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Mimus

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– MONTFIELD –

'. . . *BUT THE SORCERESS avenged herself on the prince by imprisoning him in a stone tower without a roof. Deprived of shelter, he was scorched by the sun and soaked by the rain and snow. And the sorceress commanded a raven to fly over the tower once a day and let fall a thimbleful of water and a morsel of food as black and bitter as wormwood . . .*'

Tanko fell silent. The other boys sitting beside him on the tree trunk stared at him expectantly. Florin could feel the prince's parching thirst, the taste of wormwood on his tongue.

'What then?' Senna insisted. 'What happened to the prince after that?'

Lost in thought, Tanko bent and picked up a round piece of moss from the forest floor. Stroking it as if it were a furry little animal, he went on:

'*The prince groaned aloud in his distress, but all that answered him was the silence of the sky and the howling of the wind. And the sorceress, having considered how to increase his sufferings, commanded an eagle to—*'

The boys gave a jump, startled by a loud snapping of twigs in the undergrowth.

'What an impressive sight,' said a familiar voice. The four youngsters sprang to their feet at the sound of it. 'There they sit like a row of ringdoves, the future masters of Moltovia, shuddering at some old wives' tale. Why trouble to go to the exercise yard? Let old Count Ursio teach his straw dummies to fence!'

The bushes parted and a grey-haired man stepped into the clearing. Short and wiry, he was nimble and vigorous in his movements and had a face like tanned leather. Although Count Ursio was very old—or so he seemed to his pupils—he still wore the leather tunic and iron shin armour of a swordsman. He proceeded to examine the four youngsters like an officer inspecting his troops. Having looked daggers at each of them in turn, he came to a halt in front of Tanko.

'Why not finish your story?' he demanded, rocking belligerently on his heels.

Tanko stared at the tips of his toes in sheepish silence.

Count Ursio drew a deep breath. 'Teller of fairy tales!' He spat out the words like the coarsest of insults. 'You're nothing but a dreamer!' he barked like a furious mastiff. 'Go take your tales and sit with the washerwomen! It's no wonder any farmer's lad can unhorse you! You aim to be one of the king's knights? A fairground huckster—that's all you're fit for! I'll give you a handbell, then you can join the clowns and fire-eaters and entertain the rabble in the streets!'

Radbod, who was standing beside Tanko, tittered despite himself. He would have done better not to, because Count Ursio promptly rounded on him.

'And what of you, my boy?' He pressed Radbod's head back with two fingers under his chin to force the youth to look him in the eye. 'What will your noble father say if I send you home to your fine castle? What if I advise him to tie you to your nursemaid's apron strings for

another few years before he sends you back to the royal school of knighthood?'

Although nearly thirteen, Radbod was—much to his sorrow—short for his age and slender. He swallowed this insult with his lips pressed tightly together.

'But here's the biggest buffoon of all!' The old count left Radbod and drew himself up in front of Senna, who was almost a head taller. 'You think you're the best of this wretched bunch? You hope to succeed Sturmius as the prince's bodyguard?' The louder his voice became, the more Senna seemed to shrink. 'Tell me something: What would you have done if a horde of vile Vinlanders had burst in on Tanko's fairy tale? Uttered a spell and turned them into toads?'

Senna tried to speak. 'But Count Ursio, there aren't any Vinlanders so close to Montfield Castle, you know that full well.'

'Look over there!' barked the old fencing master. With outstretched arm, he indicated a tall youth leaning on his sword at the edge of the clearing. 'Is Sturmius sitting down with you fools? No, he's keeping watch as befits the prince's bodyguard. He's a dependable fellow!'

Sturmius gripped the hilt of his sword, trying not to look too proud of himself.

The old count walked past them all again. 'A washerwoman . . .' he growled contemptuously, 'a babe in arms . . . a buffoon . . .' He clasped his hands together as if in prayer. 'Holy St. George, noblest of warriors, assist me! See to it that these youngsters grow up at last!'

Florin bit his lip to suppress a grin. 'You've forgotten me, Count Ursio,' he said politely.

The count gave a little bow. 'It does not behove me to rebuke you, Your Highness,' he said. 'You must always set your companions a good example—no one knows that better than you.'

He took an hourglass from the pocket of his tunic and set it down on a tree stump. 'You'll all be at the exercise yard before the glass

empties,' he growled. 'Complete with armour, swords and shields—or you'll regret it. And don't take it into your heads to turn the clock back!' With a last menacing glare, he disappeared into the trees.

'Brrr!' Radbod shook himself like a wet dog after a rainstorm.

'Trust the old fox to steal up on us on foot!' said Senna. 'We'd have heard his horse half a mile away.'

