

## The song of the King

The three knights sat at the table and listened as the prince spoke. "My father, the king, has pledged the hand of my sister, to the first of you who can prove himself worthy"

The prince paused to let the men take in the news. He looked at their faces, each weathered from miles and scarred from battles. The kingdom knew no stronger warriors than these three. And these three soldiers knew of no fair maiden than the daughter of the king.

Each knight had asked for her hand. The king had promised only an opportunity, a test to see, which was worthy of his daughter. And now the time for the test had arrived.

"Your test is a journey" the prince exclaimed, "a journey to the King's castle by way of Hemlock."

"The forest?" One knight quickly inquired.

"The forest," answered the prince.

There was silence as the knights pondered the words. Each felt stab a fear. They knew the danger of Hemlock, a dark and deadly place. Parts of it were so thick with trees that the sunlight never found the floor.

It was the home of the Hopenots, small, sly creatures with yellow eyes. Hopenots were not strong, but they were clever, and they were many. Some people believed the Hopenots were lost travelers changed by the darkness. But no one really knew for sure.

"Will we travel alone?" Carlisle spoke, a strange question to come from the strongest of the three nights. His fierce sword was known throughout the kingdom. But even this steely soldier knew better than to travel Hemlock unaccompanied.

"You may each select one companion. "

"But the forest is dark. The trees make the sky black. How will we find the castle?"

This time it was Alon who spoke. He was not as strong as Carlisle, but much quicker. He was famous for his speed. Alon left trails of baffled enemies whose grasp he'd escape by ducking into trees or scampering over walls. But swiftness is worthless if you have no direction. So Alon asked, "how can we find the way?"

The prince nodded, reached into his sack, and pulled out an ivory flute. "There are only two of these," he exclaimed. "This one and another in the possession of the king." He put the instrument to his lips and played a soft, sweet aria. Never had the knights heard such soothing music. "My father's flute plays the same song. His song will guide you to the castle."

"How is that?" Alon asked.

"Three times a day the king will play from the castle wall. When the sun rises, when the sun peaks, and when the sun sets. Listen for him. Follow his song and you will find the castle."

"There is only one other flute like this one?"

"Only one."

"And you and your father play the same music?"

"Yes."

It was Cassidon inquiring. Cassidon was known for his alertness. He saw what others missed. He knew the home of a traveler by the dirt on his boot. He knew the truth of a story by the eyes of the teller. He could tell the size of a marching army by the number of scattered birds in flight.

Carlisle and Alon wondered why he asked about the flute. It wouldn't be very long before they found out.

"Consider the danger and choose your companion, carefully," the prince cautioned. And so they did. The next morning, the three knights mounted their horses and entered Hemlock. Behind each rode the chosen companion.

For the people in the Kings castle, the days of waiting passed slowly. All new of the test. And all wondered which knight would win the princess. Three times a day the king sent the music soaring into the trees of Hemlock. Three times a day the people stopped their work to listen.

After many days and countless songs, a watchmen spotted two figures stumbling out of the forest into the clearing. No one could tell who they were. They were too far from the castle. The men had no horses, weapons, or armor.

"Hurry," commanded the king to his guards, "bring them in. Give them medical treatment and food, but don't tell anyone who they are. Dress the knight as a prince, and we will see their faces tonight at the banquet."

He then dismissed the crowds and told them to prepare for the feast.

That evening, a festive spirit filled the banquet hall. At every table, the people try to guess which knight had survived the hemlock forest.

Finally, the moment came to present the victor. At the king's signal, the people became quiet, and he began to play the flute. Once again, the ivory instrument sang. The people turned to see who would enter.

Many thought it would be Carlisle, the strongest. Others thought it would be Alon, the swiftest. But it was neither. The knight who survived the journey was Cassidon, the wisest

He strode quickly across the floor, following the sound of the flute, one final time, and bowing before the king.

"Tell us of your journey," he was instructed. The people lean forward to listen.

"The Hopenots were treacherous," Cassidon began. "They attacked, but we resisted. They took our horses, but we continued. What nearly destroyed us, though, was something far worse."

"What was that?" asked the princess.

"They imitated."

"They imitated?" asked the king.

"Yes, my king. They imitated. Each time the song of your flute would enter the forest, a hundred flutes would begin to play. All around us, we heard music, songs from every direction."

"I do not know what became of Carlisle and Alon, he continued, "but I know strength and speed will not help one hear the right flute."

The King asked the question that was on everyone's lips. "Then how did you hear my song?"

"I chose the right companion," he answered as he motioned for his fellow traveler to enter. The people gasped. It was the prince. In his hand, he carried the flute.

"I knew there was only one who could play this song as you do," Cassidon explained. "So I asked him to travel with me. As we journeyed, he played. I learned your song so well that though a thousand false flutes tried to hide your music, I could still hear you. I knew your song and followed it."