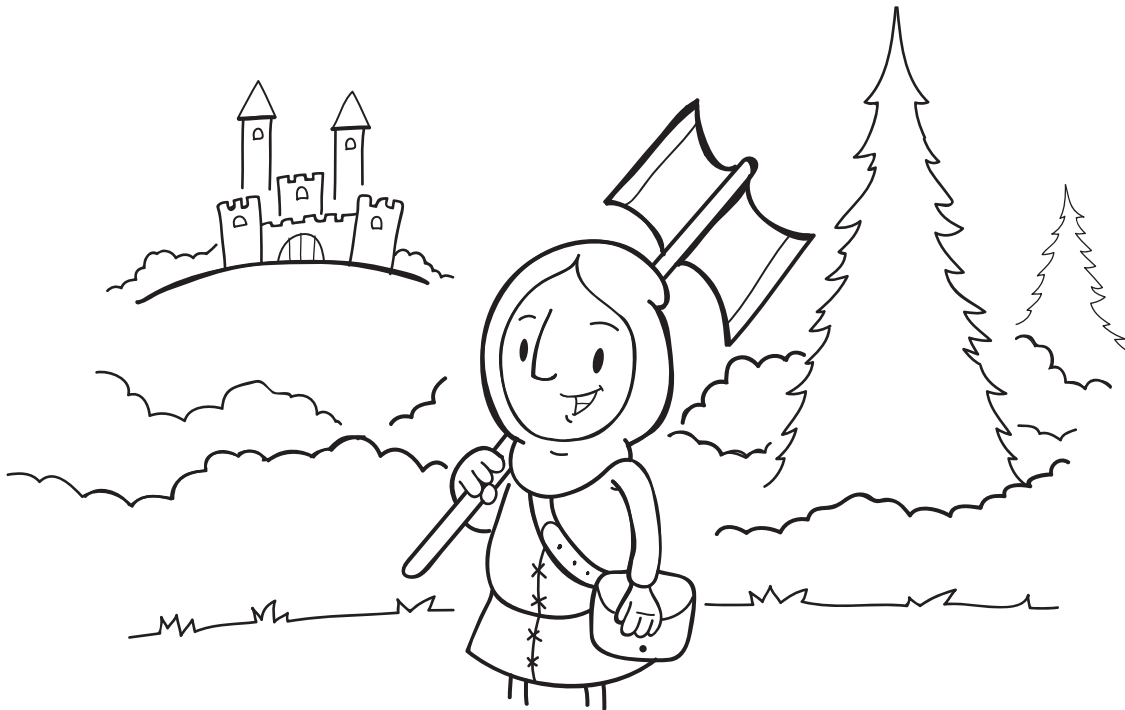


The Huntsman

My name is Jared. I am a huntsman in a great kingdom. One day many years ago, a princess was born to our king and queen. Sadly, on that same day, her mother, our queen, died. One year later, the king remarried. There was a large wedding celebration. Along with many other hunters, I provided food for the wedding dinner. I brought wild birds and pigs for the cooks at the castle to use in their sumptuous dishes. I saw the new queen. Even from far away, the queen was beautiful.

The king and queen enjoyed the food at their wedding feast so much that I was asked to return to the kitchens every month with game for the cooks to prepare. You see, it was a goose that I caught that ended up on the queen's dinner plate.

Time passed and the princess grew. The king grew older, the queen grew older, and so did I.



Every morning I would wake before the sun was up. In the darkness of early morning, I went to the forest to hunt. I caught fish from the river. I took down big wild animals like boar, and even bear. I caught fast animals like birds and deer. I hunted animals that jumped and seemed to dance, like rabbits and wild goats. Some days I caught nothing. I walked for miles. Every evening I stopped at a small pool of water. Purple flowers grew all around. I would kneel there and say, "If I can feed myself for one more day, I will sell what cannot be eaten and give the rest away." Then I would drink some of the cool water in the pool, for hunting is hard work and I was thirsty.

One evening after reciting those words a voice spoke to me. "This is the one hundredth time you have spoken those words, huntsman." When I looked up, there stood before me a woman. She was even more beautiful than the queen, for this woman had kind eyes.

