

10. Prince Marvel Wins His Fight

When the door had closed on the Royal Dragon, King Terribus turned again to Prince Marvel, while his crimson face glowed with embarrassment, and his front eye rolled with baffled rage as he thought how vain had been all his efforts to kill this impudent invader of his domains.

But his powers were by no means exhausted. He was a mighty king--the mightiest of all in the Enchanted Island, he believed--and ways to destroy his enemies were numerous.

"Send for a hundred of my Gray Men!" he suddenly cried; and a courtier ran at once to summon them. The Gray Men would obey his orders without question, he well knew. They were silent, stubborn, quick, and faithful to their king. Terribus had but to command and his will would be obeyed.

They entered the room so quietly that Nerle never knew they were there until he turned and found the hundred gray ones standing close together in the center of the hall. Then Prince Marvel came to Nerle's side and whispered something in his ear.

"Will you obey my orders?" they heard the king ask. And the Gray Men, with their eyes fixed upon their master, nodded all their hundred heads and put their hands upon the dangerous three-tined forks that were stuck in every one of the hundred belts.

Prince Marvel handed one end of a coiled rope to Nerle, and then they both sprang forward and ran around the spot where the hundred Gray Men stood huddled together. Then they were pulled closer together than before--closer, and still closer--for the prince and Nerle had surrounded them with the rope and were tying the two ends together in a tight knot. The rope cut into the waists of those on the outside, and they pressed inward against their fellows until there was scarcely space to stick a knife-blade between any two of them. When the prince had tied the rope firmly King Terribus, who had been looking on amazed, saw that his hundred Gray Men were fastened together like a bundle of kindling-wood, and were unable to stir hand or foot.

And, while he still gazed open-mouthed at the strange sight, Prince Marvel tilted the bundle of men up on its edge and rolled it out of the door. It went rolling swiftly through the courtyard and bounded down the castle steps,

where the rope broke and the men fell sprawling in all directions on the marble walk.

King Terribus sighed, for such treatment of his Gray Men, whom he dearly loved, made him very unhappy.

But more than ever was he resolved to kill these impudent strangers, who, in the very heart of his kingdom where thousands bowed to his will, dared openly defy his power. So, after a moment's thought, Terribus beckoned to a dwarf who, robed in gay and glittering apparel, stood near his throne.

"Summon the royal Dart Slingers!" he said, with a scowl.

The little man bowed and hastened away, to return presently with twenty curiously crooked dwarfs, each armed with a sling and a quiver full of slender, sharp-pointed darts.

"Slay me these strangers!" exclaimed the king, in his gruffest voice.

Now Nerle, when he beheld these terrible Dart Slingers, of whom he had heard many tales in his boyhood, began to shiver and shake with fright, so that his teeth rattled one upon another. And he reflected: "Soon shall I be content, for these darts will doubtless pierce every part of my body."

The dwarfs formed a line at one side of the gloomy throne-room, and Prince Marvel, who had been earnestly regarding them, caught Nerle by the arm and led him to the opposite wall.

"Stand close behind me and you will be safe," he whispered to his esquire.

Then each dwarf fixed a dart in his sling, and at a word from their chief they all drew back their arms and launched a shower of the sharp missiles at the strangers.

Swift and true they sped, each dart intended to pierce the body of the youthful knight who stood so calm before them. Prince Marvel had raised his right arm, and in his hand was a small leather sack, with a wide mouth. As the darts flew near him a strange thing happened: they each and all swerved from their true course and fell rattling into the leathern sack, to the wonder of the royal slingers and the dismay of King Terribus himself.

"Again!" screamed the king, his usually mild voice hoarse with anger.

So again the dwarfs cast their darts, and again the leathern sack caught them every one. Another flight followed, and yet another, till the magic sack was packed full of the darts and not a dwarf had one remaining in his quiver.

Amid the awed silence of the beholders of this feat the merry laughter of Prince Marvel rang loud and clear; for the sight of the puzzled and terrified faces about him was very comical. Plucking a dart from the sack he raised his arm and cried:

"Now it is my turn. You shall have back your darts!"

