



RANSOM

A Rapunzel retelling of strength and honor



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POPPY SEEDS

The creaking of an ancient weathered axle interrupted the serenity of the countryside as two wooden wheels resisted the rough, underused trails. Aged, leathery hands gripped tightly as the man pressed forward, hobbling on his good leg and dragging the disfigured one behind him. His muscles cramped and stiffened from constant jerking. Every other uneven step sent a shooting pain from his hip, yet he pressed on. His withered body refused to cover ground as quickly as it used to, and the slow pace strained his frail frame.

His tattered, dusty apparel and unshaven jaw made him look like a beggar, but under the begrimed appearance was a man with more riches than a czar or king. At any time he could swap the threadbare rags for new, brightly colored apparel, but he didn't want to attract any attention from extravagant clothing. Although his carefully curated merchandise could thwart the picky robber, a hasty, eager thief might not be so fastidious, swiping anything greedy hands could touch. He felt it always best to appear all but invisible.

Trinkets and baubles inside the rickety cart appeared less than desirable—scuffed, aged, and worn—but each and every piece nestled together pulsed with the weighty intrigue of treasure. The relics, unique and heavily used, had long been fortified with infusions of ancient magic, and the old man served as their designated peddler and keeper. Shuffling slowly from town to town, magically guided by the inanimate pieces themselves, he fulfilled his purpose dutifully.

Among the curios, a talisman from across the great sea, carved out of cypress from the swamps of the bayou, slid back and forth. Thin leather

straps that once tethered the magic piece around the neck now wound and tangled around fellow dormant relics. Another piece glistened when it caught the sunlight, with intricate golden swirls surrounding a rectangular handheld mirror. Swooping leaves of gold flowed down, forming the handle in the most beautiful manner, ending in a magnificent rose in bloom. Said to show anything to the possessor, the mirror appeared worthlessly clouded with age. Next to it lay a spindle, taken from a spinning wheel burned in a heap of similar frames. It appeared plain to the untrained eye, but the power and sharpness was obvious to those who were looking. Pinging against the deadly needle, a clear jar rolled back and forth on its side, its lid screwed tight. Inside the thick glass a small, swirling storm cloud churned, and if one were to look closely, they would witness never-ending snowfall.

Clattering loudly against large and small wares, an old oil lamp, tarnished and discolored, bounced in the cart as well. A tiny voice usually called out from inside, although the occupant became less chatty during prolonged travel. Long and sleek, dull and rusted, the lamp was the reason for excursion now. Leading by magic in the direction it was meant to go, the peddler dutifully followed. Yes, the distance was far and tiresome, but the reward was always worth the pain. So, he pulled along, just as he had done for a hundred years.

Heading south, the lamp guided its keeper around Mächtig Mountain. Enormously powerful, the mount lay on the southern border of the kingdom of Stillemach. Impressive snowy peaks dusted the blue sky, seen by all for several days before travelers reached the base of the great mountain. Inclining quickly, dangerously jagged, the foothills forced every road to veer, discouraging all from a foolish attempt over.

Bumping and winding carefully, the peddler regretted the path of choice, pulling across what was no more than a sparse trail, and not a very good one at that. Rocks and thick tufts of grass hampered progress, catching the wooden wheels on the barely visible ruts while tripping feet with the help of sudden earth mounds. Then, without warning, the road vanished, swept away in a vicious mudslide some months before, the earth long since dried to create a gap in the pitiful trail. Sighing heavily, the peddler geared up to blaze through sloping grounds of debris and soft earth. As he pulled, one squeaky wheel banged roughly against a hidden boulder, and the cart lurched wildly. The unexpected obstruction caught him by surprise, and the

frail man stumbled wildly to the side. A small pouch hanging across his chest for protection swung from the safe haven of his body, causing a magic poppy seed, the size of a pin prick, to fall from the leather bag without notice.

Moving quickly to prevent the loss of precious cargo, he righted the wheels, regained composure, and straightened the cart before carefully skirting around the obnoxious boulder. His heart raced from the burst of exertion, but despite the chaos, a smug grin bloomed across his dry lips at a job well done.

