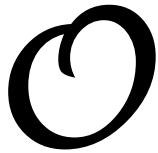


Long Ago,



ver many miles and over many hills, above the mountains and just to the left, there was a kingdom. This kingdom was small, with few (as far as kingdoms can be concerned) people under its rule, and this served the king and queen just fine. The royal castle stood proudly with its peaks in the clouds, watching down over the rolling green landscape below and could be seen in all its majesty for miles around. Visiting the royal castle though, was quite an ordeal; you see it was built upon an island of sheer rock. There was but a single bridge built across the vast chasm betwixt the royal castle and the mainland, and any unwary rider of the moving platforms had hundreds upon hundreds of feet to fall before landing in a very shallow river. Today was a market day, and as you can well imagine moving goods to and from the castle required quite the to-do and was undertaken with the greatest of care and guarded by the greatest of the guards. This guard was a hulking beast of a man, standing seven feet high, and held in equally high esteem by His Lordship the King and all the court beneath him. This guard was most well-known for singlehandedly besting a Great Bear with nothing more than a leather jerkin and a rather heavy stone. His name was Haggisford McCullough III but most simply called him Haggy. The Queen was expecting the first royal child, and the market was abuzz with gossip and speculation. As Haggy and his Lugmen passed through the market in search of a very specific list of items given to them by the queen, and a few other necessities of the court, they were

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berated with constant 'deals' on all wares child related. Haggisford, of course, did not listen to a word of it.

Meanwhile, inside the castle there was a commotion of equal measure, the queen had gone into an early labor. As the queen lay on her bed letting out screams that would have scared Haggisford's bear into hiding, the king was in his workshop and blissfully unaware of the goings on. The king's workshop was the birthplace of New Magic, and he toiled endlessly to his own delight (and his wife's chagrin) at creating new and better ways to facilitate it. This very workshop was also the point of genesis for the growing tensions between the High Kingdom and their distant neighbor of Doldrumar. The king's latest invention involved a peculiar type of stone which harnessed in its own small way the power of the sun. It was the king's belief that these stones could be used to power any number of devices if he could just stop them from exploding every time he tried. Today was not the day he succeeded.

Covered in soot and still smoldering the king burst into the bedroom where his wife was still screaming.

"Have I missed it?!" He yelled over his wife to her or any of the many midwives who were making their hurried way about the chamber. "Have I missed the birth of my child? Confound it!"

The king was in no state to be asking questions, as he could hear nothing of the responses, let alone the queen's piercing screams. He would have known straight away that he was still in time, if he had only been **on** time, and not fiddling about in his workshop. This was a fact which his wife reminded him of frequently and repeatedly as often as she could in the coming years. The explosion had done a number on the ears of the king, and it took him some time to hear a young midwife telling him the child was nearly there.

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Far away back over those rolling hills, over many miles, and nestled in the bosom of a deep valley, and just to the right, lay the kingdom of Doldrumar. The kingdom of Doldrumar was the last seat of Old Magic and the king of that land used it to rule absolutely. The castle of Doldrumar was built against the foot of the mountain which rose high above the valley and was protected by thick stone walls on all sides leading to the mountain. The thick stone walls were guarded by ever watchful constructs of stone given motion and purpose by the will of the king and by the power of Old Magic. Ever those walls were aglow with the soft purple light that radiated between the stone plates of the sentries, and the people were frightened to go near them for fear of being turned to ash, or worse. There was a subdued market day going on here as well, but there were no Lugmen making purchases, only the Sentries that walked like glowing pallbearers at a funeral, receiving taxes and 'donations' into a deep wooden box. High in the Arcanum the king was watching through his seeing stone with ever increasing interest as the High King and Queen prepared to become parents.

"And you're certain of the prophecy?" he asked his chief lore master absently, his attention focused on the scene in the stone.

"Quite certain, lord," The Lore Master cleared his throat dramatically before reading, "Lo it shall be known that when the Monkey Prince is prince no more but king above the sky, an end shall come to the reign of magic, and magic so shall die." The king heard the rolling up of parchment and could almost feel the expectant air of his servant waiting to be of further help.

"Oh, be gone with you then, I will see soon enough if now is the time for me to crush these 'New Magic' toting heretics at last. Go on!" The king issued a shooping hand and the Lore Master scurried away like a dismissed dog, but was more than a little hurt he did not receive a 'thank you'.

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The time had come at last, and the king was kneeling next to his wife, the bones of his hand being crushed into the finest of powders by his wife's dainty grip. The final leg of labor was coming to its close and the midwives were gathered and ready to catch and clean the newest member of the royalty. The midwives were smiling as the Queen pushed and they saw the cap of the child's head, but a deep worry fell upon the mind of the king as he watched their faces turn from glowing smiles, to confusion, to fear.

"What is it? He questioned as quietly as possible to the midwife nearest to him, "Why do you look so pale?"

The midwife didn't know how to answer so she simply shrugged and returned to her duties. The final push was over, and the king could hear the baby cry a healthy wail, which put his mind at ease, and the midwives took the baby across the room to be cleaned and wrapped in blankets. Wrapping his hands around the Queen's the king looked her lovingly in the eyes, "You've done it my love, we have a child, a baby...why they never told us if it was a girl or a boy."

"He's a boy," The queen responded weakly with a smile, "I know he's a beautiful boy."

The senior midwife came walking up with the bundle in her arms, tears staining her cheeks and fear in her eyes.

"A word, my lord?" she begged and led the king to an area out of earshot of the queen. "What's wrong? Is my son alive?" The king asked as soon as they stopped walking.

"The...boy, is alive sire, of that you can be certain, but...well you'll have to see for yourself, we can tell her he's dead if you'd like." The king gave her a furious glare that gave her all the answer she needed on that subject, and she handed him his child. The baby was blue eyed and smiling, but he was covered from head to toe with thick brown hair and had a furry tail he was currently playing with. Only his innocent face was left untouched by the fur that covered him.

The king was white faced as he walked to his wife, and the queen was rigid with worry as he handed her their child. The only words the king could muster before he began to cry were,

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"It's a boy." The queen took the baby in her arms and smiled at him with tears in her eyes as well,

"I told you he'd be beautiful," she said, "He's perfect."