

# To Be A King

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As Prince Eric knelt before the altar of God in prayer, he couldn't help but be distracted by an eerie silence, for this temple has never before been so quiet. That silence was soon broken by the echo of footsteps as they entered the room. The steps were slow and hesitant, but soon came to a stop. The old pew behind him let out a cringing creak from the sudden burden of weight. "You're going to be king soon. You know that, don't you, Eric?" said a familiar voice.

"I do, Uncle Bross." Eric replied. "But Father Morris said that if the medicine takes, my father could have another year, or two." Bross sighed. The echo carried the sound of Bross scratching his beard to Eric's ears as he searched for the appropriate remark.

"Eric, I'm afraid the king's illness is beyond any healer of any religion. They're doing the best they can, but I feel it won't be long." Bross paused for a moment, and once again, the old pew let out a loud creak, but in relief. He placed his hand on Eric's shoulder and asked, "Would you like to see him one last time?"

"Yes," he said, wiping the tears from his blue, yet bloodshot eyes, "Let's go." Eric stood to his feet and brushed his shaggy red hair from his face before following his uncle out of the temple and to the king's chambers. As they walked, Eric asked his uncle, "What will happen...you know, after—"

"Upon my brother's death, you will be named King and Protector of Alfon, and be expected to rule with competence."

"I'm 10 years old," replied Eric.

"No matter. You will have me as your mentor and Trusted Advisor. Many kings have done a lot more with a lot less."

"But what if that's not enough and I make a bad decision that puts the kingdom in jeopardy?"

"Then it'll be your undoing!" Bross responded with a smirk and a hint of sarcasm. He leaned in toward the young prince, ruffled his hair and continued softly, "But I won't let that happen."

As they approached the opening doors to the king's chambers, a man in a black cloak stepped out, headed in the opposite direction. He looked at Eric with a devilish smile and said with a modest bow, "My Lord." as he continued down the hall.

"Who is that man," Eric inquired, "I've never seen him before."

"One of the many 'well-wishers' I suppose." Bross replied while holding the door open for the prince. Eric looked at his father with shock. It had only been a few hours since he last saw his father and already he looked worse for wear. The king's eyes had

gone pale, and his hair had grown whiter. It was clear to Eric that the medicine was little help, if not at all.

“Can he still speak?” Eric asked with a quivering voice.

“I’m afraid not, My Prince,” replied Father Morris, the king’s High Priest, “It would seem he’s lost his sight and his hearing, as well. It won’t be much longer, now. You’d best get him ready, Bross.”

The sound of his father gasping for air was too much for Eric. he would’ve taken that noisy old pew over this nauseating racket any day. Shoving his uncle aside, Eric stormed out of the room and back into the hall where he collapsed to his hands and knees, whimpering. The stone floor was cold. It was somehow comforting to him. So much so that he laid himself flat, extending his arms and legs out in different directions. His whimpering ceased for a moment before hearing a violent whisper,

“*Get up!*” Bross quietly exclaimed, “*Get up before someone sees you!*” Eric slowly rose to his feet and looked at his uncle, his nose red with congestion. “ You’ll likely be king within the night and you need to present yourself as such. This is your first lesson.” Bross paused and wiped the dirt from Eric’s clothes. “Now get yourself to bed and rest up. Your crowning ceremony will begin at first light and you’ll need all the rest you can—”

“But he’s still alive!” Eric interrupted.

“Your father is too far gone now. Father Morris and I as King Regent have decided that delaying any longer would prove fruitless. There’s work to do and Alfon needs a king. Now go.”

Eric retired to his chambers to sleep for the few hours he left in the night. His room was cold and he could hear the sound of wind softly howling. He looked curiously at his window. It was left open. A curious matter because he never opened his window. His room was seven stories above the ground and the height frightened him. The room was dark because the candelabras had all been blown out. Eric approached the window cautiously, slowly leaning his head outside facing down. Chills rushed through his body and he quickly slammed the window shut. The prince re-lit the candles, undressed and crawled into bed.

At some point in the night, Eric found himself awake in his bed, but he could not move. He tried to raise his head, but still nothing. As panic started to take over his nerves, he opened his mouth to scream for help...but still, nothing. Something moved in the darkness of the room and his eyes shifted. He noticed that once again his candles were out and the window was open. He looked back towards the window and stepping out from the shadows was a tall dark figure. As it came closer, Eric could see the outline of a black cloak. He wanted nothing more than to scream his lungs out of existence as he watched the hooded figure kneel at the side of his bed, face to face with him. The moonlight's reflection was enough to illuminate the stranger's face. The sharp jaw, the thin mustache, those piercing green eyes...that devilish smile.

“*The man from the hall!*” he thought to himself. Eric’s body began to tremble and the man opened his mouth and with a sinister tone he said, “Long live the King.”