'If he had his way, we'd never leave the castle,' Tanko said plaintively, 'and would go to bed armed to the teeth.'

'Count Ursio sleeps in full armour every night,' Florin added. 'What on earth will he do if peace really comes?'

'He'll invent some new threat,' Tanko predicted, 'and bully us even more. To Count Ursio, sword drill and swordplay are as necessary as breathing.'

'It looks as if we'll be fencing in the rain,' Radbod said, with an appraising glance at the sky. 'But who cares?' He mimicked Ursio's voice. 'What will you do in battle, you milksops? Ask the vile Vinlanders to hold off until the weather improves?'

Tanko cast a worried glance at the sand in the hourglass. 'We'd better go.'

'There's no hurry.' Cool as a cucumber, Senna produced an ivory pin from his pocket. Having carefully dipped it in some pitch oozing from the tree trunk, he bent over Count Ursio's hourglass. 'First I want to know if he survives.'

'If who survives?' Tanko stared at him.

'The prince in the tower, of course,' Senna replied as he neatly thrust the pin through the hourglass's leather case. The pitch clogged the trickle of sand, which stopped abruptly. 'Just imagine, a thimbleful of water and a morsel of wormwood a day! Our prince grumbles if ten of his favourite dishes fail to appear on the table at once.' He nudged Florin in the ribs. 'It's a miracle you remain so thin, Your Highness.'

'Food certainly sticks to *your* ribs,' Florin retorted. 'Three years at Montfield Castle have doubled your girth as well as your height!'

'Don't be envious!' Senna withdrew the pin with a jerk. 'Well, friends,' he said contentedly, 'now we've solved that problem, what would you say to making a little detour on the way to the exercise yard?'

'The hideaway!' Florin and Radbod exclaimed together.

The hideaway was an abandoned hermit's hut that stood not far from Montfield Castle, concealed by a thicket of fir saplings and bramble bushes. The boys had stumbled across it by chance while hunting deer—a meeting place during the winter days to come.

'But we can't!' Tanko eyed the useless hourglass apprehensively.

'No one touched it,' said Senna. 'It simply stopped. Count Ursio should fill his hourglass with finer sand.'

'He'll flay us alive!'

Senna sighed impatiently. 'How can anyone who thinks up such exciting stories be such a coward himself?'

It was true, Florin reflected. Tanko's storytelling seemed to use up all his courage, wit and spirit of adventure.

'To the hideaway,' Senna said firmly. 'And you, my prince,' he added, bowing with a flourish, 'will take the lead. You know you must always be foremost in setting your companions a good example.'

Halfway there, the heavens opened and the rain came down in sheets. The boys raced off followed by Sturmius, Florin's bodyguard, who was hampered by the sword at his belt. They reached the hideaway laughing and soaked to the skin. With a little bow, Senna and Radbod opened the rickety wooden door for Florin as a matter of course, only to slam it in his bodyguard's face a moment later.

'An excellent idea of yours, Sturmius, to stand guard outside!' Radbod shouted through the door. 'You're a dependable fellow!'

'Poor Sturmius,' Senna said pensively. 'Fancy having to stand guard in the rain . . . Being the prince's bodyguard is a dull job. I shall have to think twice about it.'

'You do that,' said Florin, well aware that Senna was itching to assume the post. He looked round the hut. Two weeks ago he had

talked one of the royal foresters into secretly making the place more comfortable for them. It was now clean and snug, with fresh rushes on the floor and sacks of straw to sit on. Dry logs were stacked beside the brick-lined hearth.

'Wait.' Radbod produced a tinderbox from his pocket. 'We'll soon have a fire.'

Before long, flames were leaping up the chimney. The boys pulled the sacks nearer to the fire and spread their sodden cloaks to dry.

'My father has a mind to replace Count Ursio,' Florin confided. 'When he returns from Frankenland, Duke Bonizo may become our instructor in the arts of war.'

'Truly?' The youngsters' eyes lit up. Duke Bonizo's renown as a warrior was legendary.

'Then they'll have to enlarge the school at last,' said Radbod. 'Our dormitory is already bursting at the seams.'

The royal school of knighthood numbered twenty pupils. King Philip had founded it so that his only son, the future king of Moltovia, should not grow up in isolation. The teachers were learned monks and experienced soldiers whom he had summoned to the royal court from all over the country, and every noble family in Moltovia yearned to have at least one son educated in the prince's company.

'Duke Bonizo must be commanding your father's bodyguard now,' Senna said enviously. 'If only we had some news from them. A fast-riding horseman could have been here long ago.'

