

## **THE OLD WOMAN AND THE PRINCE**

A

Short Story

by

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“What a beautiful day.” The kind of day that made Emerald have no choice but to smile and whistle as she walked. The grass and trees and soil still smelled of the night’s rain; the sun was bright, and the breeze balming. The birdsong welcomed her as she passed, and the squirrels chattered as if in greeting. She carried a simple walking stick—though more to complete the look than from any need—and a covered wicker basket, into which she placed the occasional flower or herb or leaf; twice, she removed a small piece of bark and deposited it as well.

“Yes, it’s the perfect day,” Emerald repeated, though the birds did not answer; the squirrels ignored her. “Hmm, rude!” Though the brief pout of her lips could not hold against the perfection of the early spring day.

“Oh, this is the perfect place for a picnic!” Emerald lay her basket and walking stick on the swarded patch of ground and clapped her wrinkled hands together, then settled herself onto a lonely rock in the middle of the patch.

Opening her basket, she removed a flawless red apple from an inner compartment. A moan of enjoyment followed each bite, as did a dribble of juice in the corner of her mouth.

“Here you go!” Emerald tossed the core beneath the nearby trees. If the squirrels appreciated the gesture, they didn’t say, though Emerald wasn’t bothered. She was already biting into a sweet, succulent peach. “Mmm. Wonderful! It’s a shame this day will have to end.” A sigh punctuated her regret.

“Crone!” A harsh voice came down the trail. “Yeah, you! Who’s you talkin’ to, you batty old crone?”

Startled and dropping her peach, Emerald sulked at the loss. She reached downward to grasp her walking stick and pushed herself to her feet.

The one who’d spoken was a squat, bearded tough in dirty, mismatched breeches and tunic.

“She’s talkin’ to herself, Treyvor.” The second man—taller but no less rough-looking than his companion—followed his statement with a harsh laugh.

“I don’t want any trouble,” Emerald said, voice steady, absent any tremor, her namesake eyes neither hard nor fearful but set on the others. Though she held her walking stick, her stance was straight, fronted on the two ruffians.

“Wells, we do,” said the shorter one, smiling in the self-satisfied way of one who thinks himself clever. Both men stepped nearer her.

“I have nothing to give you.” Emerald made no movement away.

“What’s in the basket?” the taller one asked, pointing a grimy finger.

Emerald shrugged. “Just some flowers and herbs. Nothing you’d want.”

“How’d ya know what we wants?” Stout snapped, grasping at the feigned indignation of the perceived slight like a found friend.

“They’re not giving me any choice,” Emerald said, almost plaintively, ending in another sigh.

“Now who’s she—”

“You there!” came a shout, accompanied by the clop of cantering hooves.

Emerald’s body remained in its stance, though her eyes focused on the four mounted forms coming up the trail behind the ruffians.

The two men spun on the newcomers, though any hostility died on their lips.

The four pulled up less than ten paces from the ruffians. The lead rider, sitting straight in the saddle, features sharp and angled, struck an imposing figure, though he appeared unarmed.

The other three riders, hands overtly resting on scabbarded blades, surrounded the lead protectively, behind and to the sides.

“Lady, do these two accost you?”

“Lady, hmm? He must mean me. Ah...no...they—they were just asking for directions.”

“Oh? I trust they have what they need and will be on their way, then.” The deep, clear voice held the confidence of one accustomed to the obedience of others.

“No—yes, Highness, sir.” Stout spoke as if the words could not leave his mouth fast enough.

“We’s a-goin’,” the other ruffian said, and both hurried down the path. Though they passed Emerald, neither glanced at her, finding more interest in the dirt path beneath their well-worn shoes. The smell of weeks’ accumulation of grime wafted by as they passed.

The lead figure dismounted, sliding smoothly from the saddle. The breeze did not seem to touch his immaculately coifed black hair, though his fur-lined cape fluttered behind him, and even his black riding boots somehow maintained their shine. With a bow at the waist, he said, “Lady, a pleasure. I am Prince Pulchor.”

Emerald found herself responding in kind to his open smile, a long-unfelt stirring in her stomach. “A prince, hmm? I’m Emerald.” She seemed to recall mention of a royal castle thereabouts, but whether this was *that prince* she couldn’t say.

