

The witch had been scheming for years, building her army, and preparing for an opportunity to overthrow the kingdom. Now she marched purposefully down the hall towards the throne room, listening with satisfaction to the noises of her horde of monsters overwhelming the kingdom's troops outside. Soon she would be not only a witch, but a queen!

A door flew open towards the servants' quarters and allowed a group of soldiers to rush into the hallway before her, spears and swords at the ready.

“Surrender!”

She waved lazily towards them, and the men were suddenly thrown back down the hallway, strange powers preventing them from confronting her again.

The witch approached the nearest man to her with a cruel smile. “Turn your snout back to the slop, pig,” she scolded disdainfully.

The young man cried out, pulling his helmet off and casting it aside as magic coursed through his body. The Witch's magic was quick and irresistible. His nose turned up and grew into a grotesque snout, then pushed out before him with a series of frightened snorts and squeals. His ears pulled out long and flopped to hang by the sides of his head, and all of his hair fell away, leaving only coarse bristles behind. His body quickly fattened, and his armor fell away to let rolls of fat spill out, his skin now colored with dark splotches where more bristles had grown. His hands and feet were constricted and forced into the form of porcine hooves, and his arms and legs twisted and popped until he now could not help but stand on all fours. Finally, a tail curled and twisted out behind him, and the warrior squealed in shame and terror as the witch laughed at his misfortune.

Leaving the pig to find its trotters behind her, the Witch approached the next man down the hall. Her armies had things well in hand, so there was no reason to rush.

“Stay away from me!”

Despite still being disoriented by the initial blast of magic, the man tried to attack her, but she caught his arm and threw him away.

“Useless!” she crowed. “Like a turtle flipped on its back.”

He tried to cry out, but her magic already had ahold of him. He groaned as he felt his limbs stiffen, refusing to move as they should, and he was lifted up a bit as his back hardened, turning into a bony material to protect him. The soldier's skin felt cold and clammy as it was changed to fit a testudinal form, and he could feel the cold, hard texture of a turtle's shell surrounding his body. Folds of skin grew out to attach his body to this natural armor, trapping him within it all at once.

The soldier watched as his fingers were changed, strange webbed digits covered by scaly skin and tipped by hooked claws. His feet were changing as well, but he could do little to observe as his change prevented easy movement. His face finally began to change as well, nose withdrawing as his mouth pushed into a beak-like shape. He tried to speak, but only a strange, foreign sound came out.

At last he shrank down, his human armor disintegrated, and he was left lying on his back, entirely unable to flip himself over no matter how he desperately waved his arms and legs. The Witch nudged

him with her foot, and he instinctively withdrew himself to the safe confines of his shell. At least here he could hide from the terror beyond.

Another man tried to run, but a minimal exertion of power sufficed to prevent his flight and send him tumbling to the floor.

“Running like a coward? Ha! You're more rabbit than man! What will you do if a hawk comes for you?”

“No, please!”

The Witch sneered as she gestured to the one who had run, then to another who stood, petrified, by the wall. The two changed together as the Witch looked on in sadistic glee.

Her rabbit's ears were already growing long on his head as he grabbed one in each hand and pulled them down as though it would prevent them from growing further. Instead his fingers began to change, becoming shorter until they could no longer grasp his ears, which sprang up to their full, impressive length as he looked at the little paws that he now had instead of hands.

The other man cried out as his arms spread wide of their own accord. Hands changed and reshaped into strange paddles, made neither to grasp nor to walk upon. Instead, as his hands changed, they began to grow feathers all over, colored in brown, black, and tan. He realized the Witch's intention now, and screamed, only to have his voice turn into the shriek of a hawk.

The sound caught in the rabbit's ears, which instantly grew soft white fur all over, fur which swept down to cover a rapidly-changing face. His nose pushed out into a twitching rabbit's muzzle, mouth filling with teeth suited for grinding and nibbling on vegetables. He collapsed into the heap of his clothing as he shrank, and struggled as his body reshaped to emerge from its folds.

