

"BORING!"

This was probably the fifth time Myrna, the young, red-headed woman currently stuck in the back of a dusty wagon headed toward the Capital, had shouted this, and again she was ignored by everyone else in the caravan. She tried flopping in her seat, tapping the wheels of the wagon where they peaked up over the walls, and whistling tunes, but still, she was ignored. An hour later, Myrna was ready to cause some serious mischief to kill her boredom.

Quickly scanning the faces in the wagon and seeing none looking at her, she took her chance. Myrna turned inward, muttering under her breath while directing her attention to the cart's front wheels. The wagon bounced, a loud *crack* sounded out, and their movement came to an abrupt halt. Myrna tuned back into the world around her, catching the look of utter contempt on the leader's face, and decided the best course of action would be to feign ignorance. While murmurs were exchanged between the passengers, the young peasant handling the cart stepped down to check the wheel.

"Ne'er seen tha before!" the young man said as he bent down and lifted up the broken wheel of the cart, which was now a bright yellow cheese wheel. He scratched his head, a bewildered look on his face, and Myrna snickered to herself as he went about replacing the wheel with a spare underneath the cart. The wagon was operational soon enough, and Myrna now felt more at ease.

The murmuring in the cart had died down once they began moving again, the silence taking on a suffocating quality. Myrna received looks of contempt, disgust, shame, and anger from everyone, their eyes boring into her. It wasn't the best feeling in the world, having all of that directed at her, but Myrna refused to let everyone else ruin her fun. They didn't even know that she had done it, as Myrna knew no one had seen her cast her little spell, but naturally, they

blamed her. Myrna, the youngest in the coven, the little troublemaker, the greatest annoyance, etc. She tried not to let it get under her skin, but the lack of faith in her abilities made her feel like the group's outcast, like they didn't even want her around.

It had taken much persuading for Myrna to come on the trip, and the coven leader had forbidden Myrna from knowing the purpose of their mission. All she knew was the coven was going to the festival, and that they all seemed on edge. Everyone had been more snappish than usual, which is saying something, and that meant even more of their distaste was directed at Myrna. Despite it all, Myrna was determined to enjoy herself; it was a celebration, after all. It didn't matter why her coven was suddenly interested in the kingdom they so vehemently hated; the festival was all Myrna wanted to think about.

From what she heard, the festival was something to behold. There would be more food, dancing, drinking, and entertainment than Myrna had ever seen. Knights would joust in tournaments, foreign performers would conduct shows, and merchants from every corner of the land would be there, selling their wares. Myrna intended to enjoy herself as much as possible, but she also had a plan. Apparently, magic was forbidden in the kingdom, meaning the poor citizens had little to no access to healing. As such, Myrna had brought all the necessary ingredients to make healing potions and planned to sell them while in the Capital. This obviously posed some risk, but that was why Myrna had elected to not inform any of the coven members of her plan. As long as none of them knew what she was up to, everything would be fine.

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Lord Tille of Lockewood was a stocky nobleman, short in stature and going on in years. His hair had begun to fade, dulling in color, and his joints would now ache the day before it rained. Many Lords would have let age sour themselves, ruining whatever legacy they may have had, but Lord Tille would not. He was a powerful man, trusted by the King, in charge of a substantial amount of land and subjects, yet, despite his position, Lord Tille was also rather humble. A man of pride and honor, he vowed to carry himself as such until the day he died, which would be a ways off as Lord Tille was not much for fighting. Not that it was an issue, of course; that's what his knights were for.

The Knights of Lockewood served under Lord Tille and were known across the land for their feats of greatness. With his most trusted knights, Captain Ernest Ryder led the knights through many dangerous encounters against unbeatable odds and always returned victorious. Slaying terrible beasts, rescuing maidens, toppling bordering nations, and invading foreign lands; there was nothing The Knights of Lockewood could not do. For this reason, the King asked Lord Tille and The Knights of Lockewood to attend his royal banquet, both to enjoy the festivities and act as a deterrent to those who would wish the King harm.