"Here is a gate." With these words and a wave of her hand, an arch appeared behind the pool of water. "You may step through or you may continue your life wandering the forest and working in the kingdom."

"What is beyond the gate?" I asked.

"What if I told you there is fortune there?"

"I am good enough at hunting that I can pay for what I need. That is enough."

"And if I said you could find rest there? You would not have to work from sunup to sundown."

"I am better being useful than idle, mistress. I rest enough when I am asleep. And I take time to relax."

"What if I said there is a dragon beyond that gate?" But this time she smiled at her joke.

"I would believe that."

At this she really did laugh.

"I am a simple man," I said in apology. "Please, allow me to keep hunting and I will bother no one."

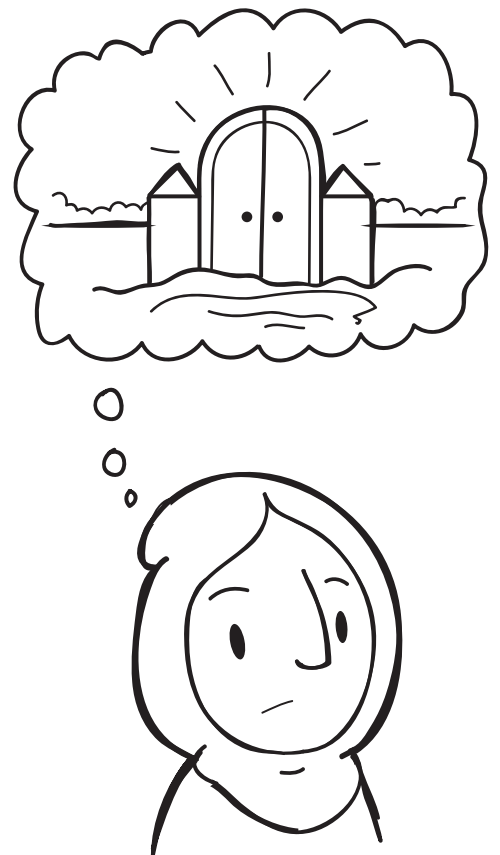
She nodded her head, then turned and walked away.

What a relief. It felt like a stone had fallen away from my heart!

The next day, I went hunting and, as usual, stopped at the pool with the purple flowers and spoke my hope. I quickly looked around but nothing happened. No one was there. As the days passed I began to think perhaps I had dreamed the woman and the gate. I even chuckled to myself sometimes, thinking how silly I was. Why would a magical woman appear, or offer me anything?

One day, I stood outside the castle kitchens. My game bag was full and heavy on my back. "You!" someone screeched from deep within the kitchen. An old woman ran up to me. "You, hunter! Come with me!" She tugged me by the arm. "Leave that there!" she commanded, and pulled my bag from me. She pulled me as hard as she could deeper into the castle than I had ever been. The old woman pushed me through a doorway into a small bare stone room. She shut the door. This was how I met the queen.

The queen stood at the other end of the room. She was still beautiful, though she looked older and unhappy. The queen had summoned a huntsman, so here I stood.



She said to me, "Take the king's daughter out into the woods. I never want to see her again. Kill her, and as proof that she is dead, bring her heart back to me." I stared at her and said nothing. "You will go now. She is playing in the garden." I did not move. I did not speak. "Or the guards will take you away. Forever. And if you run, they will find you. Return when the deed is done."

I obeyed.

The princess had skin as white as snow and hair as black as a raven. I took her into the woods.

"Run away, you poor child," I told her.

She seemed to understand. "I will run into the wild woods and never come back, dear huntsman."

I took pity on her. I gave her my knife, though I did not think that she would be able to defend against the wild animals.

I found a small boar and killed it. I took its heart back to the queen as proof that the princess was dead. The wicked woman had it salted and cooked, and she ate the heart thinking it was that of the princess.

The next morning, I did not hunt. I walked and walked until I came to the pool of water with purple flowers. I knelt and took a sip of the cool water. "Can the gate help the princess?" I said aloud.

A voice spoke. "You have come to this pool and spoken one thousand times. But this time, you ask a question. And you ask it to help someone else." The woman with kind eyes stood beside me.

