

8. The Fool-Killer

The room was round, with a dome at the top. The bare walls were of gray stone, with square, open windows set full twenty feet from the floor. Rough gray stone also composed the floor, and in the center of the room stood one great rock with a seat hollowed in its middle. This was the throne, and round about it stood a swarm of men and women dressed in rich satins, velvets and brocades, brilliantly ornamented with gold and precious stones. The men were of many shapes and sizes--giants and dwarfs being among them. The women all seemed young and beautiful.

Prince Marvel cast but a passing glance at this assemblage, for his eye quickly sought the rude throne on which was seated King Terribus.

The personal appearance of this monster was doubtless the most hideous known in that age of the world. His head was large and shaped like an egg; it was bright scarlet in color and no hair whatever grew upon it. It had three eyes--one in the center of his face, one on the top of his head and one in the back. Thus he was always able to see in every direction at the same time. His nose was shaped like an elephant's trunk, and swayed constantly from side to side. His mouth was very wide and had no lips at all, two rows of sharp and white teeth being always plainly visible beneath the swaying nose.

King Terribus, although surrounded by so splendid a court, wore a simple robe of gray cloth, with no ornament or other finery, and his strange and fearful appearance was strongly contrasted with the glittering raiment of his courtiers and the beauty of his ladies in waiting.

When Prince Marvel, with Nerle marching close behind, entered the great room, Terribus looked at him sharply a moment, and then bowed. And when he bowed the eye upon the top of his head also looked sharply at the intruders.

Then the king spoke, his voice sounding so sweet and agreeable that it almost shocked Nerle, who had expected to hear a roar like that from a wild beast.

"Why are you here?" asked Terribus.

"Partly by chance and partly from curiosity," answered Prince Marvel. "No one in this island, except your own people, had ever seen the king of Spor; so, finding myself in your country, I decided to come here and have a look at you."

The faces of the people who stood about the throne wore frightened looks at the unheard of boldness of this speech to their terrible monarch. But the king merely nodded and inquired:

"Since you have seen me, what do you think of me?"

"I am sorry you asked that question," returned the prince; "for I must confess you are a very frightful-looking creature, and not at all agreeable to gaze upon."

"Ha! you are honest, as well as frank," exclaimed the king. "But that is the reason I do not leave my kingdom, as you will readily understand. And that is the reason I never permit strangers to come here, under penalty of death. So long as no one knows the King of Spor is a monster people will not gossip about my looks, and I am very sensitive regarding my personal appearance. You will perhaps understand that if I could have chosen I should have been born beautiful instead of ugly."

"I certainly understand that. And permit me to say I wish you were beautiful. I shall probably dream of you for many nights," added the prince.

"Not for many," said King Terribus, quietly. "By coming here you have chosen death, and the dead do not dream."

"Why should I die?" inquired Prince Marvel, curiously.

"Because you have seen me. Should I allow you to go away you would tell the world about my ugly face. I do not like to kill you, believe me; but you must pay the penalty of your rashness--you and the man behind you."

Nerle smiled at this; but whether from pride at being called a man or in pleasurable anticipation of the sufferings to come I leave you to guess.

"Will you allow me to object to being killed?" asked the prince.

"Certainly," answered the king, courteously. "I expect you to object. It is natural. But it will do you no good."

Then Terribus turned to an attendant and commanded:

"Send hither the Fool-Killer."

At this Prince Marvel laughed outright.

"The Fool-Killer!" he cried; "surely your Majesty does me little credit. Am I, then, a fool?"

"You entered my kingdom uninvited," retorted the king, "and you tell me to my face I am ugly. Moreover, you laugh when I condemn you to death. From this I conclude the Fool-Killer is the proper one to execute you. Behold!"

Marvel turned quickly, to find a tall, stalwart man standing behind him. His features were strong but very grave, and the prince caught a look of compassion in his eye as their gaze met. His skin was fair and without blemish, a robe of silver cloth fell from his shoulders, and in his right hand he bore a gleaming sword.

"Well met!" cried Marvel, heartily, as he bowed to the Fool-Killer. "I have often heard your name mentioned, but 'tis said in the world that you are a laggard in your duty."

"Had I my way," answered the Fool-Killer, "my blade would always drip. It is my master, yonder, who thwarts my duty." And he nodded toward King Terribus.

"Then you should exercise your right on him, and cleave the ugly head from his shoulders," declared the prince.

"Nay, unless I interfered with the Fool-Killer," said the king, "I should soon have no subjects left to rule; for at one time or another they all deserve the blade."

"Why, that may be true enough," replied Prince Marvel. "But I think, under such circumstances, your Fool-Killer is a needless servant. So I will rid you of him in a few moments."

With that he whipped out his sword and stood calmly confronting the Fool-Killer, whose grave face never changed in expression as he advanced menacingly upon his intended victim. The blades clashed together, and that of the Fool-Killer broke short off at the hilt. He took a step backward, stumbled and fell prone upon the rocky floor, while Prince Marvel sprang forward and pressed the point of his sword against his opponent's breast.

"Hold!" cried the king, starting to his feet. "Would you slay my Fool-Killer? Think of the harm you would do the world!"

"But he is laggard and unfaithful to his calling!" answered the prince, sternly.

"Nevertheless, if he remove but one fool a year he is a benefit to mankind," declared the king. "Release him, I pray you!"

Then the victor withdrew his sword and stood aside, while the Fool-Killer slowly got upon his feet and bowed humbly before the king.

"Go!" shouted Terribus, his eye flashing angrily. "You have humiliated me before my enemy. As an atonement see that you kill me a fool a day for sixty days."

Hearing this command, many of the people about the throne began to tremble; but the king paid no attention to their fears, and the Fool-Killer bowed again before his master and withdrew from the chamber.