

Chapter 3: Escape into the Forest

Everyone was nervous, but the escape went as planned. Henry, Grace, and John were able to sneak out of the South Gate using soldiers' uniforms.

Horak and Peter, two of King Trad's old friends, met them outside of the city with horses.

The horses were also loyal to King Trad's family, and so had agreed to be ridden in order to help the young princes and princess escape.

They rode for several days.

Inside of the city, it had always been crowded and noisy. There were too many people, and too many buildings, and barely any trees in sight.

Even outside of the city walls, the city sprawl continued for miles. Houses, taverns, temples, and inns were everywhere.

But gradually, as they rode on and on, the buildings became less and less. And the fields became more and more. Until eventually, they were in the rural farming area.

There were a few farmhouses and grain storage towers out in the distance. But mostly it was just endless fields of wheat and barley.

This went on for a couple days, but then this too became less and less. As they rode on, there were still some cultivated fields, but more and more the land was empty and unused. Sometimes it was just empty grassland stretching out, but then more and more they began seeing clumps of trees and small wooded areas.

Eventually there were more and more trees, until the road was surrounded on all sides by forest.

Henry thought that now they were in the great Western Forest. But Horak corrected him. "We're getting close, but we're not there yet," Horak said. "As long as there is still a wide road to ride on, we're not truly in the forest yet."

The trees were filled with the chatter of birds. Most of the birds cared little for human affairs, and just chatted endlessly about the forest gossip.

But Horak knew that birds make the best spies. They could fly everywhere and see everything, and the army of Mora always kept a few birds in their employ. Horak tried to keep his eyes open for birds who looked like outsiders--birds who were not gossiping with the others.

King Trad's friends had spies of their own, and occasionally Horak would get messages. A bird would fly down to his shoulder and whisper something in his ear.

Henry, Grace, and John could never hear what the bird was whispering. But it was seldom good. Usually Horak's face would get worried, and he would tell the horses to go faster.

Occasionally, they would hear the sound of animals--wolves, or other wild dogs--running through the trees. It seemed at times like the sounds were following them. When the sounds came very close, Grace would fit an arrow to her bow, and Henry would put his hand on his sword.

But in the end, they never saw anything.

At night, they slept in shifts. Always two were awake, keeping watch while the others slept.

After the third day of travelling through the woods, they reached the woodsman's cabin, just as the sun was beginning to go down.

The cabin did not mark the end of the road. The road continued on past the cabin, and Horak told them that the road continued on through the forest, and eventually led to another town on the other side. "But this is not the real forest," Horak said. "To get into the real forest, you have to leave the road behind, and walk through the trees on foot."

The woodsman and his wife came out, and Horak made simple introductions.

All of the travellers were exhausted, and the ranger had not arrived yet, so Horak announced that they would spend the night in the cabin.

The woodsman and his wife lived in a simple cabin, and did not have beds for the visitors. They barely had floorspace for everyone. It was a big change from the beds in the palace that Henry, Grace, and John were used to. But they were so exhausted from the travelling that they didn't care. They flung themselves down on the ground and were fast asleep.

We've not yet properly met our young princes and princess, so now may be a good time to make brief introductions.

Henry was the oldest. He was 17.

Of the three, he was the only one who had clear memories of their father, and the only one who remembered anything about their mother.

Henry was 6 feet tall. He had brown hair, which he kept neatly parted on the left side, and green eyes, and a sharp strong jaw line.

Throughout his teenage years, Henry spent most of his free time out in the field practicing his military exercises. He had grown strong and muscular from all the exercise. He knew how to use a sword and shield, even though he had never been in a real fight in his life.

Henry had spent his whole life expecting to be king. And now, even though he had no throne, he still acted like one born to rule. He gave orders, and expected others to do as he bid. He did not react well if others told him what to do. Horak and Peter he tolerated, because they had been his father's friends, and so he had been obeying them so far on this journey. But anyone else he refused to listen to.

This is not to say that he had no good qualities. Although he expected to command and to be obeyed, he would never have ordered others to do anything that he would not do himself. He felt that as the rightful king, it was his duty to protect those under him. And he would always expose himself to danger first, rather than risk the life of someone beneath him.

And he never hesitated to expose himself to danger. He was also very brave. Like his father, he was probably too brave--he cared nothing for his own safety. And, if he had ended up

becoming king, he might well have ended his life at a young age the same way his father had done, by needlessly exposing himself in battle.

Grace was the next oldest. She was 15, two years younger than Henry.

Grace was the only one out of the 3 to have red hair. Henry and John both had brown hair, like their father, but Grace took after their mother. Until recently, Grace's long red hair had been much remarked upon for its beauty. But now Grace had cut it all off. Her hair was now shortly cut around her head, like a boy's.