"Can you help her? She is in the forest alone. She is probably dead."

"She is not dead. She is with friends. New friends."

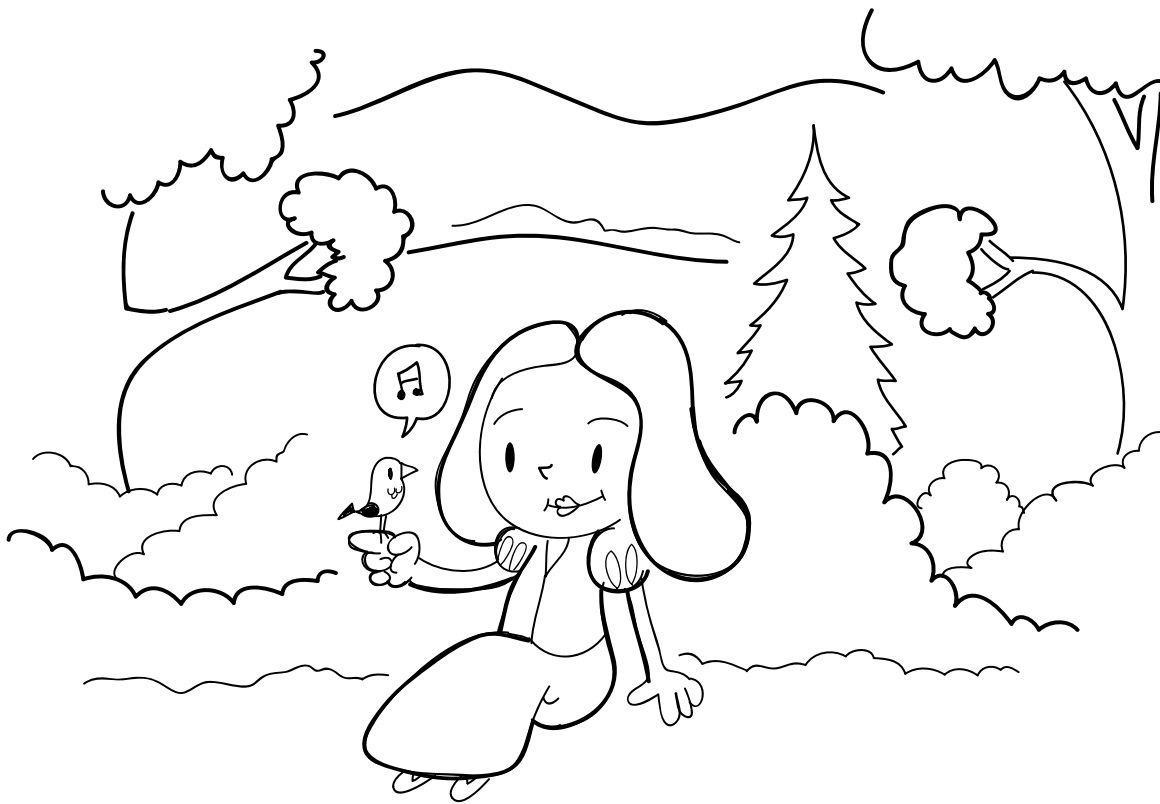
"Can this be true?" I demanded. "How do you know?"

"The queen will soon know that you lied. I offer you welcome, and entrance."
Again the gate appeared. "You will be safe beyond that gate."

"What if I bring the princess here? Can she cross instead?"

The woman silently shook her head no. "You have proven yourself faithful and trustworthy. The princess must live her own story. I say again, huntsman, for the third and final time. If you refuse, I cannot invite you again. You may step through."

I took a step forward. Then I took another step forward. I passed through the gate, half-hoping and half-fearing there would be a dragon on the other side.



Which fairy tale do you think the huntsman is from?

- a. Little Red Riding Hood
- b. Twelve Dancing Princesses
- c. Snow White
- d. Beauty and the Beast

Who is telling the story?

- a. Jared
- b. the princess
- c. the king
- d. the queen

Talk About It!

"I passed through the gate, half-hoping and half-fearing there would be a dragon on the other side."

-The Huntsman

Why do you think the huntsman said what he did about dragons?