The hawk's wings were very nearly complete, and his body changed quickly, tangling him up with his clothing and preventing his beating wings from gaining flight. His face pushed forward into a sharp raptor's beak while bright, cunning eyes giving his gaze a severe appearance. Feathers rushed to cover him as he finally slipped away from his human trappings, and a tail of long feathers emerged behind him with its tip highlighted in red.

The rabbit escaped his own clothing a moment later, now almost entirely changed. He had a little twitching puffball of a tail, and his legs were now thick and exceedingly strong, well suited for leaping along as he escaped the gaze of woodland predators. One of these he spotted finding its talons across the hall, and in a blind panic the little prey creature bolted towards the main doors. Spying the sudden flurry of movement, the hawk screamed again and leaped into the air to give chase.

The Witch cackled as she turned to face the last man, who stood braced against the wall.

“Milady,” he offered. “It is clear you are meant to be our queen.” He fell before her, bowing more deeply now than he had ever done in the presence of the king. “Spare me, and I will serve you as you deserve!”

The Witch scoffed. “You will all serve me, no matter whether you do me reverence. However, a willing heart is easily put to good use.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder, and he grunted as he felt power flowing into him. As it did, his body began to grow in bulk, his strength increasing as muscles began to swell beneath his skin. He breathed heavily as he began to panic.

“What are you doing? I promise, I'll serve you—!”

“Indeed, fear not. You will serve me in a grand capacity, with power and strength greater than you have ever imagined.”

Despite her reassurances, the man cried out in panic, stumbling back as he watched the changes sweep over his body. His muscles grew so large that the straps of his armor began to pop and break away. His boots were eviscerated as legs thickened, revealing skin covered by dark brown fur. As he stepped out of their ruins, his feet cramped and changed, strange black nails covering his toes and warping them into cloven hooves.

The changes swept upward, his chest barreling out as his strength grew even further, causing his breastplate to fly off, the shirt underneath shredding under the force of expanding muscle. Though more muscular and now covered by fur, his form was still quite humanoid unlike those of his fellows. Only as the changes reached his head was there a major change.

His face pushed forward into a wide muzzle, causing him to give a surprised snort through larger nostrils. Eyes shifted to the sides of his head, and his ears changed into an oval shape and were magically lifted to a new position. Then, just as he thought his changes might have ceased, a pair of horns grew above him from either side. He reached up and felt them, even as his fingernails grew thick over his fingertip, blackening and dulling his feeling. What... was he?

Whatever he was, the Witch clearly disapproved of the rags leftover from his armor. Done with his body, the magic turned its focus instead to those remaining tatters. The torn cloth changed to pelts, formed into a heavy loincloth, circled by a heavy leather belt from which two primitive hand axes now hung. His chest remained bare but for a single strap crossing from his shoulder to his hip, a quiver of javelins hanging there against his back.

The changed soldier looked at himself, staring from one hand back to the other, not believing what he was seeing. He was a minotaur, like the creature of myth. He stood, marveling at the strength that he felt through every part of his body. A grin crossed his muzzle as he lifted his arms, the feeling of unstoppable power filling him with an incredible energy. Lifting his muzzle to the sky, he gave a mighty bellow towards the sky, letting it echo down along the hall. He had a few moments to revel in the power of his voice before a reply came in the form of a squeal from the frightened hog several paces down the hall.

The new minotaur joined his gruff voice to his Queen's, and they laughed at the pitiful creature's reaction. Then, he bowed before her.

“My queen.”

“You will be a captain in my armies,” the Witch announced. “Now, join me and let us pay a visit to the usurper who claims my throne. Watch, but do not interfere.”

He grunted and stood, waving an arm to direct his sovereign towards the massive doors at the end of the hall.

“Show me in, captain,” she commanded.

The minotaur nodded and smiled. The door was barred, but he would have no trouble with that. He turned to the door and bellowed a challenge. Digging his hooves in, he rushed down the hallway with supernatural speed. A blow from his shoulder tore one door from its hinges, the bar holding the two of them together bending in half before the fallen door tore it out of its place. The occupants of the room all jumped back as the minotaur finished his work, and he bellowed once more, though now speaking words that other could understand.