“Emerald? A lovely name.”

Hearing her name on his lips was like water trickling over rocks. Emerald felt a warmth in her cheeks that she hadn’t believed herself capable of anymore. “Named for my eyes.”

“I can think of a no more fitting name, Lady.” Prince Pulchor looked into her bright green eyes, and she felt suddenly like she held no secrets from him. The sensation was simultaneously stimulating and unsettling.

When was the last time she felt like that? She’d forgotten what the sensation was like.

“I do apologize, Lady, but I must be going. My sister is ill, and I thought it a wonderful day to join my men for a ride to fetch the reagents needed for the remedy.”

Inexplicably, Emerald felt her heart racing, and she was overcome with the desire to help him. “What’s wrong with her?” she blurted, adding quickly, “If I can ask.”

Prince Pulchor turned back to her, the same open smile affixed to his face. “Of course, Lady. She has been afflicted with the wasting sickness. The physic says she needs bark of the redbole tree and root of the black arronia.”

“Bark of the—root of—no, no!” Her tone was of a gossip scandalized by the latest rumor. “To cure wasting sickness, you need bark of the spindle tree and—I can brew for you the proper remedy.” Emerald hunched her shoulders, realizing only when she saw the smirks of the prince’s retinue that she might have spoken out of turn.

Pulchor raised a single, sharp eyebrow. “Oh?” He was silent for several moments, contemplating, then, “I don’t know why, but I believe you speak truly.”

Emerald gave a crooked smile, the sensation strange after so long. “If you co—if you send your man to my cottage, it will be ready by this time on the morrow. My home lies on the hill between the river and mire, two miles upstream from the old bridge.”

“On the morrow, then, Lady.” Prince Pulchor gave a parting bow, remounted, and, followed by his men-at-arms, returned down the trail whence he came.

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“The time is almost come. The prince’s man will be here soon,” Emerald said as she finished stirring the boggy liquid, smelling of rotted vegetables, in the black iron pot. “You need to stay out of sight when he comes.”

An affronted harrumph sounded from atop a stool in the corner. Stunted legs swayed above the floor, and the voice that responded was high and whiny. “I know, I know, always hiding.”

“Don’t pout, Hob,” Emerald said in mock reproach, looking up from the pot, then added soothingly, “It’s an unfortunate necessity. No one would understand.”

“What I don’t understand is why you would agree to help this princeling. No, volunteer!” The voice ended in a piercing whine.

“I’m not helping the prince, I’m helping his sick sister. Her physic is an idiot.” Emerald spoke slowly, as if explaining to a child.

She was answered by a scoff and a single bark of laughter. “As that pretentious fop you once knew said, ‘The lady doth pr—’”

A whinny and a “Whoa” sounded from without the cottage.

“He’s here! Go!” Emerald dropped the wooden stirrer to the side of the hearth and lifted the pot from its stand with a metal rod that hooked beneath the handle.

A small, naked form, like a disproportionate child, but with two bat-like wings and a swishing tail, scampered through the only interior doorway in the cottage and melded into the shadows.

Using a funnel, Emerald was ladling the contents of the pot into a flask when a sure knock sounded on the solid oaken door.

“Just a moment,” Emerald called in answer. Stopping the flask, she moved to open the door.

The smiling, strong-featured face that greeted her caused Emerald to start. “Prince Pulchor, I didn’t expect you to come yourself.”

If anything, his smile widened. “Greetings to you as well, Lady Emerald.”

The sound of herself so addressed gave Emerald a shudder of pleasure.

The prince continued, “I was curious to see for myself the abode of one so knowledgeable of herblore and to thank her myself for her aid.”

Though his smile never faltered and his gaze never left her face, Emerald felt as if the prince absorbed an image of the whole of the interior of her cottage—the hearth set opposite the door; the simple yet sturdy tables and chairs; the shelves of reagent-filled jars; the pots, pans, and utensils suspended from hooks and pegs; the flowers, herbs, and leaves strung up to dry; and the single, partially-ajar door. The dried plants gave the cottage the smell of spices worthy of the prince’s own kitchen, like a piquant mix of cinnamon, cloves, and sumac.

