



here once was a beautiful land called Karamenia, which held a great magic that spanned across all things, living and dead. There was a neighboring kingdom, Landion, which had been at war with Karamenia for many years.

The king of Karamenia had a beautiful daughter who he doted on and taught everything he knew. The princess was known across the land by many names. She was known as the kingdom's jewel, for the many gems she wore on her crown; the kingdom's flower, for her beauty; and the kingdom's dagger, for she had a mind with cutting intelligence.

The time came that the princess must marry. She was betrothed to marry the prince of Landion, in an agreement which was to mark a treaty between the two kingdoms. However, the princess wanted to ensure that her suitor would make a suitable king before agreeing to the marriage. The two sat down to meet for the first time, the night before they would marry.

The princess asked what his intentions were for the kingdom, once they had merged the two. The prince said that as king, he wished to devote Karamenia's resources to conquering new lands, for he said there was no greater aspiration than the glory of battle.

The princess next inquired after his studies and training, and asked if he would like to meet with the king's advisors to learn about the ways of this land. She asked his knowledge of the trade roads, and he said he was not a trader. She asked his knowledge of their farming practices and his ideas on these things, and he said he was not a farmer. She continued on, and his answers were all the same. Irritated at her continued questioning, he said there was little value in such things. She said it was absurd, for he would rule over all of the land, not only the castle and the battlefield. The princess told him that it would be folly to make him king regardless of the treaty, as to invite such an ignorant brute to rule would only bring ruin upon Karamenia.

The king took her into the hall to quiet her. She said that if he were made king, she would run away in protest. This angered the king, and he locked her in her room in hopes that she might come to her senses.

The princess wept long into the night. The great magic of the land heard her cries, drawn in by her kindness and her pure love for the kingdom, and it took pity on her. It told her that to escape the marriage she could become one with the land itself, her heart buried in Karamenia.

The next morning, her servant came with an urgent message to the king: the princess was missing, and had left behind nothing but a scroll with a written message.

*To return the princess, these words you must heed  
You must find a man who the kingdom can lead  
Start at this castle from whence the princess has fled*

*Follow river's path to the gemstone in the cave of the dead  
Next, to the east border, the rare seed in the tower  
It's stalk will grow up, then pluck the blue flower  
At last, you must pull the red dagger from the chest  
Answer the riddle, the final piece of the test  
The man who does these tasks may take the princess's hand  
And for the rest of his days may unite the land*

The prince of Landion, who had been taken in by the princess's beauty even during their brief meeting, found that he had to have her for his bride. He decided to attempt to find the princess and marry her as the scroll had said.

The prince, though well trained in the arts of battle, was untested, having rarely left his own castle. Still, he knew it would not be a difficult challenge, as he had his trusty sword at his side as always. And so the prince snuck out to find her.

First, he would need to locate the gemstone in the cave of the dead. He found a ferryman at the river's edge and decided he would need the man's boat for his voyage. He swung his sword to threaten the ferryman into giving it over. The ferryman said that if he struck him down he would be unable to get down the river on his own, as the waters were treacherous and the rivers winding. The prince scoffed, for he knew he could do it on his own. He floated this way and that down the river, but found that it was indeed impossible to navigate, for he had no knowledge of these lands or their waters, and no idea what direction he should go.

He came to a bridge, thoroughly lost, and a fish swam up to him. You must answer my riddle to end your quest, it said. I cannot be protected by sword, bow, or lance, for I vanish at first blood. What am I?

Impossible, the prince said, for skilled as he was with such things, there was nothing he could not protect. He could not answer something so ridiculous, and in his anger, he slayed the fish, which sank to the bottom of the river.

The prince continued to float aimlessly for days, unable to find the cave, and finally he was forced to turn back and grudgingly follow the path he came. The ferryman waited up on the shore, and as he approached, he asked if the prince was ready to be led. The prince was angered at this insolence, but was forced to settle his temper. He paid his due, and the ferryman took him onto the boat. He had taken many men this way, all attempting to find the princess, and few had returned, for they did not know the way. The prince decided that it was indeed important that he know his way across Karamenia to complete his quest, and so he asked that the ferryman show him.

