radishes," King Bewilliam said. "These are rather small...no offense."

"None taken. Would that I could grow them bigger."

"Hmm. Have you tried feeding the earth with the refuse of your meal from the night before?"

The farmer frowned. "Would that help?"

King Bewilliam explained that apparently when certain items such as onion peels and melon rinds rotted, they returned beneficial humours to the soil, so the decomposed refuse could be used as fertilizer. "But don't use meat scraps or bones. That just attracts vermin."

The farmer pursed his lips and nodded. "How know you this? Do you farm?"

King Bewilliam shook his head and smiled. "I like radishes."

"Have you one, then," replied the farmer. "Then play me a tune, Friend." He put out his hand. "I am John."

His own hand halfway toward accepting the greeting, King Bewilliam stammered, "I'm... I'm..." He took a cue from the birds that had inspired his tune. "Robin."

They shook hands. With the slap of the chains, John put the cart in motion. "From whence you come, Robin? A far piece, from the looks of you."

Robin nodded. "A far piece." In miles, an untold number. Much farther than that in terms of what he had left behind and where he now found himself. He dusted the soil from the radish and ate it in one bite. "You might have left the radishes in the ground longer."

"Would that I could have, but I have a need for cash. I have a loan that's come due."

They rode for three songs and one lengthy tale that Robin told of a night in a tavern. It so amused the farmer that he cried with laughter. Then Robin took the reins while Farmer John slept. Jouncing in the cart's rope-sling seat didn't do Robin's bottom any favors. He wished for the gentler ride of Bell Castle's royal carriages with their cushioned seats and a springy suspension that he had invented. His feet were grateful for the rest, however, and riding spared his already shabby boots.

The morning was warm, warmer than he remembered spring mornings being. Maybe it was no longer spring, but summer or fall. Had he been walking that long? It felt like a lifetime. However the tender green of the leaves on the trees and shrubs told him that they were still in the earlier part of the year.

"Eh, Farmer John, I believe we're nearing town."

John raised his head.

"Must be Market Day from the looks of all this traffic," said Robin. The number of farmers and merchants using the wagon way had gradually increased until it had become quite crowded.

"Nay, this is only Tuesday," said Farmer John. "It's often like this."

"Indeed?" Robin handed over the reins.

"This is a popular trade center."

Clearly it was. The carts alongside them were heaped with produce and goods.

"I hope to sell the entire load," John said.

His face was tight and Robin suspected the debt that the farmer owed preyed on his mind. "The loan of which you spoke?"

The farmer nodded. "Yes. I had a drainage problem at the farm. My fields flooded with every rain and my crops were ruined."

"Your lord was not inclined to help?" I would have been, Robin thought. After all, his fortunes rose and fell with those of his tenants.

"I own my land," John said. "It's not much but it is mine, and I am proud to be able to bequeath it to my sons when the time comes. Farming here is a challenge. Our weather is downright devilish. Some days are brutal hot, others bitter cold. Sometimes we have terrible storms with great winds. We have droughts followed by downpours that could drown an ox. This last deluge about swept me away." He shook his head. "I was told, 'Send word to Lord Bernard.' And yes, I had heard that this lord had provided assistance to others, for an obligation. One day I was approached by one of his knights who said that I needed to dig a ditch. Well of course I did, but I didn't have the wherewithal to do it."

Robin nodded. Farmers, he knew, were busy from sunup to sundown and beyond just getting the farming done, much less making capital improvements.

"Before long," said John, "the knight returned with a small loan for me. It was just enough for me to hire a ditch digger."

"And now?"

"My crops have been doing much better. It looked like I was going to be in a position to pay back the loan as agreed but the knight visited me and told me that Lord Bernard demands payment now."

That didn't sound at all right to Robin. What was the worth of an agreement if both parties did not honor the terms? "Perhaps you are dealing with a rogue knight who seeks to fill his own pouch."

Farmer John shook his head. "I don't think so. He seemed to regret having to pressure me, and I think was fearful of what would happen if he didn't return to Lord Bernard with money." John frowned. "You have not heard of Lord Bernard?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

The farmer shrugged. "No matter. I hope to get out from under this obligation and then truly, I have learned my lesson. I will make the best of what I have and not aspire beyond my means."

Alongside the rose, a trellis covered with rambler roses marked the settlement ahead. To Robin, the absence of a defensive ditch, wall, or gate spoke of a loosely-organized settlement not even worthy of the term "village."

"That's Rose Bank, the trade center, up ahead," said Farmer John. He handed Robin his sack and knife. "Where do you go from here, Friend?" he asked as Robin dismounted the wagon.

"Don't know." It would be helpful if he knew where he was.

All he could remember was walking. Perhaps he had set out for a hike. There was nothing unusual about his leaving the castle. He often toured the countryside, partly to escape the pressure of court and partly to see firsthand how fared his subjects. However rarely did he go without his retinue and most assuredly did not go on foot.

This last time, apparently, he had set out alone, walked beyond the castle gates, and kept walking. He remembered walking and walking and walking until he could walk no more, sat to rest, and fell asleep. He awoke and realized that he was in a strange land, definitely out of his realm. Could he have been enchanted while he slept? An enchantment would explain his lot. If not a spell, what other reason could there be for his mysterious transformation from honored and respected ruler to homeless vagabond?

He remembered trying to make his way back to his kingdom. Yet the harder he tried, the further he got into unknown territory. He sorely missed the ease and luxury of royal life. He felt adrift in the absence of challenges presented to him daily, and the satisfaction of reaching solutions where benefits outweighed the cost. He tried not to think about his wife and two sons as that brought a longing that was too painful to bear.

If he even could make it back to his realm, what would he find? Did his family and subjects await his return? Would the kingdom have fallen to ruin? Had he been deposed? Did someone else now rule in his place? If that were true, would he even be able to reclaim his throne? Certainly it would take more than simply reappearing, ragged and worn from life on the road. Hell, he might need an army to recapture his throne. At the very least, he would need a king's ransom to redeem it.

A king's ransom. What a joke! At the moment he didn't have a coin to buy a haircut or a crust of bread to eat or a bed in which to sleep. He sighed. Here in this settlement there would be no sleeping in the open, for he would be arrested as a vagrant. Perhaps, though, he could find some employment and raise a few coins.

...excerpt...

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