"Hold!" shouted the king, in great fear. "Do not, I beg you, slay my faithful servants." And with a wave of his hand he dismissed the dwarfs, who were glad to rush from the room and escape.

Nerle wiped the tears from his eyes, for he was sorely disappointed at having again escaped all pain and discomfort; but Prince Marvel seated himself quietly upon a stool and looked at the scowling face of King Terribus with real amusement.

The monarch of Spor had never before been so foiled and scorned by any living creature. Defeated and humbled before his own people, he bowed his crimson head on his hands and sullenly regarded his foe with his top eye. Then it was that the idea came to him that no ordinary mortal could have thwarted him so easily, and he began to fear he was dealing--perhaps unawares--with some great magician or sorcerer. That a fairy should have assumed a mortal form he never once considered, for such a thing was until then unheard of in the Enchanted Island of Yew. But with the knowledge that he had met his master, whoever he might prove to be, and that further attempts upon the stranger's life might lead to his own undoing, King Terribus decided to adopt a new line of conduct, hoping to accomplish by stratagem what he could not do by force. To be sure, there remained his regiment of Giants, the pride of his kingdom; but Terribus dreaded to meet with another defeat; and he was not at all sure, after what had happened, that the giants would succeed in conquering or destroying the strangers.

"After all," he thought, "my only object in killing them was to prevent their carrying news of my monstrous appearance to the outside world; so if I can but manage to keep them forever in my kingdom it will answer my purpose equally well."

As the result of this thought he presently raised his head and spoke to Prince Marvel in a quiet and even cheerful voice.

"Enough of these rude and boisterous games," said he, with a smile that showed his white teeth in a repulsive manner. "They may have seemed to my people an ill welcome to my good friend, Prince Marvel; yet they were only designed to show the powers of the mighty magician who has become my guest. Nay, do not deny it, Prince; from the first I guessed your secret, and to prove myself right I called my servants to oppose you, being sure they could not do you an injury. But no more of such fooling,--and pray forgive my merry game at your expense. Henceforth we shall be friends, and you are heartily welcome to the best my kingdom affords."

With this speech Terribus stepped down from his throne and approached Prince Marvel with outstretched hand. The prince was not at all deceived, but he was pleased to see how cunningly the king excused his attempts to kill him. So he laughed and touched the hand Terribus extended, for this fairy prince seemed to have no anger against any mortal who ventured to oppose him.

The strangers were now conducted, with every mark of respect, to a beautiful suite of apartments in the castle, wherein were soft beds with velvet spreads, marble baths with perfumed waters, and a variety of silken and brocaded costumes from which they might select a change of raiment.

No sooner had they bathed and adorned themselves fittingly than they were summoned to the king's banquet hall, being escorted thither by twelve young maidens bearing torches with lavender-colored flames.

The night had fallen upon the mountains outside, but the great banquet hall was brilliant with the glow of a thousand candles, and seated at the head of the long table was King Terribus.

Yet here, as in the throne-room, the ruler of Spor was dressed in simplest garments, and his seat was a rough block of stone. All about him were lords and ladies in gorgeous array; the walls were hung with rare embroideries; the table was weighted with gold platters and richly carved goblets filled with sweet nectars. But the king himself, with his horrid, ugly head, was like a great blot on a fair parchment, and even Prince Marvel could not repress a shudder as he gazed upon him.

Terribus placed his guest upon his right hand and loaded him with honors. Nerle stood behind the prince's chair and served him faithfully, as an esquire should. But the other servants treated Nerle with much deference, noting in him an air of breeding that marked him the unusual servant of an unusual master.

Indeed, most curious were the looks cast on these marvelous men who had calmly walked into the castle of mighty Terribus and successfully defied his anger; for in spite of his youthful appearance and smiling face every attendant at the banquet feared Prince Marvel even more than they feared their own fierce king.