Along the river the ferryman showed him the landscape and the main paths which ran along the river trade routes. By the end of their journey the prince was quite familiar with the river that spanned the land of Karamenia. Finally, they reached the dock which was beside the cave of the dead, and the prince left the ferryman to continue his journey.

The prince made his way through the caves passages, remembering the ferryman's directions. As the prince went deeper into the cave of the dead, he began to understand why it was named such. Many skeletons

littered the floors. He met several miners there, taking the ores and stones for building. He asked the miners what they died from, and the miners said the skeletons were from ancient battles, and their screams had pierced the sky, but now they could rest at last. He asked the miners if they had seen the gemstone, and they said they had not. The prince realized he would need to have knowledge of the other precious stones to properly identify the gemstone when he saw it, and asked that they tell him which stones and gems were common to the region. They told him of the gold and how they mined it, of the shale and sandstone they took for building, and the iron they took for weapons. He left the men behind, and went on.

As the prince ventured even deeper, past the miners and their loud tools, he saw that it was utterly silent and dark. There seemed to be no life here, perhaps not even his own, as he had been in the cave for what felt like many days and he was hungry and thirsty to the point of desperation. It was utterly foreign, unlike the rich fabrics and marble and constant noise of his castle, his belly that had never gone empty. But, as he sat, he found that he enjoyed the silence and stillness deep underground, and that the hunger brought him closer to the dead. He closed his eyes and sat for awhile in the complete darkness, and he understood what it was to be dead, to be no one and nothing, hidden in the dark underground. He understood things which were eternal and silent as death itself. When he opened his eyes, he saw a sparkling gemstone, glowing faintly with magic. He took it and placed it in his bag, and made his way back out of the cave, back to the living.

Next, he would need to find the flower, which the ferryman had told him how to reach to the east, and he navigated with the help of the winds and the sun and the stars as the ferryman had shown him. He traveled that way, across the mountains, passing through several villages. At the mountaintop, he gazed out over the valleys. In the distance, he could see the border, where fires burned brightly from the battles that raged on. The smoke lifted high into the sky.

A little bird landed beside him. You must answer my riddle, it said, to end your journey. Cities can be raised in me, but are always razed in my absence. I am found in a sleeping babe, and in a dead man in his tomb. What am I?

The prince did not know, but he did not slay the bird as he had the fish. It seemed a waste, to quiet such a happy birds song into eternal silence, to sentence its rich blue feathers to an eternal darkness where they could not be seen. Instead he sat and watched the horizon, and appreciated the bird's beauty. Finally, it flew away, and the prince's journey continued.

He reached a farming village, surprised that the next object would be somewhere so humble, nothing like the vast cave he had trekked through. He looked around for the seed, in hopes he would know it when he saw it. The villagers ignored him despite his royal fineries and his sword, and gave him cold looks as he tried digging up the ground, searching for the seed there with impatience. The prince remembered that the scroll left by the princess had mentioned a tower, and went to the only tower in the village to try to get inside.

This alarmed the villagers, who would not allow him to continue. Outraged, he asked how he could expect, then, to find the rare blue flower. The villagers told him many had searched for the seed, and men had come through several times to pillage the entire village, but the villagers valued the seed of the rare blue flower as their most precious artifact and would not give up the seeds to anyone they did not trust. If he wanted to get into the tower he would need to fight them.

The prince knew he could defeat them all given his training with a sword, but remembered the ferryman's wisdom, and how he had floated aimlessly along, never reaching the cave without his help. The prince did not know the first thing about growing a plant, and might end up unsuccessful if he took it by force and had no help to grow it. So he humbled himself before them and asked if he might stay and gain their trust, in hopes of gaining the seed that way.

The villagers agreed, and he stayed with the farmers. The farmers showed him how he could help them till the land and prepare it for crops. The crops grew over the season as he learned to fertilize them, to water them, and to treat them carefully. He learned to help the women with the washing and sewing, to dry seeds and grain, to store the grain so it would not spoil. He learned to sew and to weave garments from the sewist, and to fish from the fisherman, and to smith from the blacksmith. In the nights he would dance and sing with the local people, and in the day he would work diligently at their sides.