Suddenly, Eric shouted and awoke from his slumber. He paused. “It’s morning,” he said softly, “Was I dreaming?” His head was a throbbing mess as he lost his balance and fell out of bed onto the floor. “Dammit to hell!” he cried, picking himself up to his feet. He peered around the room, curiously. The window was shut and all the candles were still burning. His attention was had by the sound of an unusual horn. It was a traditional horn reserved for the passing of a king. “‘First light’ indeed,” he muttered while he gazed out the window to see the sun breach the ridgeline at that very moment.

An hour had passed before Eric found himself kneeling before an empty throne as Father Morris placed a crown upon his head. Either the crown was uneven, or his head was too big because it refused to stay properly in place. As the High Priest rambled on with the formalities of the coronation speech, Eric was red with frustration. Not just the crown, or the long-windedness of the ceremony, but he could hear the muttering of some in the crowd behind him. He couldn’t make out the words exactly, but he knew he was being judged by his subjects. He knew that the future of Alfon was now on his shoulders.

The speech was over, and the boy rose, now King Eric, Protector of Alfon. The crowd of people gave a reluctant cheer before clearing out of the hall as Eric sat in the throne for the first time. For the first time since his fathers death, Eric and Bross were alone again.

“I know it’s difficult,” said Bross, “But now is the time for action, not grieving. Alfon is vulnerable for the first time in half a century, and you need to make your strength known in all the kingdoms.”

“Strength?!” Eric inquired. “My father spent the last 20 years establishing peace between the four kingdoms! Father Morris told me it was the stress of those years that caused my mother to pass upon my birth! And what? You want me to throw all of that away?”

“I’m not asking you to go to war, Nephew. Our army is larger than the other three kingdoms combined. Just send a few battalions to occupy their land for a little while. Just to keep them from trying anything..foolish.” Bross said with a worrisome smile.

“I don’t know much about ruling, Uncle, but I *do* know that in Alfon, the people have the power to unseat a king if they feel he has not ruled in their favor.”

Bross kneeled before the young king, placing his hands on Eric’s knee. “You won’t have to worry about that,” he said with reassurance. “I know how these people think. I’ll take care of them for you. Just heed my advice for a little while.”

Eric took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second. The color came back to his face as he remembered the trust his father put in Bross. He felt that it would dishonor his father’s memory if he didn’t trust him, too.

The next eleven and a half months were grueling for the young king. Though he trusted his uncle; he couldn't help but feel like every decision he made was the wrong one. The people of Verna, the kingdom to the north, were rioting against the occupation of Alfonian troops. Alta, the kingdom to the south, suffered a collapse in their economy due to the occupation's strain on their resources, and the kingdom to the east, Corva, had killed the "invaders", and began marching west, toward Alfon. Even his own people had started to turn against him. Alfonians were protesting in the streets, and caricatures of the king were painted on city walls. The peace they had finally achieved had been left in ruins. Eric lacked his father's constitution and had not the heart to punish his people. He turned to his uncle for an answer to the chaos.

"Bross!" he said aggressively as he entered the Hall of Counsel. "You promised me the people would be kept in check. What happened?!"

"I never promised anything, Your Grace." Bross replied rather vaingloriously. "I told you I would take care of them, and I have. You don't yet see things the way I do; the way a 'King' should. Give me two weeks, and I *promise* all will be well." King Eric's face scowled with anger. He lowered his head and rubbed eyes.

"Fine," Eric conceded, "two weeks. You're my blood, but if things do not improve, I'm holding you responsible."

"As one should, Your Grace." Bross looked away from his king, back down at a desk he was sitting at and continued to write a note on a pile of paper. Eric lingered for a moment. Before returning to his chambers, he tried to steal a glance at what his uncle was writing. He couldn't make out the text and Bross paid him no mind. The king left his Trusted Advisor to his work and retired for the evening.

Eric found his new chambers bothersome. Everything in the room was a conduit for bad memories. Even the bed unnerved him so much that he had taken to sleeping in a cot under the window. He kept the room dark, never lighting the candles to hide from the haunting memories. The fireplace, too, he had never burned, for the cool air helped him sleep. In his cot, he laid staring at the stone ceiling, until his exhaustion overcame him.

A week had passed and things only seemed to get worse, and each night Eric promised himself he would relieve Bross of his duties on the next day. Unfortunately he lacked his father's courage, as well as his resolve. However, the next night. Something happened. For the first time in nearly a year, he awoke in the dead of night..paralyzed. Above him, the curtains swayed in the wind though it was the wind's howl that gave him chills. Shifting his eyes away from the window, he once again saw the man in black with that horrid smile standing over him. Eric tried to speak, but it was futile. The man leaned close and spoke balefully.

"Be wary of your kin. He seeks to unseat you, and who do you suppose would inherit the crown? Heed my words, young king, for it is you I want." A gust of wind thrashed the curtains and seemed to blow the man away as if he were a pillar of ash. Eric startled awake and pressed his palms to his eyes, wincing in pain.