'Except that he would have had to set off as soon as they got to Frankenland,' Radbod objected. 'Why would King Philip send a courier if there's nothing to report?'

'Well said,' Tanko remarked, warming his hands at the fire. 'You'll see, a courier will arrive in the next few days. And, just to prevent you from bursting with curiosity, I'll tell you what news he'll bring.'

Florin smiled at his friend. 'Are you a soothsayer now, as well as a storyteller?'

'Who knows?' Tanko replied with an air of mystery. 'At all events, the beginning of my story is the plain truth. So listen.' He settled himself more comfortably on his sack. '*Once upon a time there were two kingdoms, Vinland and Moltovia . . .*'

'Forget about Vinland,' Senna growled. 'Vinland can go to the devil for all I care, but Moltovia will exist for ever!'

'Don't interrupt!' Tanko scowled at him. '*The two kingdoms were at war, a war so old that its beginnings were shrouded in mystery . . .*'

'As old as I am,' Senna said drily. 'Fourteen.'

'Yes, and every babe in arms knows why it started,' Radbod chimed in. 'Theodo of Vinland had fastened his greedy gaze on our silver mines, that's why.'

Tanko folded his arms. 'I've had enough!' he said firmly.

'No, go on,' Florin pleaded. Listening to the facts of their own story told like a legend was mesmerising. 'For my sake.'

'Very well,' Tanko said graciously, 'but only for your sake.'

'*It was an endless, merciless war—merciless for the most part because neither kingdom could defeat the other. There were spells of deceptive calm during which the warriors licked their wounds and the harassed inhabitants breathed again. Thereafter the warring armies clashed with redoubled ferocity, plundering towns and villages, burning homes and churches, and ravaging the fields. As in Moltovia, so in Vinland.*'

'That's true,' Florin said quietly. Even though the war had never come within a hundred miles of Montfield Castle, thanks to an ingenious ring of fortifications, he had heard enough about its horrors from his father's generals.

'*Things continued in this manner, year after year*,' Tanko went on, '*until one spring, when King Theodo of Vinland—*'

'*This* spring,' Radbod amended.

'. . . *one spring*,' Tanko repeated, glaring at him, '*when King Theodo quite unexpectedly sued for peace. Moltovia's royal court greeted this approach with deep suspicion . . .*'

That was putting it mildly. The first envoys from Vinland to reach Montfield Castle were thrown into a dungeon before they had a chance to pass on a single word of Theodo's proposal, and were only released at King Philip's express command.

'. . . *but Theodo continued to send Philip envoys day after day, and they never tired of conveying the same message: the King of Vinland wishes to make peace with Moltovia.*'

Until the day came when we simply had to believe it, thought Florin.

'*Early that summer, negotiators from the two kingdoms met at the Relling, the river that marks the frontier between them. The Vinlanders pitched camp on the west bank, the Moltovians on the east, and the loudest-voiced among them bellowed their conditions across the water* . . .'

'That would have been a job for me!' Senna said exuberantly.

'*By the time they were hoarse, it had been agreed that the warring kings should meet in person. Not in Vinland or Moltovia, but on neutral territory: in Frankenland, at the court of King Ludvik* . . .'

'Where they dine on snails and frogs' legs,' Radbod put in with a shudder. 'Let's hope our people take a good look at the fare that's set before them!'

'*The sun was beating down when King Philip, escorted by a magnificent retinue, set off for Frankenland* . . .'

That had been six weeks ago. Since then, Montfield Castle had seemed deserted. Over three hundred men, including the whole of the Privy Council, had accompanied King Philip on horseback.

'*And two weeks later they reached the capital of Frankenland safe and sound.*'

'Now you're playing the soothsayer,' Senna objected.

'But that's what the couriers will say,' said Tanko. 'They'll report that the King of Vinland was awaiting King Philip with impatience.' The corners of his mouth twitched. 'They'll report that he's a fat, bald, toothless, evil-smelling fellow with flat feet.'

The other boys giggled. 'Come, come, Tanko,' said Florin, 'you've no idea what Theodo looks like.'

Tanko closed his eyes. '*To hymns of praise and the ringing of church bells,*' he went on solemnly, '*the two kings exchanged the kiss of peace and pledged eternal friendship. The elaborate festivities held to celebrate their pact continued for a whole year. But the finest festivity of all was the marriage of Moltovia's crown prince to the princess of Vinland.*'

Radbod and Senna burst out laughing. 'It's lucky you aren't a genuine soothsayer,' Senna exclaimed.

After glancing at Florin's face, Tanko said hesitantly: 'At all events . . . *peace had been restored, and they all lived happily ever after.*'

'God grant it may be so,' Florin said earnestly.