“Y-yes, here is the remedy.” Emerald handed the prince the flask. “One draft a day for a week, and she will be cured.”

Prince Pulchor took the flask without looking at it. “Much thanks, Lady.” He bowed in valediction, and Emerald noticed two men standing by the horses outside for the first time.

“My pleasure, Prince Pulchor.” Emerald returned his fixed smile with a crooked, self-conscious one of her own.

Once the prince had departed, Hob withdrew from the shadows and emerged from the doorway. Its facial features—ears, eyes, nose, and mouth—were all exaggerated and irregular. Shaking its head, it said, “Mark my word, no good will come of this kindness.”

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A week and a day later, Emerald was startled from her work of measuring reagents by the sound of horses’ hooves, the jangling metal of harnesses, and a familiar knock.

Hob, who had been sitting atop a stool beside Emerald, hopped down. “I know. I’m going. ‘They won’t understand.’”

Emerald gave an apologetic smile. “Thank you, Hob.”

“Hmph!”

A wide, bright smile met Emerald when she opened the door. “Prince Pulchor? I did not expect to see you.” *Again* she added silently.

“Lady Emerald, I had to thank you personally for your aid to my sister. Her recovery is nothing short of miraculous.” As at their first meeting, his fine cape, hose, and boots remained untouched by the rigors of the road. He beckoned behind him, and a retainer hurried forward bearing a basket of fruit. “I noticed your bowl of fruit the last time I was here. As a small token of my gratitude, I brought you these from my own gardens.”

With the ingenuous smile of a child, Emerald, nearly salivating at the colorful assortment, took the basket. “Thank you, Highness. Would...ah...would you care to come in?”

Prince Pulchor’s answering smile was ready, as if receiving a hoped for gift himself. “I would, yes. Thank you, Lady.”

Emerald stepped aside to allow the prince to enter. She waited for his retinue to follow, but Pulchor said, “They will remain outside,” before taking a seat.

“Oh, yes...ah...of course.” With an apologetic look to the three, Emerald closed the door, then set the basket upon the table. “May I offer you anything to drink? I’m sure I don’t have any of the wines to which you’re accustomed.”

“No, thank you.” Prince Pulchor crossed his legs and leaned backward. The old wood of the chair creaked, though, despite its age, the chair was solidly constructed. “I have another thirst...one for knowledge.”



“Oh? Do you require another elixir?” Emerald crossed her arms as if guarding herself, though her tone remained conversational. She glanced toward the still-open door where Hob hid.

“Oh no, no, Lady. I seek to learn the secrets of your lore.” At Emerald’s confused expression, he added, mistaking the reason for her hesitation, “You would be amply compensated, of course.”

Emerald cleared her throat. Despite the prince’s pleasant demeanor and ever-present smile, she understood that such men did not make *requests*. However amiably expressed, their desires were to be counted as commands. “It is no small thing to learn herblore. Such knowledge requires years of study and practice.”

Pulchor laughed good-naturedly and waved a hand, as if that were no more a concern than a buzzing fly. “Then all the more reason to begin straightaway.”

Glancing again at the doorway—she knew what Hob would say about the arrangement—Emerald considered all she had to do. The responsibility of a student would take time from her important work, though, with the prince’s resources, she could lessen the burden in other ways. And as much as she enjoyed the society of Hob, it had been more years than she cared to remember since she enjoyed the company of another human, let alone of the charm, refinement, and comeliness of the prince. “Of course, Highness. It would be an honor to pass on any knowledge I have.”

Pulchor gave a single clap. “Wonderful! I have many responsibilities, as you can imagine, but look for me every third day.” He rose and gave a slight bow. “Until then, Lady.”

“I look forward to it, Highness.” Despite her smile, Emerald was not certain whether the knot in her stomach was due to eagerness or nervousness at spending so much time with the prince.

The sound from the closing exterior door had yet to fade before Hob bounded back into the main room of the cottage. “What were you thinking? *Were* you thinking?”

The questions, particularly the latter, struck with a bit too much truth for her liking. Turning back to her reagents, she said, “Hob, I don’t want to hear it.”