Left behind, the tiny seed immediately sank into the rich soil, planting powerful magic. Roots spread quickly, reaching out into the colossal mountain, and the long stringy veins not only drank in water but also sucked in the strength of Mächtig. For every inch the enchanted poppy grew, the mountain shrank one thousand feet. Within a short time, the great Mächtig Mountain vanished entirely, leaving behind a beautiful poppy bush, full of giant bright red blooms. The seemingly ordinary flowers stood tall in the grasses, soaking up the sun just as any common bush. But inside the stems, petals, and leaves hid extraordinary power and the strength of a mountain.



Eyes flashed in the darkness as scavengers began their evening routines. Scurrying paws scratched and pattered while the low call of an owl murmured in the early night. Like the shadows of many disproportionate trees lining the lonely road, the Crooked Elm sat skewed and lopsided on the side of the darkened highway, waiting to offer paying travelers pitiful food, adequate drink, and the type of lodging one weighs against sleeping in the mud. Serving as a haven from the rough, lonely trail, nothing impressive stood out with the contorted inn. Even so, any traveler having made it this far happily accepted the accommodations with gratitude deep in their weary bones.

Inside, creaking wooden joints groaned in the empty tavern as only two rooms sat claimed for the night. The crisp sound of cards being shuffled cut through the stale air as an old hunter, withered from age and covered in dust, sat at his favorite table playing alone. The second patron sat heavily, sunken on his stool, head lying on the worn-out bar top while drool spilled

from his gaping mouth. Sounds of cloth swooshing against metal constantly interrupted the peace as the large tavern keeper continued his usual work. Obsessively, the man polished semi-clean tankards, working the filthy cloth quickly in and out of each tin cup, somehow leaving them dirtier than before.

Slowly, the iron hinges of the thick wooden door creaked open, and an old man hobbled in with one straight leg and one crooked, making his way to a certain table. Though not the fanciest nor most comfortable place to rest, the Crooked Elm always had an empty bed, no matter when the peddler travelled through.

“Ah, Torban,” a loud voice boomed from behind the bar. “My old friend! You’ve made it back this way.” The large man filled a filthy tankard with a frothy amber liquid and pit it down onto the small table in front of his latest customer. “I’ve been wondering. Didn’t know how many trips ye had left in ya,” he said, patting the tired man once heartily on the back.

“Yes, yes. I may be slow and crooked, but I still have a spring in my step,” the old, bone-tired Torban responded softly.

The tavern keeper huffed a small laugh, but, like a good host, clomped back behind the counter, leaving his patron in peace.

The peddler pulled the satchel from across his chest, as he always did when he stopped for the night, and began counting the tiny black seeds. Puzzlement bloomed across his wrinkled face and he counted again. Usually untroubled by fellow travelers, the strange behavior of the peddler was quite distracting, and soon the old hunter curiously observed a befuddled old man. After watching the peddler count for the fourth time, he lay his cards face down and slid the chair back, slowly lifting himself from the seat. Aged bones cracked from stiffness, forcing the old guy to take his time wandering across the room.

Once standing directly across from Torban, the hunter slicked back stubby gray hair, picked yellowed teeth quickly, and presented his most charming self. “Excuse me, Monsieur. I am most curious. May I inquire as to what you are about? Have you lost something, and may I assist?”

Torban glanced up at the new friend for an instant but went quickly back to counting for a sixth time. “Dear me, dear me. I fear I have lost something. Something of great value.”

The hunter studied the tiny seeds and scoffed but attempted to suppress

his incredulity. “You’ve lost a seed?” The words were produced slowly.

“A magic seed!” Torban snapped. Eyes looked up quickly as he realized he’d revealed more than intended, but upon surveying his elderly companion, he determined a man almost as aged as himself would be no problem. “A magic seed,” he repeated more calmly and nodded at the chair across the table.

The hunter pulled the chair back and settled in. “What do you mean, ‘magic seed’?” he asked with curious eyes.

Torban ignored the eagerness in his new friend’s voice, grateful to talk through the befuddlement, and began to share. “Just what I said. Magic seed. These here have been enchanted by a very powerful magic indeed. As the flower grows, the roots pull in the strength from surrounding objects. Those objects minimize, but the flower grows. The trick, though, is that it appears as an ordinary plant, while inside courses strength one-thousand fold.”

Soaking in every word, the hunter became increasingly intrigued. “Why would one want such a flower?”