“Bow before Eteida, True Queen of the Realm!”

A pair of guards had stood a few feet from the door, and one of them managed to gain his feet and rushed towards the Witch. Remembering her instruction, the minotaur stood aside and allowed the man to pass. The man was one of the King's Own Guard, but he would stand no chance.

The Witch drew a glyph in the air and pointed towards the charging soldier. As it struck him, it sent him reeling back, dropping his sword and gasping in surprise.

“Do not fear. Though you may fail here, perhaps a princess will still grant you the favor of a kiss after my magic has finished.”

He tried to speak, but his eyes opened wide when suddenly his throat expanded impossibly, filling with air before his breath emerged from his lips as a strangled croak. He clasped his hands over his throat, but he could not prevent it from happening again.

“Please! Straaugh--” He choked on another croak. “Stop!”

The witch chuckled, shaking her head as she watched the change. His skin became damp and green, with a few bright highlights close to his face. His nose and mouth widened inhumanly, his desperate eyes becoming amphibian to end his pleading glance. He opened his mouth to try speaking once more, but only managed to reveal a long, sticky tongue without the capacity to form words.

A snap of the fingers, and he disappeared into the armor he had been wearing. As it collapsed under its own weight, a frog was thrown free, gangly limbs searching for some grasp. Finally, he landed on the ground in front of the minotaur. The bull man grunted and lifted his hoof as though to stamp it upon the creature, but the frog hopped away in desperate fear, fleeing before any further harm could come to him.

The last guard interposed himself between the Witch and her throne with his spear, trembling but not retreating. He looked barely older than a boy; likely, he had been the squire of the man who had just been changed.

“In the name of King Roderick, halt!” he called.

“Come, boy,” the Witch said, approaching at a calm pace. “Your liege is false. One so young as you might have a future among my servants. You could be a warrior as powerful as my captain. Bow before

me.”

He lunged to attack, but the witch could likely have avoided him without the aid of magic. She caught the head of his spear and tore it from his grasp. Sighing, she shook her head.

“I am not cruel, boy, but resistance must be punished. You may yet live long, but I cannot leave you where you can be an obstacle to me.”

She lunged forward and took ahold of his helmet in one hand. He reached up to grasp her arm, but all of his strength left him, and he cried out as something began to change. As he tried to escape, his helmet began to bend around two areas, bulges that grew more and more until finally a pair of sharp points punched through the metal. Once clear of the helmet, those points bloomed out above him into a majestic pair of antlers.

“I give you a crown worthy of a king,” she declared. Under her grasp, the remaining metal of the helmet tore like paper, and she tossed it away to disintegrate midair. The youth's face pulled out into a muzzle as he looked up at her, sorrow, but no longer fear, visible in his eyes.

“Can you see to it that I am safe from hunters?” he pleaded.

The Witch frowned, but she admired the request. For a fearful youth, he showed a good deal of courage.

“Very well. Never let my mercy be doubted.”

As the young man's body shifted, a set of runes appeared wrapped around his antlers, glowing blue for a moment before fading to black: an enchantment to shatter any arrow fired towards him. He tried to thank her, but his cervine muzzle could not form words. The brown fur from his face spread down his body. Shoulders changed, forcing his arms into their new position, while arms became slender and long, hands forced to adopt the shape of hooves. He fell forward onto them and lifted his weight upon his forehooves for the first time. He scrambled to put his feet on the floor, and finally succeeded as his legs were changed to match his arms. As human clothing faded, a tail flagged behind the new buck. His humanity was entirely gone.

“Go.” The Witch commanded, and the deer went, bounding for freedom down one of the halls. As his hooffalls faded, the Witch turned to face the last remaining person in the room.

She frowned. It was not the king. She should have expected as much, yet it was still unpleasant to confirm her suspicion. The man who greeted her stood to the right of the throne, holding a wooden staff with traced magical carvings along its length. His wrinkled face was grim, his expression clear despite his long, white beard.

