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The Prince Who Would Seek Immortality

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In the very middle of a very large kingdom, there was a town, and in the town a palace, and in the palace a king. He had one son, whom he thought the cleverest boy who ever lived. He'd chosen the best tutors and sent the boy travelling so he could see that other peoples' ways were often as good as his own.

But when the prince came home, he'd changed. The cheerful boy had become a gloomy, silent man. The king worried until he thought of an explanation: the boy must be in love! He led his son to a room hung with portraits of the loveliest princesses in the world. "Pick one," he said, "and I'll send an embassy to ask for her hand."

"It's not love that troubles me," said the prince. "It's that everyone dies, even kings. I won't be happy until I find a land where death is unknown."

The king argued, pleaded, and offered him the throne. The prince listened to none of it. The next morning he buckled on his sword and left.

After many days of travel, he found a huge tree with an eagle at the top, shaking its branches with all its might. When the prince stared, the eagle dropped to the ground and became a king.



"I'm under a spell," said the eagle-king. "Neither I nor any of my family can die until I've uprooted this tree. Come, be my guest tonight." At dinner the prince explained his quest.

"You've found it!" said the eagle-king. "It'll take me six hundred years to uproot that tree. Marry my daughter and live here with us. Six hundred years is practically forever!"

"It's very tempting," said the prince. "But at the end of six hundred years we'd still have to die. I must find the land where there's no death at all."

The princess couldn't change his mind. She gave him a small box with her portrait inside. "Open it when you're tired of walking, and it will carry you as fast as thought."

He travelled on until he reached a mountain where a bald man was digging earth and carrying it away by the basket. This was another king under a spell: he and his family couldn't die until the whole mountain was levelled with the plain. "Eight hundred years," he said. "Stay and marry my daughter. Eight hundred years is long enough to live!"

"Certainly," said the prince, "but I'd still rather find the land where there's no death at all."

The princess gave him a gold ring that would take its wearer wherever he wished. When the prince tried it, wishing himself at the end of the world, he found himself in a street of marble palaces. The people were tall and richly dressed, and none understood a word he said — until he spotted a man in clothes from his own country, who told him this was the Blue Kingdom, ruled by a young queen.

She received him on the steps of her palace, wrapped in a veil of silver mist. When he told her his quest, she took his arm and led him to a room whose floor was covered completely, point to point, with needles. "I can't die until I've worn out every one of these needles with sewing. It will take a thousand years. Stay and share my throne. A thousand years is long enough to live."

"It is," said the prince. "But at the end of it I'd have to die." The queen gave him a little golden rod that could become whatever he needed.

Beyond her city flowed the broad river at the edge of the world, and above it floated a city in the air, with no bridge and no road. The prince threw down the golden rod and wished with all his heart, and it became a golden ladder. He climbed up, and at the gates a many-headed beast sprang at him. His sword leapt out of its scabbard and cut off some of its heads, but they grew back, and he cried for help.

The queen of the city heard him from her window and had him brought in. "You've found it," she said when he told her his quest. "I am queen over life and over death. Here you may live among the immortals."

A thousand years passed in that city, and to the prince it seemed no more than six months. Every moment was happy. Then one night he dreamed of his father and mother, and in the morning he said that he must go home to see them.

"Are you out of your mind?" said the queen. "Your parents died eight hundred years ago. There's not even dust left."

"I have to go," he said.

Seeing he couldn't be stopped, she gave him two flasks, one gold and one silver. "From the trap-door in the floor, fill the silver one. That water turns whoever it

touches to a dead man, even one who has lived a thousand years. And from the well in that corner, fill the gold one. It comes from the rock of eternity. A few drops will bring the dead back to life, even if they've been dead a thousand years."

He thanked her and set out. In the Blue Kingdom, the city had changed so much he could hardly find his way. In the palace he wandered through silent rooms until he found the queen lying on her couch, an embroidery in her hand, asleep. The room of needles was empty. She'd broken the last one, and with it the spell, and she was dead.

He sprinkled a few drops from the gold flask over her. She stirred and opened her eyes. "Oh, my friend, how glad I am you woke me. I must have slept a long time."

"You'd have slept forever if I hadn't come," said the prince.

He found the bald king dead beside his spade and basket, the whole mountain levelled. The gold water woke him. "I must have slept a long time," said the king.

"You'd have slept forever," said the prince.

The eagle-king lay beside the fallen tree, wings spread as if for flight. A shiver ran through his feathers when the drops touched him. "How long I must have slept!" he said.

"You'd have slept forever," said the prince. And each of them promised to repay him if they ever could.

When the prince reached his father's capital, he found nothing where the palace had been but a wide lake with blue flames dancing on it. How could he find his parents' bones, even to bring them back to life? He walked away in despair, and heard a voice behind him: "At last! It's a thousand years since I started looking for you."

It was Death, an old white-bearded figure. Quick as thought, the prince slipped the ring from his finger and wished for help, and the eagle-king, the bald king, and the veiled queen appeared and grabbed Death and held him tight. But Death was faster than they knew. The prince had just one foot across the border of the Land of Immortality when the other was caught from behind. "Halt! You're mine!"

From her window the queen of the immortals cried out. "You've no power in my kingdom."

"His foot is in mine," said Death.

"Then half of him is mine, and half a man is no use to either of us," said the

queen. "I'll let you in this once. We'll settle it by a wager."

She chose the great square at the city's heart. "I'll toss him up beyond the morning star. If he falls inside the city walls, he's mine. If he falls outside, he's yours."

She set her foot beneath his and flung him into the sky. He rose until no one could see him. Had she thrown him straight? If not, he would fall outside the wall and be lost. Seconds crawled. At last she and Death saw a speck no bigger than a wasp, coming down. Straight? Not straight? Then a gust of wind sprang up and pushed him toward the wall. He was about to fall half over it when the queen sprang forward, caught him in her arms, and flung him over the wall.

She turned to her servants and told them to throw Death out of the city. They did, so hard that he never showed his face in the Land of Immortality again.

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