

The Magician of Hundare

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Marco, the Prince of Hundare sat on his throne, doing what any prince in his current position would do, that is, sulk. His parents had just left for their seaside holiday, leaving him to entertain a group of delegates from the south of the country. In his opinion, they were a bunch of self-important, pompous officials, parading around to look down their nose at everyone else. And to make it even worse, they would be here for an entire week.

As he sat there, fiddling with his deck of cards, a servant entered. ‘Your Highness, the entertainers wishing to audition for tomorrow are here.’

‘Send them in,’ said Marco, with a wave of his hand. First, an actor entered, bowing to Marco as he came in. Then he rose, and Marco was startled, for the actor looked like his mirror image. The man had the exact same build as Marco and even could speak like him, giving Marco a possible solution to his problems.

‘I need someone to entertain the delegates next week. Would you be willing?’ he asked.

‘Why would I be interested?’

‘You could impersonate me. You’ll have all the abilities of the prince, along with all the luxuries.’

‘Done.’

The next morning, Marco packed up his kit and headed to the town, while the actor prepared for the arrival of the delegates. Marco enjoyed himself in town, for he had practised his magic tricks whenever he had gotten some spare time and had even thought up a few by himself.

He used his tricks well, and soon a crowd gathered to see him perform, for magicians, especially good ones, were a rarity in this part of the world. He spent the day in that fashion, and as the sun began to set, he headed for an inn, where he spent the night, using the money earned from his day performing.

He spent the next couple of days that way, and the day before his parents’ return, packed up his kit, sighing as he prepared to return to the castle. He had had a great time. He continued on, strolling up to the castle, pleased that he had escaped the boredom of entertaining the delegates for most of the week.

He went to his bedroom window, and climbed in. The actor, still looking exactly like Marco, startled for a moment, but recognised Marco. ‘There you are! Welcome back.’

Marco sat down on a chair. ‘How did you enjoy being the prince?’

‘Oh, I enjoyed it very much! In fact, I’m quite in your debt. Here, let me make you a little present. One of the delegates presented this to me,’ said the actor, taking out a beautifully ornamented sword with jewels on the hilt.

Without warning, the actor lunged at Marco with the blade, Marco ducking just in time. Now on his guard, he threw the chair at the actor, hurling it across the room. The actor was caught unawares, and the chair smashed into him, causing him to drop the sword.

Marco, seeing his opportunity, rushed towards the actor, and picked up the blade, pointing it at him. ‘I’m going to call the guards, and we’ll try you for the attempted murder of the crown prince!’

‘How funny, I was going to say the exact same thing!’ said the actor, smirking. He put his fingers to his lips, and whistled, causing the guards stationed down the corridor to burst open the door and rush in.

Marco quickly realised the deadly situation he was in, for he was still dressed as a commoner, while the actor was dressed in Marco’s royal clothes. Marco sped to the window as the guards tried to process the situation, leaping out and rolling after the drop.

He heard the actor snarl at him, rushing to the window, but by the time the guards had climbed down, Marco was far away, hitching a ride on the back of a cart that happened to be passing by.

After Marco decided he was far away enough from the castle, he leapt off the cart. He glared at the sword that had been the cause of his recent troubles and was about to throw it away when an idea occurred to him. He went to the town market and purchased several items for the evening’s show including a false beard, putting it on. Then, he settled behind a hedge to practise the trick he planned for tonight.

That night, dressed in different clothes, he walked to the castle, wheeling a wheelbarrow with his magic kit. As usual, there was a small que of entertainers gathered outside for the evenings show to the delegates. He joined the queue and waited to be admitted into the castle.

After waiting half an hour, Marco was at last admitted into the castle. He left his wheelbarrow in a corner and snuck upstairs to his room. Fortunately for him, his counterfeit was not there. He gathered some of his clothes into a bundle and crept back downstairs.

The show was just beginning. When it came to his turn, he wheeled his cart onto the outdoor stage and announced that he would need a volunteer who was about the same height and build as him. None of the pompous delegates met the criteria, but nonetheless, some of them enthusiastically volunteered, tiptoeing above the audience to raise their hand.

As Marco had planned, his counterfeit was the only one in the audience who met this requirement, and after some encouragement from the delegates, his counterfeit proudly rose from his seat and strode onto the stage.

‘For this trick,’ announced Marco. ‘I will make something truly spectacular happen.’

He invited his counterfeit inside a large box about waist height. Marco crawled into the dark and small box, bringing with him a bag. He held out some ragged garments including a cloak, to the actor, who after a moment of hesitation, put them on over his previous clothes. The actor wrinkled his nose in disgust as he did so, muttering to himself.

Then, while the actor waited, Marco exchanged his commoner’s clothes for his royal robes, also pulling off his false beard. And last of all, he took out the same sword from yesterday and gave it to the actor, who asked, ‘Are we done yet?’

‘Yes,’ replied Marco. Then he screamed, ‘The entertainer tried to kill me! Guards! Murder!’

The actor stared at him in puzzlement, trying to make sense of the situation. While he was thinking, Marco pulled him out onto the stage, where the pair wrestled on the floor, the sword knocked out of the way in the scuffle. The approaching guards stopped in confusion as they saw two virtually identical figures.

As they wrestled, Marco gained the upper hand, and shoved the actor to the edge of the stage, where he lost his balance and toppled into the muddy pond beside the stage. Marco turned to face the guards. ‘Quick! It’s the same entertainer that tried to kill me yesterday! This sword here proves it! Detain him!’

Seeing Marco in royal clothes, the guards assumed that the splashing and floundering figure in the pond was the entertainer, and rushed towards him, hauling him out as he reached the shore. Dripping from head to toe with mud, the guards never imagined that the prince they had seen go on stage was this sorry, dripping figure.

Recovering his breath, the counterfeit began to protest, but was dragged away by the guards. Marco grinned; it had been an entertaining week. As he watched the guards lead the actor away, he heard a rustling in the bushes.

He looked at them cautiously but relaxed as the delegates emerged from them, having hidden there during the fight. They congratulated Marco on his wits and quick thinking, assuring him that they would be signing the treaty.

As he basked in their praise, a messenger came in. 'Your Highness, I have brought a message from your parents.'

Marco opened the envelope:

Dear Marco,

We hope you are well.

We hope the delegates are pleased with your hosting, as it is essential for them to sign the treaty. We have enjoyed the holiday very much, as the beach is extremely relaxing, and we have decided to extend our trip. Don't expect us for the next month.

Love,

Mum and Dad.

P.S. The Delegates from the north of the country are coming next week. The treaty they need to sign is in our room.

Marco groaned as he read this, excused himself from the delegates and started walking slowly back up to the castle, where he went to his room. He sighed as he saw his deck of cards on the table and put it aside into a cupboard. *Those times are over.* As he did so, there was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' he said.

To his surprise, another actor approached, looking just like him. 'Greetings, your Highness.'

'Greetings...' replied Marco.