“I’m losing my mind,” he whispered. The words of the man echoed in Eric’s head, and though he tried to suppress them, he couldn’t help but wonder if they were at all truthful. He pondered this for a moment then prepared himself to confront his uncle. Chest out and crown perched high upon his head, he charged into the Hall of Counsel, but it was empty. No one and no thing was in there save for a table and a few chairs. Even the pile of documents that scattered the table had been removed. One of the armed guards posted outside the hall peeked in and called to the king.

“Your Grace?” he said. Eric turned slowly to face the guard.

“Yes?” he replied.

“Lord Bross is in the throne room. I believe he’s waiting for you.”

“Thank you.” said the king as he hastily marched to the throne room. His stomach was in knots. He prayed that Bross had not done something irrational and irreversible. Upon his arrival, he was met by his royal guard. Unlike the men at the Hall of Counsel who wore black mail, these knights were clad in silver armor and tasked with escorting and defending the king outside of the castle. They seized Eric by the arms and stood still as if awaiting further instructions.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Eric shouted. “Let go of your king!”

“You are not their king anymore” said a familiar voice from behind the large knights. Eric looked about the room and saw that it was packed full of citizens and the one speaking was Bross.

“Uncle! What have you done?!” Eric cried with tear filled eyes.

“Only what was necessary.” Bross replied imperiously. “You have led your people toward destruction and I aim to liberate Alfon from your tyranny.”

“I followed your advice! You were the one—”

“Blame who you will, but *you* were the king and the king gave the orders. The deposition is complete. Take the boy away.” The royal guard carried Eric kicking and screaming to a cell where he would remain until the sitting king felt it necessary to release him.

In that grimy cell he sat for six nights wallowing in sorrow, until he received a visitor. “My Lord?” called Father Morris. “Your uncle— erm, The King has requested your presence in the temple.” Eric stood up from the floor, not bothering to dust himself off, and stared at the priest. Father Morris gestured for one of the guards to open his cell and he proceeded to escort the boy to the temple. When they arrived, Morris and the guards left the room and closed the doors behind them. Eric saw his uncle for the first time wearing the crown. The temple somehow seemed dark to him, though the candles were all lit. Bross stood at the altar admiring the craftsmanship of their holy statue that stood behind it. Above the statue, there were words in an old language from a time well before the life of Eric’s father.

“Do you know what these words mean, Eric?” Bross said without turning to look at his nephew. Eric squinted his eyes to get a better look, but he could not decipher the language.

“No, Your Grace.” he replied. Bross turned to look at Eric.

“Faithless fathers find fruitless fortune,” Bross continued, “It always sounded like nonsense to me, but over the years I’ve started to understand. You see, nephew, without faith we are blind. Moreover, if we are blind and called to lead, we lead not just ourselves but others into despair. At least that’s what I’ve come to understand from this lesson of old.” Eric stood motionless and silent. “Your father was faithless, Eric.” The boy’s head lifted to meet his uncle’s gaze.

“What did you say?” Eric asked angrily.

“Faithless,’ Eric. And his faithlessness resulted in his doom...and mine.”

Suddenly the wind began to howl softly, and the candles flickered though there were no open windows in the temple. Bross paid no mind and continued. “My brother was a good father, but a poor king. The four kingdoms were constantly at war and your father had lost faith in not just our God, but all Gods. He turned to something darker. An archdevil.”

“No!” Eric interjected.

“Let. Me. Finish.” Eric bit his tongue in suspense, though he wanted to kill his uncle for slandering his father.

“Go on.” he relented.

“Your father struck up a deal with that monster, against my counsel, for peace in exchange for the life of his successor. The devil told him ‘No matter what, peace would endure.’ and about eight months later, you were born.”

“Does that mean I’m going to die?” asked Eric.

“The terms of the deal were very specific. Whoever wore your father’s crown exactly one year after his death would die as well.” Bross then gestured to the crown he was wearing. Eric then realized that at first light it would be exactly one year since his father’s passing. His eyes grew large but before he could speak, Bross continued again. “I was not trying to steal your throne, dear nephew. I was trying to save your life.” he said with a hopeful smile.

Just then, the sun breached the ridgeline and its light filled the temple and all the candle flames were suddenly blown out. Eric felt something brush his shoulder and he saw a figure in a dark cloak pass him by. The figure approached his uncle and caressed his cheek with the back of his hand.

“You’re a clever one, Bross.” the figure said. “I thought for sure I’d be taking the kid.” The figure looked back at Eric with his piercing green eyes and his devilish smile. Raising one hand in the air and placing the other one on Bross’ neck, the man said, “Long live the king.” and he snapped his fingers. In an instant, both the man in black and Bross blew away like ash in the wind, and the Alfonian crown fell to the floor; its crash echoing in the temple. Onced the echo ceased, Eric fell to the floor. As he laid

there before the altar of God, he couldn't help but be distracted by an eerie silence, for this temple has never before been so quiet.