“Tydus. I wish I could say it was good to see you, old friend.”

The kingdom's archmage frowned heavily, but he nodded. “Eteida. Your aspirations have reached our ears, and wheels have been put in motion to see you defeated. The king has escaped, and you will not have him. I am here to tell you that you may have captured the castle, but we know your power is limited. You have overreached, and you will be overthrown while you are weak.”

“Who will overthrow me? You?”

The wizard raised his staff and met her sudden magical assault, dissolving it before it could meet its mark.

“Perhaps not, old friend, but I will take every last bit of power I can before I fall.”

The old wizard was clearly being overwhelmed, but he continued to fight with every bit of his might. The Witch let her rage fully show as she poured her magic into his shield, until finally his protection collapsed. The remaining magic was still so powerful that the transformation happened all at once. Curved horns sprouted above him, white fur joining his beard to cover his face as a long muzzle pushed out with a bleating cry. His eyes changed to a foreign, rectangular pupil, and his ears flopped against the sides of his head. Hooves replaced his hands, and his feet fell out of his fine slippers as they too succumbed. He bucked and bleated his resistance, but only succeeded in kicking away the last vestiges of his humanity, leaving a goat to glance about in witless confusion. In her fury, Eteida had taken even his understanding.

Her task done, the Witch composed herself. She trembled a bit, wondering if the old mage had been right. It had taken years to enchant the mana crystals that allowed her to perform so many strenuous feats all at once. Her army, though powerful, could not be made invulnerable through her power alone. Would the rest of the kingdom's forces rally, then return and undo what she had only just accomplished?

Casting aside those fears, she laughed. She mounted her throne and lounged into its deeply cushioned depths. Looking to her newly minted servant, she smiled. “Captain, see to it that the goat and pig find a good farm to call home, then come to me for further orders. We must fortify this position against the false king's forces.”

The minotaur bowed deeply, then set about to the task that his Queen had given to him. As for the defense, he would personally deal with any warrior foolish enough to raise arms against the True Queen of the Realm.

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Things had gone quiet in the castle hallways. A pair of dark eyes peered out from the shadows, straining to hear any sign of resistance remaining. At last, a heavy set of footfalls sounded from the distance, growing closer until the door at the far end of the hallway was thrown open, and a massive bull man stepped out. The spying figure slunk deeper into the shadow as the creature passed, marveling as it carried two cages, one under each arm. Bleating and snorting sounds made it clear that they were not empty.

As the minotaur left the hallway, a quiet voice spoke up.

“Father, I'm scared.”

The King turned back and slipped into the hole that served as their shelter during the siege. One of his daughters met him, whiskers trembling.

“It's all right dear.” To a human listener, the words came out as a quiet squeaking, but everyone in the

hole understood their meaning. “Our army could not be recalled to defend the castle quickly enough, but they will come soon, and they will cast out these unwelcome guests.”

His wife came to stand by him, putting an arm around his shoulders and kissing the side of his muzzle. She turned to face the children. “Your father is right. Master Tydus' spell will keep us safe, and we need only make use of the gem he gave us once things have returned to order. Just think of it as an adventure! Few get to see the world from the perspective of mice, and these holes lead all over the castle.”

The King, a white mouse only a few inches tall, nodded and smiled as well as he could. “Yes, just wait! We will explore the castle grounds as we never have before.”

“What about Samuel?”

The King drooped a bit as he looked at his daughters. The two little mice could see their father was worried as well, and he forced himself to smile to answer their concerns.

“He will also be well, but Master Tydus had a very important task for him especially. Do not worry. He will be back with us as soon as this all is over.”

The girls finally did calm a little, and the King returned to the hole and peeked out. Though he knew he would not see what he sought, he glanced up at the window at the far end of the hall.

“Stay safe, my son.”

Far away, the sleek form of a raven soared through the skies. He carried not only a written message bound to his leg, but a voice capable of delivering his message safely at journey's end. His thoughts continually strayed to his family, but he knew that he had to see this job to its end. He only hoped that Tydus' gambit would work. There was so much at stake.