'Sounds almost too good to be true,' Senna said gruffly. 'And now, Tanko, tell us what the eagle did to the prince in the tower.'

AT the evening meal the boys listened in silence to a lecture from Chancellor Artold crammed with words like duty and example, responsibility and respect. Count Ursio sat beside him with his arms folded and a look of extreme satisfaction on his face.

He would probably have looked less smug had he heard the chancellor's whispered words as he bade the boys goodnight.

'How in the world does one get an hourglass to stop?'

'Pitch,' Florin whispered back.

'Senna, I suppose?' Chancellor Artold gave an admiring nod. 'The crafty young devil! It still amuses me to remember the tripwire he installed outside the dormitory of our learned monks, not to mention the inflated fish bladder he hid beneath a cushion on Monsignor Federino's chair.' He chuckled at the memory. 'The reverend gentleman almost sank through the floor in shame, it made such an appallingly vulgar noise . . .'

'By your leave,' Florin said with modest pride, 'the inflated fish bladder was mine.'

'Ingenuity is a gift from God and, as such, beyond praise,' the chancellor said, straight-faced. 'In the immediate future, however, you and your companions had better apply your ingenuity to Euclidean geometry and Latin grammar. Otherwise, everyone will think I'm an old fool who allows young scamps to lead me by the nose!'

THE next morning Florin was woken by a prolonged ratatat on the door of his bedchamber.

'Your pardon, Highness,' he heard the chamberlain call, 'but it's time. Petitioners are already standing in line outside the castle gates.'

'What did you say?' Florin struggled into a sitting position.

The door opened and Count Marrod entered the room. Although it was still early, he was already wearing his official black robe complete with the insignia of his office, a gold chain and a bunch of keys. 'Surely you hadn't forgotten what day it is?' he asked with a smile, drawing back the curtains round the bed. 'Chancellor Artold will not be best pleased, I fear.'

Audience day! Florin shut his eyes for a moment, then leapt out of bed.

'Where's Ramon?' he asked. 'Why didn't he wake me?'

The reason soon became clear: a sleepy grunt issued from his valet's bed in the corner.

The chamberlain cleared his throat. 'I shall await Your Highness in the throne room,' he said, and shut the door quietly behind him.

'Ramon, get up!' Florin stripped off his valet's bedclothes. 'You heard: they're all waiting.'

'I'm making haste, my prince.' Ramon raised his tousled head from the pillows. 'But first,' he gave a hearty yawn, 'I must somehow pry open my eyes.'

Soon afterward, with a half-eaten slice of plum loaf in his hand, Florin was sprinting toward the throne room followed by Sturmius, who had been waiting outside the door of his bedchamber, already

booted and spurred. Count Marrod had still to open the castle gates, fortunately, so at least he didn't have to thread his way through a crowd of petitioners. Even so, it was disagreeable enough to hurry to the throne past all the bowing and scraping clerks, civil servants, sentries and pages.

'Punctuality is the adornment of kings, my prince,' Chancellor Artold said with a frown. 'May we begin?'

While Sturmius took up his position behind the throne with sword drawn, Florin hurriedly stuffed the last morsel into his mouth and sat down.

Six months ago, on Florin's twelfth birthday, King Philip had invested his only son with the title of regent—the traditional way of accustoming a crown prince to his responsibilities. Florin was proud of this honour and his father's trust.

However, he could happily have dispensed with many of his new duties. *Giving audiences*—he remembered how magical the words had sounded to him at first. Receiving people from all over the country, listening to their troubles and cares, making sensible and fair decisions . . . He now found his Latin lessons more exciting than these weekly audiences. The petitioners' concerns were always the same: requests for exemption from taxes, complaints about high import duties, requests for privileges, complaints about predatory provincial governors, requests for royal safe-conducts, complaints about exorbitant rents and rates of interest . . . Ninety-nine out of a hundred such decisions Florin thankfully left to Chancellor Artold—after all, who cared about interest rates and import duties? When evening came and the castle gates were shut at last, his head was full to bursting with polite phrases and standard responses, and his lips stiff from smiling patiently.

'Why do we have to see all these people?' he had asked his father. 'They always come out with the same old things, either requests or complaints. Audiences are dull and tedious.'

'If you find them too much for you,' his father had replied, 'what

of our Heavenly Father? Imagine how many requests and complaints are ringing in his ears every moment of the day and night. What if there came a time when he'd had enough of us mortals and our petty concerns?' King Philip took Florin's hands in his. 'Being a future king by God's grace, don't you think you owe the Almighty a few hours of patience now and then?'