He saw the sunrise each morning and the sunset each evening, and watched the birds fly across the sky. He saw the deer feeding on the grasses, and he came to know the people of the village, and saw all manner of life being lived, from little babies being born to the elders on their deathbeds. He found that over these months he had come to love the land of Karamenia and its people. It seemed to be the opposite of the cave's silence and dark of the dead, a constant movement which filled him with an understanding of life in all its forms, and things which are ephemeral.

Finally, the people of the village knew and trusted him, and gave him the seed, which was then planted among the grain and was cared for by everyone. Patiently the prince waited until the seed grew up into a blue flower. He was reluctant to pluck it, for he now understood the work that went into growing it and the value of its small life, but it began to wilt, and at last he did pluck it when it was time. He bid farewell to the villagers and went on his way. Now he must only find the red dagger, and he would be reunited with the princess.

As he left the village, he heard a frightful scream, and a chaos behind him. He turned back to see a group of men on horseback entering the village, all with weapons. He recognized their coat of arms, for it was the seal of Landion, his home kingdom.

He recalled the fires in the distance which he had seen at the mountaintop months ago, and the whisperings that the men were encroaching closer. The prince had heard of the war since his childhood, and knew of it in a distant sense, that it was a conquering of glorious benefit. He watched as the knights descended upon the village and finally understood what the face of war truly looked like. It was not like the cave of the dead, with its silent stillness, nor the glory of a kill that his father had described.

He ran back into the streets of the village. A man approached on horseback, a knight he recognized from home. The knight greeted him, saying that the prince should return home, for his father had died in his absence and the kingdom needed a ruler. The prince demanded that they stop attacking at once, and the knight responded in confusion, saying that they were merely taking the land as he and his father had wished.

But the prince did not wish it. People lay about crying out in pain and the air reeked of iron. Those he had come to respect-- the farmer, the singer, the sewist-- lay dead in the streets and the rivers ran red with their blood. The prince saw that though Landion had the land they sought, they had destroyed all that was beautiful and valuable there. They had set fire to the village. The fields of golden grain, the silvery webs of

woven wool, and the glittering jewel-flowers along the roadsides were destroyed entirely. It was a desecration, not a victory.

The prince ordered the knights to go home and to give orders that the war was finished and they would not continue to attack. He came to kneel beside a young boy who lay on the side of the path. He was bleeding, and in his chest was impaled a red dagger. The prince whispered to the boy and poured water into his mouth, stricken with compassion and horror. He took the dagger gently by the hilt and tugged it free from the boy's small chest, and held the dagger in his hands, as if he himself were guilty of the stabbing. And he was, for he had condoned the war and encouraged it. He understood, then, what the princess had told him those months ago. He wept, for he had failed the princess, and everyone who lived in Karamenia.

The boy, by miracle, sat up and spoke, blood dribbling from his mouth. Answer my riddle, he said, for this will be the last time I ask you. I cannot be protected by sword, bow, or lance, for I vanish at first blood. I am more valuable than gold, but am destroyed in search of it. Cities can be raised in me, and razed in my absence. I am found in a sleeping babe, and in a dead man in his tomb. What am I?

The prince uttered the answer to the riddle, which he finally understood. The answer had lain all around him, and now that it was destroyed he could see its absence like a wound; this thing that was more precious than any gold and which he had come to know over the months of his journey.

*Peace*, the prince answered, and the boy nodded, for he had passed the final test.

The gemstone, the flower, and the dagger lay upon the ground, where they had fallen in the prince's haste, and the boy took them into his hands. The boy stood and transformed into a ferryman, a miner, a farmer, a fish, a bird, and finally, into the princess.

The prince had passed her tests, she said, and had proven that the subjects of Karamenia would be ruled by a king with great compassion and wisdom. She would happily marry him, for as the prince had looked for her and fallen in love with the land and its people, so too had the princess come to fall in love with him.

The two were given blessing by the magic of the land, and they returned to the castle to marry, ending the war between their two kingdoms. For many years, the two lived happily, and were loved by all for their wisdom, patience, and love for peace.

The End.