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The morning of the third day hence, Prince Pulchor returned to the home of Emerald to begin his instruction. He gave to her another basket of fruit, along with a generous payment of coin.

“Thank you, Highness.” Emerald smiled, showing her graying teeth, with tooth-sized gaps in some places. “I’ve never taught herblore, so I’m at a bit of a loss where to begin. But, I suppose, the beginning is just as good a place as any.”

Emerald began naming the many herbs she kept in stock and describing how to identify them. For his part, Prince Pulchor listened astutely, asked questions when appropriate, and complimented Emerald on her breadth of knowledge.

When the prince left that day, Emerald sat heavily upon a cushioned chair and put her feet up on a stool. “Hob, who knew teaching could be so exhausting? But, I have to admit, it is nice to have someone to whom to pass on my hard-won knowledge. I’d feared it would die with me.”

“I still don’t know,” came the high-pitched reply emerging from the bedroom.

“Oh, come now. You heard the prince. He’s intelligent and eager to learn.” Emerald took a bite of fruit with a striped, yellow and green skin brought by the prince.

“A prince, like out of a fairytale.” To another, the pitch might have made the statement sound like a friendly jibe, though Emerald knew it for the accusation it was. “He could be a grandchild several generations removed.”

“Pfft. Yes, he’s nice to look at, so? We have a fair, businesslike relationship.” She waved her hand dismissively, as if shooing away a persistent mosquito.

“You may be blinded by the shiny teeth, but I will continue to be suspicious.”

Emerald settled back deeper into the chair, comforted by more than the soft cushion. Her smile, like her heart, was warm. Though she had created the homunculus, like an artificial person, it was more a child to her than any natural offspring. “I know, Hob. For over half a century, you’ve been my best, my only, friend.” With slyly narrowed eyes, Emerald added, “Just no messes, like that time at the count’s mountain castle. We were forever making it livable again.” She ended with a chiding shake of her head.

Hob shrugged uneven shoulders. “No promises.”

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The prince’s visits continued for months, well into summer. Though he never took a note, rarely did he forget any point conveyed by his tutor.

“How do you remember it all?” Emerald asked, shaking her head.

“I spent much of my early life with tutors. I’ve grown accustomed to discerning the relevant information and retaining that which is most important.” From another man, it might have sounded like a boast, but, as with everything else with Prince Pulchor, he had a way about him that made life seem effortless.

*If I were a century younger.* Emerald's thoughts laughed. "Next time, we can begin on the effects of mixing certain herbs."

For the first time, Emerald saw a crack in the prince's smile, though it disappeared so quickly that she dismissed it as fancy.

"Lady, as much as I enjoy these sessions, my time, unfortunately, is becoming scarcer. Can we not advance these lessons to a...more practical bent?"

Was that an edge to his voice? Just imagining its presence changed the interpretation of his smile, turning it from open and welcoming into that reminiscent of a lure used by a predator before springing its trap. She could only hope that Hob had not imagined the same hardness of tone; she didn't need one more thing for him to complain about.

"I'm not quite...ah...sure what you mean, Prince Pulchor," Emerald said with a nervous glance to the doorway to her bedroom, where she caught a flitter of movement in the shadows.

"Lady"—whenever he spoke that word, he could make it sound like he'd created it specifically for her—"the royal physic is well versed in the most common poisons and how to detect them. Unfortunately, for those in my position, threats are ever present, and having an understanding of more unusual poisons, those otherwise undetectable, would be of utmost benefit. As would those concoctions that enhance health and prolong life."

"Those are more advanced, Highness. Perhaps...we should establish a firmer foundation first." Emerald wrung her hands behind her back.

"Hmm. Perhaps." The prince narrowed his eyes as if he could detect hidden meaning in her words.

Still, Emerald released a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

“But not too much longer, Lady.” That same ambiguous smile whose meaning changed with the preconceptions one brought when observing it. “Lives are at stake, after all.”

“Yes, of course, Prince Pulchor.” For the first time since beginning her instruction of the prince, Emerald was reminded why she chose to live alone, away from the crowded towns and their officious, judgmental residents. Here, she could practice her trades in solitude, away from the politics and prejudices of the ignorant.