The Knights of Lockewood were understandably honored by the King's request, but Lord Tille was wary. At any other time, the Lord would have been as delighted as the knights to be asked after by the King, but in recent months some concerning rumors had begun to spread about the royal family—rumors involving magic. There was no proof, naturally, but Lord Tille was understandably tense. If the royal family had indeed turned to witchcraft, there would surely be chaos on the horizon.

Of course, these concerns failed to prevent Lord Tille and his knights from attending the festival; none of them wished their heads a premature departure from their necks. So off they

went, Lord, knights, servants and all, to make their way to the capital. Excitement and apprehension flitted from person to person, and before the week's end, the convoy had arrived at their destination—the briefest glimpses of the capital visible through the trees. As the forest around them began to thin and the cavalcade neared the castle, the structure's magnificence was revealed. With spires that pierced the heavens and brickwork that must have taken generations, this castle was the grandest any of them had seen. Every window reflected the rising sun's light to a nearly blinding degree, giving an ethereal sharpness to the place.

The castle's drawbridge was down; thousands of people crossed it to enter the gates and partake in the festival. As the convoy approached the gates themselves, they began to make out the forms of individuals. From the lowest of peasants to the highest of noblemen, merchants, and performers, people from all over the land had come to partake in the celebration. Lord Tille even spotted a few other nobles among the crowd on horseback.

Navigating the bustling streets packed with excitement and wonder, Lord Tille and his knights make their way to the inner bailey, the keep's wooden doors before them. Servants scurry around like ants, unloading the convoy's belongings and taking them to the rooms set aside for them. The keep's wooden doors open; the King's advisors descend the steps to welcome them, ushering them inside and informing them of their duties. The rest of the festival is a blur to Lord Tille—the many performances and toasts of good health blurring together as the week continues. There are many royal dinners and pompous nobles, their bitterness counteracted by the joyous fervor the festivities bring out in the people. Tournaments are won, deals are made, songs are sung, and on and on and on it goes. All the while, Lord Tille keeps his eyes sharp, never forgetting the rumors that surround the King.

It was the festival's final day, and Lord Tille had yet to spot anything that would suggest the royal family was practicing magic. With the presence of The Knights of Lockewood, no one dared make an attempt on the King, and so the celebrations had gone uninterrupted. It was finally time for everyone to leave, return to their lands, homes, and jobs, and wait for next year's festival, which would surely be even greater than this one. It is now that The Knights of Lockewood gather in the barracks, trading farewells with the brave soldiers who serve the King and had been their equals during the festival. Though it had only been one week, The Knights of Lockewood and the King's knights had formed close bonds, and promises to send aid in times of need were made by many. As the group of heroes gave their final goodbyes, the King stumbled into the barracks.

The room fell silent, the knights of both royals standing at attention. Lord Tille raised a brow, as it was unusual for the King to come to the barracks, though based on the stumbling, perhaps he was drunk from the festivities? The King stopped to lean against a wall and opened his mouth to speak, only to double over giggling and coughing. The King's lack of sobriety no longer in question, Lord Tille decided to call over a servant to guide his majesty back to his chambers. The knights relaxed a little, knowing they weren't to be reprimanded by His Majesty, and returned to their conversations. Just as the servant was about to reach the King, and Lord Tille was about to turn away himself, the room exploded in light.

The stone walls of the barracks shook with the might of the explosion, launching dust and debris into the air. The knights gathered in the room were scrambling, shouting at one another, and adding to the unseen chaos. As the light faded from the room Lord Tille's vision returned. Many of the King's knights had been knocked to the ground, limp but breathing. Most of Lord

Tille's knights had been spared, though some had sustained injuries as parts of the ceiling fell on them during the explosion. Lord Tille was fine, dusty and shaken up, but fine.

"The King!" shouted Captain Ryder as he rushed to Lord Tille's side and stared at the wall the King had been leaning against. In his place was a shadow, a mark on the wall in his shape. Ringing from the bell towers could be heard—the attack must have been noticed by the royals—and the stomping of the royal guard as they approached the barracks.

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