His father was right, and Florin never complained again. Instead, he devised a little game—'the hat oracle'—to entertain himself during those endless days. He was playing it now.

'A tattered grey velvet cap,' he muttered to himself as the first petitioner came before him. 'The man's a villager. I'll wager he starts with 'Your Royal Highness' and is involved in some dispute with a neighbour.'

'Your Royal Highness,' said the small, dark-skinned man in front of him, 'I thank you most humbly for your indulgence in lending an ear to my trifling request. Your magnanimity is a boon to the entire country, your benevolence—'

'Your request, my good man,' Chancellor Artold admonished him.

'Er, yes, of course.' Abruptly losing the thread of his well-rehearsed speech, the man cleared his throat. 'My evil neighbour, may God punish him for it, has been deceitful and treacherous enough to move the boundary stones between our properties . . .'

Florin secretly awarded himself full marks.

The next person to approach the throne was a young woman.

A snow-white lace bonnet, thought Florin, as she curtsied to him. She's newly married, and her husband has sent her because he can't pay his taxes this year. She'll begin with 'Gra—'

'Gracious Prince,' the woman began in a low voice. 'My beloved sister and I wish to devote our lives to God at the convent of St. Clara, but we lack the gold shilling which every nun must pay into the convent treasury on admission. If you, most bountiful prince . . .'

Although Florin had only predicted her first words this time, the

oracle proved right surprisingly often: a priest's black hat inevitably meant some question about church dues, a baker's white cap about the price of bread. The more audiences Florin held, the more accurate his predictions became. Besides, guessing made the time pass more quickly.

A commotion had broken out in the antechamber. Chancellor Artold, sitting stiffly behind his desk, looked up indignantly. 'What is it?' he demanded.

'I'll go and see.' Count Marrod went out, only to reappear in the doorway a moment later. 'Good news, my prince!' he called. 'Couriers from your royal father have just arrived.'

'At last!' Florin turned to Chancellor Artold. 'May they come in at once?'

'But of course.' The chancellor laid his pen aside. 'The audience is adjourned.'

He signed to the chamberlain, who went out again and promptly returned with the couriers.

The five men hadn't even paused to brush the dirt of the road off their cloaks and boots. Florin noticed their smell as they approached the throne: the stench of dust and lathered horses and the exertions of a long, hard ride. He glanced at their headgear out of habit: all five wore woven leather caps with long cords attached, presumably to secure them when travelling at a gallop.

Caps of this kind are new to me, he thought, full of anticipation. I've no idea what these men are about to say.

One of the couriers was carrying a sealed parchment scroll. Florin glanced briefly at the green wax seal of a leaping wolf. It was the royal emblem of Moltovia, which also adorned the signet ring on his own finger.

The man bowed. 'Your Royal Highness.' Then, with another bow in the direction of the desk: 'Chancellor Artold.'

'Count Tillo,' Artold replied coldly. 'The court of Moltovia has seen you but seldom in recent years. What brings you here?'

Florin eyed the man with curiosity. He had never seen Count Tillo before, but he knew that his family castle was near the borders of Vinland.

'We come as envoys from King Philip, and—'

'Why should His Majesty send you, rather than one of his usual couriers?' Artold broke in curtly, and Florin was puzzled by his icy tone.

'For a very simple reason, worthy chancellor,' replied Count Tillo. 'The king's men are fully engaged in preparing for a new era.' Solemnly, he spread his arms wide. 'The war between Moltovia and Vinland is at an end!'

'God be praised!' said Florin and Count Marrod simultaneously and with heartfelt relief. The clerks and pages also murmured prayers of thanksgiving. Still seated behind his desk, Chancellor Artold alone looked totally unmoved.

'King Ludvik of Frankenland proved a successful mediator,' Count Tillo went on. 'The two kings have signed a treaty and sealed it with the kiss of peace. We have come straight from Bellingar, Vinland's royal castle, to bring you King Philip's news.'

'My father is in Vinland?' Florin asked in surprise.

'And has been these ten days past. King Theodo expressed a wish to mark the signing of the treaty with a grand festivity at his court.'

A festivity—just as Tanko predicted, Florin thought happily.

'Your father accepted the invitation with pleasure,' said Count Tillo. As he drew nearer to the throne, Florin noticed a diagonal scar on his right cheek. When the man smiled, as he did now, it wriggled like a worm. 'On the morrow of their kiss of peace, the two kings set off for Vinland with their retinues. But it's best you should read this yourself.' Count Tillo moved to hand the scroll to Florin.

'By your leave,' Chancellor Artold broke in. 'I wish to examine the document first.' He held out his hand with an imperious air.

An uneasy silence filled the room while Artold was reading.