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opening extract from

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Chapter One
Sword and Stew

A village in Germany, 1227

The dress was made of finest silk, but now it was faded and worn.

The dress was green with threads of gold, but the threads were broken and torn.

The dress reached down to the muddy road and the edge was tattered and splattered with mud.

The knight rode up to the tavern as the sun was setting and the sky was the colour of blood.

He handed his grey horse to the groom to feed and water it. The horse snorted softly as it smelled the oats and the hay.



The knight pulled his sword straight and walked to the door of the tavern. He pushed it open and looked into the gloomy room.

The room was a pit of filth from the straw on the floor to the ale that swam over the dirty wooden tables.

Some men supped from cups and others chewed on stew in wooden bowls. Some played board games and argued about their game – some just sat on their stools and argued because they wanted to argue.



Dogs wandered round and begged for scraps of stew but found the mutton too tough for their yellow teeth. (The sheep that was in the stew had died of old age.)

Leonard the landlord and his daughter Meg poured the ale from jugs and kept the fire and the candles burning, they slopped the stew and gathered up the empty plates and cups.



Meg was crop-haired, like a boy, and wore trousers when she worked in the tavern.

She saw the door swing open, letting in the dim, red light of dusk. She saw the knight. Her mouth fell open. She gave a scream.

The crowd fell silent. Fifty pairs of eyes were turned towards the door.

Meg tried to speak, but couldn't find her voice.

Sam the blacksmith had a voice and spluttered, "Mmmmf-mmmmf-mm-mm-mmmmf!" (His mouth was full of chewy stew, of course, but everyone in the tavern knew what he meant.)

"Just look at *him*!" Meg gasped at last.

John the gong-farmer sniggered.

Richard the rabbit-catcher giggled.

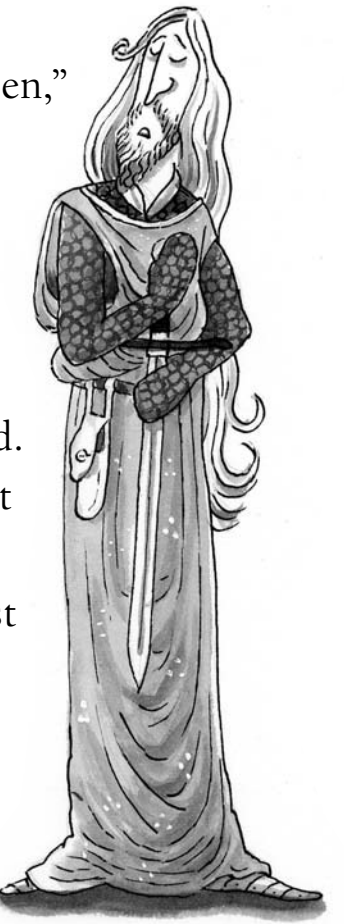
Simon the snaggle-bodger snorted.

Soon the whole room was laughing and pointing, pointing and laughing, slapping the tables, their legs, their backs, rubbing their eyes and rolling on their stools. (Helen the harpist fell off her stool, but that could have been the ale.)



At last the laughter died away.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," the knight said in a voice as soft as fox fur.



"Ooooh! *Ladies*!" Tom the village fool mocked. "He's talking about *you*, Helen!"

Helen the harpist looked up from the floor.

"And gentlemen, he said. That's *you*, Tom Fool!"

The man at the door smiled gently. "I am Ulrich of Bavaria," he said, "and I am a knight."

"Yes, but what are you doing here?" Ben the badger-baiter cried.

"I am seeking a room for the night," said Ulrich.

"A knight's night sleep?" Tom Fool asked.

The crowd laughed.

"And a fight," Ulrich said, patting the huge steel sword that hung at his side.

The crowd went suddenly silent (except for Helen the harpist, who snored on the floor). Even the dogs went quiet and stopped chewing on the mutton that was tough as old leather.



No one wanted to fight with a madman.

At last the landlord's daughter, Meg, stepped forward. "We can offer you a room, sir, and some of our fine food!"

Sam the blacksmith, who was still chewing, said what he thought of the fine food. "Mmmmf-mmmmf-mm-mm-mmmmf!"

Ulrich bowed to Meg and thanked her.

"But, sir," said Meg. "I wonder if you could tell us all..."

"Yes?" said Ulrich.

"Why... Why are you wearing a green, silk dress and a long, blond wig?"