Grace had green eyes, like Henry, but they were wider and bigger. Because of the earnest look that Grace had when she was talking to someone, her eyes were often remarked upon. People called them "bright" and "sharp" and sometimes "piercing."

Like Henry, Grace was accustomed to being obeyed, and she was naturally commanding. But she was also more thoughtful than Henry. Whereas Henry usually charged into any situation, Grace usually thought carefully before she took any action.

Grace had resisted the efforts of the household servants to make her into a perfect princess. And since she outranked them all, there had been no one to force her. She had not learned how to knit or embroider or to dance.

She had often joined Henry out on the training fields. But whereas Henry favored the sword, Grace had loved archery. She was very good with the bow and arrows. And she was swift on her feet--faster than both of her two brothers in a race.

The youngest was John. He was 14.

John had brown hair, like Henry, but John's hair was much thicker and longer. The hair covered his forehead, and every so often John had to brush the hair up to keep it out of his eyes.

And unlike his older brother and sister, John was the only one who had brown eyes instead of green eyes.

John had spent his whole life in the shadow of Henry and Grace. They had commanded everything, and he had quietly gone along with them.

He had also spent his entire life expecting to follow rather than to lead.

Unlike Henry, John had a quiet, unassuming voice. And he spent a lot of time quietly thinking.

He had had some military training, and he could use a sword if he had to, but he much preferred reading and studying.

These were the three children of King Trad.

The ranger arrived in the morning.

Horak and Peter were expecting him, and met him outside first, before they brought him in to meet the Princes and Princess.

The ranger was dressed all in green. He had a green shirt, and green pants, and even a small green hat. He had short black hair, and blue eyes.

Horak and Peter introduced him. "This is Robert. The son of Midor the ranger."

Robert was only 16, younger than Henry was, and barely older than Grace. He held out his hand for Henry to shake, but he looked nervous.

Then, when Robert was being introduced to Grace, she looked at him with her piercing eyes, and Robert instinctively looked down and his face reddened visibly. He tried to recover by quickly re-establishing eye-contact once he realized what he had done, but Henry and John both noticed, and Grace definitely noticed.

Horak and Peter noticed too. They weren't particularly surprised. The boy had spent too much time in the woods. What little human contact he had had was mostly with old rangers. He almost never met a girl his own age.

Horak sensed that there was a potential danger developing. Henry was too imperious, and Robert was too meek. He stepped forward and with his left hand grabbed ahold of Robert's hand, and with his right hand he took ahold of Henry's hand.

Horak turned to Robert first. "Robert, they know nothing of the forest. They've only ever lived in the city. You must teach them everything. Do you understand?" The boy nodded silently. "Good." Horak turned to Henry. "Henry, in the forest, Robert is the king. You follow everything he says. You do not disobey him. You do not do anything without seeking his counsel first. Do you understand?"

Henry's eyes briefly lit up with a look of defiance. But then it passed away, and Henry nodded. "Yes, I understand."

Horak decided perhaps a little more explanation was necessary. "Robert has spent his whole life in this forest. He knows which berries you can eat, and which ones are poisonous. He knows where you can safely sleep, and where you cannot. He knows which animals are friendly, and which ones are deadly. He knows which trails are safe, and which are not. If you want to survive, you must do exactly as he says, when he says." Horak paused, before deciding to continue just a little bit more. "There are many strange legends about this forest. Some of them have come down from ancient times. No man living has ever crossed the whole forest, so who knows what you might find once you journey deep into the forest."

The woodsman and his wife prepared the rest of the food, which was put in knapsacks and distributed to the 4 travellers.

As the travellers were putting on the knapsacks, another bird flew down from the sky and landed on Horak's shoulders.

"King Richard knows you're here," the bird said. "Somehow he got word."

"I knew it," said Horak. "There are too many spies in this forest."

"The soldiers are coming," said the bird. "They are already on the road to the forest."

"Why won't he leave us alone?" asked Grace. "We can't possibly hurt him all the way out here."

“It’s too late for that,” said Horak. “He’s already mobilized all of his soldiers to look for you. The entire army of Mora, all of the humans, and all of the animals, are coming for you now. King Richard couldn’t possibly call them off now. And he knows that if he ever did call off the hunt, he’d never get everyone mobilized again. This is his only chance to make sure you never bother him again.” Horak looked sternly at the Princes and Princess. “Be prepared. You could be in that forest for months.”

“We can handle it,” said Henry grimly.

“The forest has spies,” Horak continued. “Most of the animals don’t concern themselves with human affairs, but a small handful of them are in King Richard’s employ. But King Richard’s informants are only at the outskirts of the forest. Keep going deep into the forest, deeper and deeper, and eventually you’ll be out of Richard’s reach. Now go, quickly. Before Richard’s soldiers find you.”