As soon as the prince left, Emerald inhaled, blinked slowly, and braced herself for the inevitable diatribe from her diminutive companion.

“Do I even need to say it?” Hob’s voice got even higher when filled with indignation.

“No, you don’t!” Feeling a strange sense of defensiveness, she added, “I don’t know what you *thought* you heard, but you’re wrong.”

Hob shook his head like a disappointed parent. “You’re many times older than anyone else within a crow’s flight, yet you’re acting like you’re but ten years out from the womb.”

Despite the seriousness of its tone, Emerald laughed. “Do you know your nose twitches, like the leg of a dying insect, when you’re upset?”

Hob huffed. “Yes, I do! Thank you very much.”

“Don’t be angry, Hob.” Emerald gave a warm smile. “I know with you looking out for me, everything will be fine.”

Hob crossed his unequally lengthed arms in imitation of that human gesture, its tail flailing about in agitation. “And don’t you forget it!”

Emerald’s smile widened to become unabashedly happy, like a child’s when opening presents. “Never!”

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The prince's visits continued, though Emerald noted a change in his level of engagement. Whereas, before, Pulchor had been attentive, eager, he was now often distracted, eyes distant and ears unhearing.

"Is everything all right, Highness?" Emerald asked after repeating herself a third time.

Prince Pulchor shook his head, as if clearing it of diversion, and his eyes refocused. However, his smile failed to return fully. "Yes, quite. Matters of state, you understand."

Emerald had rarely been responsible for more than herself and Hob, so she did not understand all the cares and concerns of a prince, though she imagined it was like that of a single household, only a thousand-fold more. "I'm certain you'll work it out, Prince Pulchor, whatever it is."

Pulchor turned his head slightly to look at Emerald. When he spoke, his voice was flat. "I always do." His half-smile disappeared, and his eyes turned hard.

To Emerald, the change was so marked it was as if the prince had simply vanished, and a sneering, cruel doppelganger appeared in his place.

"I've wasted enough time. I don't care about which bark is best to cure wheezing cough or which root wards off biting insects."

Emerald flinched at the vehemence of his outburst. In the lull that followed, she heard the creak of shutters in her room and the swoosh as of a gust of wind, though Emerald understood the true, little-winged reason for the sound.

His chest heaving, the prince continued, "I want the true secret of your power!"

Emerald had long thought herself past such emotional frailty, such human concerns, but she felt wetness well in her eye. “What do you mean?” Her voice was soft, but not fearful.

Prince Pulchor scoffed, and the effect was to further transform his visage into a nearly unrecognizable distortion of itself. “I saw you with the ruffians. You showed no fear. Of course, I’ve heard the tales of the power of the Hag of the Heaths, the Witch of the Woods, the Crone of the Copse. You *will* reveal your secrets.”

“Why?” The single word carried the weight of sad resignation. She tasted the acidic hint of disappointment in the back of her throat.

Pulchor thought she addressed him and was beginning to respond when Emerald continued, seemingly speaking to herself.

“Why must it always be like this? After all these centuries, I still haven’t become any wiser. I still make the same mistakes.”

The prince stood to stare downward at Emerald, in what he must have thought was an imposing stance. “To whom are you speaking?”

Emerald ignored the comment, but, when she spoke, she now addressed the prince directly, her voice leaden with lifetimes’ worth of sadness. “You don’t want the secret of my power. Look at me. You call me a hag, a crone. That is the cost. Would you sacrifice your appearance, all the women who swoon at your glance? You are far too vain, *Highness*.” The last word was spoken with mocking scorn.

Rage contorted the prince’s features. “How dare you! I will make you tell me!” He called to his men outside the cottage.

Emerald shook her head. “They can’t answer you.”

“Wha—how—?” Uncertainty flashed across his face.

Anger burned away the wetness in her eyes, and, when Emerald looked at the prince, the cold depth of her gaze—a gaze that had witnessed far worse than the anger of an overweening prince—had Pulchor taking a step backward.

“Not to worry, Highness. Soon you’ll be beyond any concern.”

The End