“Power!” Torban blurted out, then took a swig of the drink in front of him. Foam clung to his mustache as he set the tin cup down a little harder than intended. “The power of the enchanted flower can be harnessed through a chant. Imagine strength unparalleled, youth, and eternal life. What could one accomplish with that?”

“A chant? Seems unlikely. What are the words?” The old hunter leaned in, eager to memorize every morsel the peddler was willing to reveal.

Torban took another deep swig, settling a bit. “Oh, you don’t want to know all that. The seed is long gone.” He waved a withered hand in dismissal.

“Long gone,” the man repeated, then hailed the large tavern keeper. “Another for my friend.” The barkeeper refilled their tankards, and Torban drank happily. Calculating, the hunter waited a short time, filling it with small talk and bottomless brew. Soon the peddler seemed adequately at ease, and the hunter decided to try his luck once more. “Going back to one of our earlier topics, I just can’t get something out of my head. I understand that the missing seed is lost forever, but what would you chant if you had it? It’s just so fascinating.”

“Fascinating it is, but magic is not to be trifled with,” Torban warned

without heart, enjoying the break from a solitary existence. “Oh, all right. The chant is a simple one. Now, let’s see . . . oh, right! ‘Strengthen marrow, strengthen bones. Time reversed, stand all alone. Recover, revive, redeem, renew. Become the person that I once knew.’ Yes, that’s it!” Torban smiled, clearly proud of his acute memory, aged as it was.

Pushing back slowly, the hunter raised his old body from the chair. “Well, friend, that was a riveting tale. I am truly sorry for your loss. I hope you may one day recover such a rare seed.”

“Oh, the seed will never be retrieved,” Torban replied off-handedly. “It plants itself instantly, and the flower grows rather quickly. I don’t have the time, energy, or space in my cart to backtrack and dig up a bush now. I’m on a very important errand, you know.”

“Indeed.” The man smirked as he collected his things. “Oh, what kind of flower did you say that was?” he asked in a disinterested manner, catching the peddler mid-drink.

Torban placed his tankard on the table, much calmer than when he first arrived. “Poppy. Red poppies,” he muttered.

“Excellent. Good luck to you, friend. Safe travels. I must be on my way.” The man walked briskly into the cool night, leaving cards on the table and a room empty. Carrying all he owned on his back, he turned north, excitedly venturing forth on a new hunt.



His heart pounded with excitement. He had spent five days carefully walking and meticulously searching, nearly giving up and almost turning back. But finally Draven the hunter spotted the bright red poppies in the distance. Like many others, he had passed through this valley before, but it hadn’t been a valley then. *Wasn’t there once an enormous mountain in this area, or is that just my old mind playing tricks on me?*

Closing the gap between him and his target, Draven approached the only poppy plant for hundreds of miles. Vibrant red stood out among the wild green grasses, out of place and stunning. “Now, how does this work?” he murmured to himself, excited but cautious. “Pluck the flower and receive the power?” Drawing his knife, Draven sliced the stem of the longest poppy and held the flower reverently in his hand. Caressing the red petals, he recited the words that the peddler mumbled and then waited. One second.

Two seconds . . . Twenty. Nothing happened.

“Drat,” Draven exclaimed under his breath, “maybe the old goat’s out of his mind after all.” Dropping the stem, he reached up and touched one of the four remaining flowers and recited the words once again. “Strengthen marrow, strengthen bones. Time reversed, stand all alone. Recover, revive, redeem, renew. Become the person that I once knew.”

A sudden rush coursed through his veins like he had never felt before. Power returned to his weary limbs as his worn out back straightened perfectly. Hair on his head and face regained the deep brown lost so long ago, and he watched as the skin on his hands tightened. Light on his feet, Draven felt as if he were in the prime of his life while adrenaline and energy pumped through his veins. For the first time in many years, he knew he could climb, or even run, up a mountain.

“Incredible,” he exclaimed, flexing his muscles again and again. “But how long will it last? I can’t dig it up, or I might ruin the magic. I can’t leave it the way it is either. The poppies are too bright, and anyone could come along and pick them without knowing their value. They must remain hidden.” Gathering long branches, he wove a rough dome that could be used to cover the plant, just as he did when creating a blind spot in the forest. The camouflage appeared as a small, wild bush, scraggly and insignificant, completely covering the poppies. Not one bit of red showed. “There. Now no one will ever know this plant is here, and I will live youthful and strong forever.”

For several decades, that was just what happened.

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