



# *The Ace of Hearts*

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Action/Adventure

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There once were two brothers, one older and another younger, who were candidates to be heir to their father's throne. He ruled over a grand kingdom with subjects of many races and various landscapes. It was a happy kingdom and the people were always willing to pay their taxes and donate to the king and his cause. This meant that the royal family was incredibly rich.

One day, the King came to the realization that he was getting older, and he needed to pick someone to take his place. So, he called his two sons to the throne room, and imposed upon them a challenge. "The two of you must rise to your places and compete for the power I hold," he started. "Any king decent enough to control my kingdom must first be loved dearly by the people; loved so much that they are willing to live and die for you. Your task is to become the most loved man in the kingdom. You each have access to our family's treasury. Spend all that you need to be victorious, but make sure you spend wisely". The two brothers accepted the challenge and wished each other good luck.

Soon after their conversation with the king, a message came from the outskirts of the capital city: the recent dry climate had been confirmed to be a drought. Many of the crops were failing, and so many people and animals would soon starve as well. The brothers arrived at the scene separately. The older brother brought a large group of people and made them walk the whole way, all while holding him on a platform above their heads. Meanwhile, the younger brother brought only a small group of people and made sure everyone had a horse to ride. By the time the brothers had made it to the farm areas, their entourages were in completely different states. The older brother's group was standing around, covered in sweat as the sun beat down on them. Meanwhile, the younger brother's group was able to fit in the small spots of shade under the trees, and were not touching the now burning-hot dirt.

The farmers and advisors took the time to explain to the brothers how the issue might be fixed. The farmlands

were previously irrigated by a series of small streams that flowed down the valley. However, those streams were no longer enough since the water was evaporating too fast. There were, however, two rivers on either side of the valley that still had enough flowing water to irrigate the farmland. The plan was to build canals from both rivers towards the farmlands, which would redirect the water and save the crops.

One would think that this plan was fairly straightforward, but the brothers still managed to execute them differently. The older brother had his group split up: half of them would stay with him to keep him cool and make sure he had enough food and drink, while the other half were working on the task at hand. He would tell them, "This is not a task fit for a prince and future king. You are the commoners, so you should help take care of your kingdom." At the same time, the younger brother's group was working on the other river. He was involved with the project and instead of just giving commands, he also did his share of the work. "It is my kingdom, and if I am to be king, I must help it stay in good condition," he told the people. Eventually, his team finished the new canal and managed to reroute enough water to the valley that satisfied the farmers. They showered the workers and the younger prince with fresh fruits and vegetables in gratitude. While the successful group rode back to the city on horseback, they passed by the older prince's group, who had quit the task due to the darkness and lack of energy. They left an ugly, incomplete trench in the middle of the farmland that served no purpose. The entire journey back, the older prince was scolding his workers for failing the job, while the younger prince was treating his team to a nice meal with the gifts the farmers had given them. Upon his eventual return to the city, the older prince immediately went to his chambers in the castle, and his group started bad-mouthing him behind his back. He later found out about this, and it left an imprint on him.

A few days later, the King took his sons on a tour throughout the city. They had been going through some of the slums and were looking for ways to improve the quality of life of the people living there. As they were walking down one of the streets, there was a family sitting in the gutter. They looked very tired and reeked terribly, like they had not bathed in a long time. The older brother had seen them first and had displayed his clear disgust. "Move yourselves from these streets! You are an eyesore and a disease to my nose." The family replied, "Our apologies, sir, but we do not have a home. It was destroyed in a storm and we come here to beg for food." As this exchange occurred, the younger brother had come around the corner and seen the family down the street. While his brother walked away in superiority, the younger prince talked with the family and learned of their issues. "It is a shame what has happened to your life, and I will take it upon myself to make sure you live respectfully once again," he told them. He called one of the guards to come closer, and told him, "Find all of the families such as this one and make sure they have a place to stay and a meal to eat by tonight. Then you will make contact with the construction workers and build some homes and plots for them in a nearby village, so

they can sustain themselves again.” The guard understood the task and started organizing his subordinates. As the prince was walking away to catch up with his tour, the mother of the family grabbed his ankles and started kissing at his feet, until the prince insisted that it was the least he could do for them.

Some months later, the kingdom found itself in disrepair. There were a series of natural disasters and storms that had damaged the infrastructure. Some of the farms were washed away by floodwaters, and the mines where the kingdom got its resources like gold, silver, and coal had collapsed. This led to a wave of crimes happening around the capital city, with vandals and bandits stealing and destroying property. The guards were trying to stop them but needed help and leadership. The king commanded his sons to deploy their personal legions and help the guards solve the issue.

The two princes spent weeks on patrol, catching different criminals almost every night. However, one night would change their futures for good.

They were investigating some screaming and yelling in one of the vendor streets of the city. There were fires blazing animals running all around in chaos. The princes and their guards arrived and immediately saw the vandals harassing some innocent people for money and goods. They called upon them to get their attention and pushed forward to arrest them. However, one criminal had weapons, and was ready to fight. The older prince was in the front of the group, but he was a coward. He did not know how to use his blade properly, and was not prepared when the criminal ran at him. So, he grabbed a young child that happened to be nearby and used him as fodder, giving him just enough time to run away from the fight, but killing the child in the process. His mother yelped in pain, and the vandal saw her and grabbed her, running around a corner.

The younger prince was not going to allow him to get away with the crimes, or have his way with the young woman. Leaving the guards behind, he chased the vandal into the darkness, and ripped the maiden from the vandal's arms. While the lady ran towards the guards and her child, the prince clashed with the vandal. The time spent in the fight was the longest collection of seconds he had ever experienced. Eventually, there were two blades deeply embedded in flesh. However, that was one blade too many.

It was a solemn day for the royal family and the kingdom. The king had found out from the princes' personal legions that the younger prince had not survived the previous night. He had died a martyr: fighting for a good cause and protecting innocent lives. Word was also spreading that the king now had no choice but to choose his eldest son as the heir. The king cried himself to eternal sleep when he realized the struggle that the kingdom would go through in the coming decades. The older prince, however, held a wide smile, for despite the back-talking and negative views about him, he had finally earned his place on the throne, and perhaps

more importantly, proved superiority over his younger brother.

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