

The Wrong Castle

Under cold, gray skies in the waning months of summer, the army of the Kingdom of Nador had gathered in the swampy marshes surrounding the Castle of King Sebastian. Within the dark, granite walls, preparations for the siege that was most assuredly approaching were hastily being carried out. Even as swords were being sharpened and arrows fashioned in their dozens with whatever resources could be spared, messengers had been dispatched to the opposing forces in hopes of averting conflict. Within the castle's keep, the king himself paced back and forth before his throne, his expression worrisome and angered.

"All of this over losing a damn game of chess..." The King sighed and resigned himself to his throne, rubbing his temples as he sought to keep as much composure as he could muster. Two villages had already been burned to the ground, with them months of cached food for the coming winter. Stiffening his upper lip, the King looked up as his guard captain; a thickly-built, balding veteran of nigh on a dozen battles walked into the keep through the large, oaken doors. "Haemish, please tell me the messengers have returned with good news!"

The guardsman took to one knee and bowed his head before the king before speaking. "I wish that were able to say that I did, M'lord. Two are being kept prisoner, and the one who has returned bares with him a declaration of war from King Nicholas himself."

King Sebastian sighed, distraught and disheartened by the news. His castle walls would not hold out forever, and even with the great defensive advantage, he knew his forces were inferior to the army he was faced with. "Continue to have the troops prepare, I want every man of fighting age to have a sword in his hand and a helm upon his head. Ensure the women and children too young to fight are either gone from the castle, or hidden somewhere safe."

"Aye, m'lord! I shall do all I can. We'll not be lost without a fight!" Haemish bowed his head once more before hurrying from the room. The clank and jangle of his armor

slowly quieting as he grew further and further from the king's hall.

The King's head fell into his hands as the guard captain left; his small crown nearly tumbling from his head as he did so. For long minutes he sat; quiet and still, losing himself to his thoughts of what the future held for him. Death was unlikely, at least for the coming few days. He knew King Nicholas preferred to keep his opponents as prisoners; shaming the deposed rulers with torturous years in shackles and chains. "A fate worse than death..." he solemnly said to himself. But barring some sort of miracle, some sort of magic, or even divine intervention, what hope was there for escaping such a fate, let alone repelling the forces preparing to lay siege to his castle?

The sudden crackle and boom of thunder broke the stillness of King Sebastian's internal lament. The shock of the powerful noise snapped his mind free of the brief circle of despair he had entered, and as he calmed himself, an idea sprouted within his mind. A long shot, but quite possibly the miracle he needed to save his kingdom, and his life. Hastily he threw on a heavy fur cloak and began to ascend the long, dark, spiral staircase to the very top of the castle's highest tower. Waiting for him on the cold, windy rooftop was the immense, fearsome form of the gargoyle he had ordered to be created to protect his castle just months earlier.

"Petra..." The King called out the statue's name, bracing himself for what was to come. The sound of shifting stone filled the air as the gargoyle stirred. Her massive, stony form slowly coming to life as she rose to her feet; hands on her wide hips and a gleaming smile adorning her horned snout as she grinned down at the knee-high ruler.

"I'd been startin' to think ah'd been fergotten about, yer majesty! What with all the hustle 'n bustle fillin' the place and all those right nasty-lookin' fellows gatherin' outside the gates, I'd thought ah might be missin' out on all tha excitement!" Her coarse, deep voice rang out in an almost sing-song fashion as she rattled off her words in a manner more befitting of a gossiping villager than the towering, enchanted stone beast that she was.

The King frowned as he stood in the shadow of the stone gargoyle woman; having to crane his neck back and shift his gaze far upwards to the tauntingly grinning

face of his castle's 'guardian'. "Spare your gossip for another time, beast. The army at our gates will overrun this castle in mere hours! You will assist my men in repelling the forces of King Nicholas at once!"

Petra chuckled, crouching down and tucking her broad wings in close to her back; her face still adorned with a fearsome grin filled with marble fangs. "Aww come off it, yer majesty! Beast? I thought I'd made it clear that ah'm a lady, not some slobberin' beastie out in the woods!"

