

The Future King

Scouts came from the north road.
“An army,” they told the king.
“Too many for us.”

The king spread the maps,
measured roads with a ruler,
and called the Council.

“No panic,” he said.
“Not yet.
We parley first.”

They met in a plain field beyond the willow flats.
The two parties faced each other.
A tense hush settled.
Then the northern leader emerged from his tent
and lifted his visor.

The king’s men gasped.
The face under the steel was the king’s own —
older, weathered, implacable.

“Terms,” the king said, shaken.

“Only this,” the elder said.
“Set down the crown that makes your kingdom about you.
Keep the throne.
Feed the city.
Judge the quarrels.
But lose the claim that everything must bear your name.
Lose the illusion you’re the center.”

“And what then?”

“If you do, I’m the spring that follows.
If you don’t, I’m the winter.”

The king looked at his crown.
It wasn’t heavy — only his.

Minutes passed.
Then, slowly, he set his crown
on the grass between them.

The elder knelt
and passed his hand over it.
The circlet shrank to the size of a locket.

A page at the elder's shoulder didn't hesitate;
he slipped a gold chain from his pouch,
threaded it through the small crown,
and placed chain and crown in the king's hands.

At the elder's nod,
the king lifted the chain over his head.
The little crown came to rest against his chest,
over his heart.
The weight felt warm and right,
as if a key had found its lock.

"That's where it belongs," the elder said.

"And what now?" the king asked.

"I keep walking," said the elder, smiling.
"You'll meet me there."
He gestured west toward the sunset,
and the quiet army turned with him.
They didn't vanish;
they thinned toward the horizon
the way a shadow does at dusk.

Later, in the Council, the king announced,
"Here is what changes:
no more signatures where a clerk's seal will do.
No plaques with my name.
Fewer orders, and clearer.
If something can prosper without my hand on it,
so be it.

"And our accounts change:
no exemptions for the king,
no off-book favors.
The full cost goes in the open ledger,
and we pay it.
We measure everything by whether the work serves the kingdom—
not whether it serves *me*."

In the years that followed,
the king did the same work as before —
heard petitions, set disputes, checked stores —
only with his hand light at the center.

He let other hands hold what they could hold.
He said "we" more, and "I" less.

And the kingdom prospered.

— *William Zeitler*
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