

The Portrait of the Veiled Queen

by Andrew Harper

It was a dismal winter for the entire kingdom the year the Queen died. She had fallen ill on her journey to visit a neighboring city, and slowly her malady overtook her, despite the royal physician's best efforts. The whole commonwealth was shocked in surprise as news spread of her death. She was equally loved by all, except for maybe the King. King Delirus did not step one foot out of his chambers for an entire week as he lamented her.

After he had thoroughly grieved her death, he decided to throw a grandiose funeral in her honor. He hired the finest musicians of the land, told his cooks to prepare their best meal, and invited nearly the entire kingdom. It was to be an exquisite occasion in her honor.

At her funeral, the best orators of the King's court gave her eulogy, praising her for her good virtues, of which she possessed many the speakers assured the audience. They spoke of her fine leadership and decision making as Queen. Lastly, they spoke of her great beauty, which was known for miles outside the King's domain, or so they said.

The truth is that no one had ever truly seen the Queen. Sure, a few palace guards had caught glimpses of her as she was walking the halls in the castle, but her veil was always too thick for anyone to see more than a faint outline of her face. She never left the palace without her cloak and veil, before drawing the curtains of her litter as she traveled. There were even rumors that she did not exist at all, and was merely fabricated so no poor girl would have to keep the King for a husband.

For it was well known that King Delirus had gone mad many years ago. Ever since he had fallen off of his horse and hit his head during a battle, his behavior had been extremely erratic. During some seasons, he would act as a king ought to act, and was a very fair ruler. Yet in the other times, he was a madman. He often made many bizarre orders, such as the time when he ordered a gold crown to be made for every prisoner, or the time when he surrendered to his own army. Often the noblemen had considered dethroning their king on account of his wild antics, and finding a more fit ruler, but before they could agree on who would succeed Delirus, he would return to his calm and reasonable state. So they dropped the

matter altogether, until the King's outrageous behavior sprung back up; this cycle repeated for some time.

The speakers continued with their flattery of the Queen whom they had never known. Each speaker was sure to be vague in their descriptions, in fear that King Delirus would become upset if they misattributed facts about her.

After what seemed like an eternity, the reception finally began. Although the guests were attending a funeral, they had a great time. For how can one grieve for someone who might not have ever existed? Only the music played gave the event a somber aura, and soon the musicians changed their tune into a more joyous and lighthearted mood. All was at rest until the King gave his proclamation.

He stood up out of his chair and ordered the congregation to be silent for him to speak. "What a most memorable Queen my wife had been. Let us never forget her! In order to carry on her memory, I will give my most prized possession to the one who can paint the finest portrait of her; my entire kingdom. For what a memorable Queen she was!" King Delirus sat back in his throne, and continued to sip from his goblet.

A silent uproar enveloped the audience as the repercussions of this news registered in their minds. Whispers quickly erupted and spread across the room. How could the King be so berserk, so foolish as to give away the entire Kingdom for a picture? But the more important question arose. Who was to be the new ruler?

The noblemen quickly met to discuss what was to be done. Clearly King Delirus was no longer fit to be a ruler. However, the same discrepancy over who was to replace him still stood. Some wanted the King's nephew, as he had the right to the throne. Yet others preferred the respectable wiseman Sapien, for he was the most fit ruler; besides, the King's nephew was much too young to rule. After much debate, an agreement finally took place. They were to abide by the King, and determine the next ruler by the one who happened to paint the best portrait of the queen. Since no one was certain of what she looked like, fate would be the determining factor.

Suddenly painters were in very high demand. The few artisans in the kingdom were able to charge an extremely hefty price, for these paintings could be worth the entire kingdom! Only the wealthiest nobles were able to hire a painter. Soon there were many new amateur painters, and it seemed as if everyone had

taken up the craft. There was a large shortage of paint supplies, and buyers fought fiercely for the last paints and brushes.

Since no one had ever seen the queen, there was a great variety among paintings when the time came for the King to pick his favorite. Some versions depicted her with dark coffee-colored hair, commonly found throughout the land. Others painted her with light gold hair, considered to be very beautiful and desirable. Almost every possible combination of features was to be found, the only trend being that each was remarkably beautiful.

Each painting was brought to the King individually to be judged. For hours, he turned down paintings with their makers or buyers, much to their dismay. Some had almost won his favor, but none were satisfactory. None until the madman Lymphatus brought his portrait to King Delirus.

His painting was certainly different from the rest. The woman, if you can call it that, in the painting was missing certain key features, while possessing qualities no human should have. Although she had no ears or nose, she made up for it with the detailed antlers on each side of her head, or so the king seemed to think. She was also blessed with lengthy sharp canine-teeth. Her skin was a pale green with orange freckles scattered across her face, and her red eyes seemed to follow from whichever angle one looked.

The King was quite pleased, saying, "Surely this remarkable painting captures how memorable our Queen was! You shall have the kingdom indeed." Therefore, he gave up his crown on the spot to this lunatic Lymphatus, much to the dismay of everyone else. "How can we let one madman be replaced by another?" the nobles said amongst each other. They would not allow Lymphatus to remain in power for long.

The nobles staged a revolt against the new found king, with strong support from the commoners of the land, for Lymphatus' insanity was apparent to all. Unfortunately, the military had long been trained to side with the crown, no matter the circumstance. An all out civil war followed, with many great battles, and even greater bloodshed. Utter chaos quickly overtook and drove the Kingdom to ruin. Only the portrait of the most memorable queen left standing on an otherwise barren wall.