The King flinched as the gargoyle leaned down and her powerful voice left a ringing in his ears. Quickly he sought to regain his composure, backing up a few steps and letting a scowl make its way onto his face. "There is no time for this! Petra, you were created to protect this castle, and as King, I will not have my orders disobeyed by some...childish stone monster!" His speech briefly interrupted by another loud thunderclap; prompting a jolt on his part and a snicker from the gargoyle. Glaring, and with arms crossed, the King began to speak once more as the first few drops of rain began to fall. "Be you a 'lady' or not, you weigh more than a dozen boulders, and you are far larger than a house! You will join my men in the fight, and you will continue to fight with them until all is lost or we have won!"

As the King continued to speak, Petra began to pay less and less attention to his words. She would nod her head as he talked, occasionally shifting her wings or idly swishing her tail. Minutes passed and the rain grew steadily stronger; fat, heavy drops splashing against her stony body with a steady procession of soft drumming sounds. Whatever the king had been saying to her about fighting and protecting the kingdom had been shoved completely out of her thoughts. In her few months of 'living', never once had she felt, let alone seen rain, and it made her feel...Good. Standing to her full height once more, she looked down at the King who was at the same time staring up at her, silent and with his jaw slack.

"Ah...Yer highness? What's got you so dumbstruck? Is me head on fire?" Petra placed her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side, gently nudging the man with a toe. "Say, lad...Yer...A wee bit smaller than I recall. I know I'm impressive and all

but...Yer a king! No need to be kneelin' to a lass like m'self! ...Yer Majesty?"

The King stumbled backwards a few steps at the gentle nudge before stammering out a response. "You...you're...in the name of God...y-you're...Growing!"

"Bah, don't be daft! I'm a rock, and last I checked, rocks don't grow! Well...I suppose rocks don't really walk, talk, fly, or look as charmin' as I do!" The gargoyle chuckled to herself briefly, crouching down and reaching out to grab the King, despite his protests and commands for her to get her damn hands away from him. Her thick fingers gently curling around his struggling, swearing form as she lifted the man up. To her surprise she could feel him slowly seeming to dwindle in her grasp, sinking slightly into the no longer rock-hard digits. Curious, she raised her other hand and brought it down upon the flat stones that lined covered the tower roof; expecting a resounding CLACK of stone on stone, but instead hearing a dull smack more akin to dropping a roast onto a kitchen floor. Her once solid, stony body feeling far more like flesh than carved granite.

"Have you gone deaf!? Put me down this instant or I shall have an army of stonecutters descend upon you with chisels! You...you...you disrespectful mons-"

Petra quickly opened her hand and set the King down with a roll of her eyes. "Aww quit yer yapping! By me bum, I swear half of what comes out of yer gob is nothin' but a right insult!"

"Well I never! Mark my words yo-"

Again, he was cut off by the gargoyle, this time as she lowered her immense head down right before him; lips curled back to show off her massive marble fangs right in front of his face. Fangs that were steadily growing larger, along with the rest of her. "OI! Do you want me to work for ya and save yer damn castle, or do you want to be kissin' me arse goodbye?"

The King froze where he stood, stammering and fumbling out a meek "yes" between the shivers and trembles that now rocked his frame as he cowered before the towering gargoyle lass.

Petra let out a deep, booming chuckle as she got off her hands and knees, and

again rose to her feet. Nearly twice as tall as she had been mere minutes ago, and continuing to rise higher and higher, her shadow completely engulfed the castle tower as it began to wobble and crackle under her tremendous weight. “Now then, yer majesty...Ah think there’s some right nasty fellows in need of some takin’ care of just outside the walls, hmm?” With a wink, and a hearty, raucous laugh, the growing gargoyle leapt into the air, powerful beats of her wings nearly sending the stunned king below tumbling off the tower as she flew off through the pounding rain in a slow, lazy circle towards the army assembled outside the castle gates.

Once above a line of trebuchets, she tucked her wings and began to drop rapidly towards the ground; growing with every passing moment as she plummeted like a stone towards the earth! Her impact against the ground seconds later left the entirety of the assembled army trembling and disoriented. The ground shook mightily as an hearing-numbing boom rang out across the landscape, people flung off their feet and sent sailing backwards through the air from the sheer force of hundreds of tons of gargoyle slamming into the ground.

Chuckling to herself, Petra brushed splintered bits of siege weaponry off her legs as she looked over the thousands of stunned soldiers below her. A fearsome grin returned to her face as she watched them dwindle beneath her.

“Out of me way, lads! I’ve business with yer king!” Her deep voice boomed out, leaving ears ringing as the pea-sized soldiers scrambled to make way for the grinning titan, a task made difficult by the soft, soaked ground, and impatient, rumbling taps of Petra’s foot against the earth. Deciding she’d waited long enough, Petra began to stroll towards the regal tents at the far end of the camp. Each step louder than the last, leaving the ground trembling and dozens falling to their knees as she passed. Siege weaponry shattering and splintering as she strode through the massive weapons of war without so much as a downward glance. Gallons of mud drenching anyone too close to her feet as she strode through the marshy ground, prompting a chuckle from the gargoyle herself.

Slowly, she continued her growing stroll through the ranks of soldiers, stopping at

last before the opposing king's tent. With a thunderous chuckle, she crouched down, flicking away the opulent tent with a wave of her clawed finger. In her shadow, a cluster of cowering nobles and proud generals huddled together under a table; shivering both from the cold and from the sight of the fearsome, hundreds of feet tall gargoyle lass looming above them. Her grin spreading wider, Petra leaned in closer and closer to the huddling nobility; their entire view taken up by gleaming, marble fangs the size of trees.

"Well now, ah believe yer King...erm...what's the name? Bah, doesn't matter! Lad, yew and I need ta have a wee chat!" A rumbling chuckle shook the ground below and sent the cowering monarchs running away as fast as their legs could carry them. With a small, ground-rumbling chuckle, Petra casually moved a single finger forward and pressed it into the ground in front of the fleeing, gravel-sized people. The monolithic pillar of gray slamming down before them and halting the fleeing cluster of people in their tracks; the tiny royals bouncing off the softened flesh of the gargoyle's finger and landing with a series of splashes in the muddy ground.

"Awww come on, lads! I've barely said hello to all of yee! Yer not going to be leaving a lady all alone and go galavantin' off in the woods are yee? Now lads, I've got one wee question, just one, and then ah can be on me way and you lot can head on home outa this rain! Now..." She leaned in close once again, growling slightly as she teasingly licked her lips. "Which one of you lot is the King? And don't be tellin' me yee forget yer names now! I'm gonna count ta five...and then King Whatever yer name is will step forward, and tap on me fingertip!"

Petra began slowly counting, accentuating each and every number with a tap of her finger against the ground; each impact heavier than the last as her body continued its steady growth. Upon reaching five she raised her fingertip over the little group, holding the smooth, gray digit just mere feet over their heads and letting her growth get it closer and closer!

"Now lads, I told you ya had until I got to five to tell me who the king was, and...well it's a wee bit past then! But, I'm a friendly lass, and ah think you lot will get one more chance! Yee got until my finger reaches down and squishes you lot, and if ya

still haven't told me...well ah think it'll be time fer me to have a wee bit of fun with yer men!" The gargoyle winked, laughing louder than a thunderclap as the miniscule people scrambled to shove their king away from them and appease the looming, fearsome lady.

"There we are, lads! There we are! Ah suppose you lot must have gotten a wee bit of mud in yer ears and couldn't hear me too well! Now then...you lads carry on and start packin' up yer camp and whatnot! I've got to have a little chat with yer king here!"

Grinning wider, she plucked up the cowering monarch between her index finger and thumb, dangling the miniscule man before her widely-grinning maw, watching his speck-sized body dwindle in her grasp as he thrashed and squirmed around in the grip of the tremendous fingers that held him captive.

"Lad...ah think ye might have come to the wrong castle!"