

## **Preface:**

Legend says there is no greater hero than the Silver Fox. Legend says that he is the best swordsman for many kingdoms. Legend says that he is brave, and strong, and cunning. Legend is right!

For the past five years, Avalon, Llyr, and the surrounding kingdoms have been protected by this masked hero. He appears from nowhere, saves the day, and blends back into the shadows.

No one has seen his face, but all the maidens are sure that he must be handsome. He is strong and broad-shouldered, so his face must match the rest of him.

He thwarted an assassination attempt on the king, cleared the thieves forest, and has rescued many damsels in distress, all of whom have fallen madly in love with him, except for Dorcas of Witherbee, but that's a long story. She was most unusual. Still, the Silver Fox has saved the day many times and the kingdoms are at peace.

Legend says that he is faster than lightening, more powerful than a bear, able to catch an arrow in its flight, and entirely invincible. There, legend is wrong. The Silver Fox is quite human and very able to die. In fact, he's a rather ordinary man. When he is cut, he bleeds. When he is sad, he cries, and when he is happy, he dances. He is normal enough, except that he risks his life to save those in need.

Perhaps he is unusually brave. Perhaps he is just fool-hardy. Perhaps he seeks adventure and glory, or perhaps he has an overwhelming sense of responsibility and knows his duty.



## Chapter 1: The Arrangement

“Silence!” King Edward called to his royal court. “We are not through yet. There is a very important item of business to take care of still.”

The court became immediately quiet, and all eyes stared at him.

“We have an important announcement,” the King proclaimed. “This is not to spread beyond the court. It's that big of news.”

The court began to murmur, but the king again silenced them.

“At the coming ball, my son, Prince Nicholas, will announce his marriage to Princess Elizabeth of Llyr. We have arranged with Queen Margaret for the marriage, and both agree that it is in our kingdom's best interest to have this marriage arranged.”

The court cheered – most of them. Whispers went through the crowd, some praising the idea and some doubting it.

Frederick the Fool, the court jester, took the opportunity to jump up, strum his mandolin, and start singing, “Prince Nicholas will marry. It's a plan without a glitch. Oh, he'll be very happy, just as long as she's no witch!” He kept playing as he danced around the room. “So, come and dance with me while I sing this little ditty. We'll all be merry for the prince. Let's hope his bride is pretty.”

The court all laughed, and Frederick grabbed one of the ladies and spun her around.

“Enough!” King Edward called. “I’ll have some dignity in my court.”

“Why start now?” Frederick called out as he rolled over and sat in front of the king.

Laughter rolled through the hall, until Gerrard stepped up in front of the court. “Your majesty,” he said to the king. “May I address the court?”

The king nodded, and Gerrard turned to the people. “This wedding will benefit both of our kingdoms. Llyr needs our protection, and we will have access to all their resources, as Llyr is rich in silver and gems. The king and queen are wise to make such an arrangement, and I will leave today to have the contract signed by Queen Margaret of Llyr. I am honored to represent our kingdom as an ambassador.” He held up the contract. “I present this now to the king and queen to put their royal seals on it. I will then get the seal of Queen Margaret, and it will all be official at the ball.” He walked over and presented the scroll to the king. “If you will seal it, I will head out to Llyr. Time is of the essence so I can have it sealed and returned by the ball.”

The king picked up the contract and began reading it. It was very straight forward, stating that Prince Nicholas and Princess Elizabeth would be married. They would take over Llyr immediately as Queen Margaret wished to step down, and they would unite the kingdoms of Llyr and Avalon into one and rule them both when King Edward and Queen Alice either died or stepped down. He nodded. “Perfect.” He signed the parchment,

then put wax on it and dipped his signet ring in it to mark his seal. He proudly held it out to hand to Queen Alice.

Frederick jumped up and took the scroll. As he read it, he sang, "The prince will wed the princess, and our kingdoms will unite. Let's hope they lower taxes. You are with me on that? Right?" He then held the scroll toward Gerrard. "Gerrard is a fool!" he called out, hitting him on the head with it. "But you are cunning. Perhaps you can explain the extra room at the bottom of the parchment?"

"It's nothing," Gerrard explained. "I am in a hurry to get this to Queen Margaret so we can get back for the ball. I have not had time to have the scribes illuminate it yet. That is all."

"That's all," the king echoed.

"The king is a fool!" Frederick called. He rolled forward and did a somersault. "Is the queen a fool too?"

Queen Alice grabbed the parchment from Frederick. "Oh, you worry too much. We can trust Gerrard. He's been very faithful. I know everything that goes on in all the kingdoms around. If he weren't faithful, I would have heard of his intrigues." She too signed the contract and sealed it.

Gerrard rolled the parchment up. "It is final."

"Final?" Frederick asked. "Has anyone asked Prince Nicholas if he agrees to the marriage?"

King Edward looked blankly at him. "Why? What does his agreement have to do with this? Royal weddings are a matter of state, not love."

Queen Alice huffed, “Of course I have asked him. He agrees.”

Prince Nicholas walked into the room. “I agree to the marriage,” he stated.

Frederick jumped up and sang, “The prince agrees to marry, though the princess he's not met. She may be smart. She may be dumb. It's a gamble what he'll get.” He then whispered to Nicholas, “Are you sure you want to do this? I don't feel good about it, and I know a certain maiden who will be very disappointed.”

Nicholas responded to the entire court. “I have known since I was young that I would marry for politics, not love. It is my royal duty, and I am willing to do it.”

The court began to murmur again. “Enough!” King Edward announced. “You are dismissed – now! I wish to speak with my son.”

Everyone started to leave.

“I will head to Llyr immediately,” Gerrard stated.

“Wait!” Edward ordered. “I wish to speak with you and Nicholas before you go.”

When the court all left, Edward began. “Are you sure this is wise?” he asked Gerrard. “You are sure that Nicholas and the princess are a good match? Perhaps we should give them time to get to know each other before we announce the marriage.”

“Nay,” Gerrard countered. “We need this alliance. You know it. If your debt is not paid in two months, you know what will happen.”

The king looked away. "I know." He walked over to the window and looked out. "But Nicholas hasn't even met Princess Elizabeth. You know how I feel about arranged marriages."

Queen Alice walked over. "Nonsense. Our wedding was arranged, and look how happy we are. You do everything I ask." She then went over to a corner table with some fruit on it and shoved a handful of grapes in her mouth. Through a mouthful of food she explained, "She's a princess. She'll be refined and proper, just like me. There is nothing to worry about."

The king thought for a moment. "Perhaps, Nicholas, you should go to Llyr with Gerrard and meet the princess."

"No," Nicholas countered. "You know that I have business and must go, but I assure you that I will be back for the ball and the announcement."

"Must you go?" the king asked. "Perhaps if you spoke to the princess..."

"I must go," Nicholas explained. "You know it's the right thing to do."

The king nodded.

"Don't worry about anything," Gerrard interjected. "Everything will be fine. I assure you that my niece, Princess Elizabeth, is kind and beautiful. Loving her will be quite easy. You will find that out when you meet her." He turned to go.

"Wait!" Frederick called. "I will go with you. You shouldn't travel alone."

Gerrard laughed. "I am in no danger going to Llyr. I am the queen's brother. This may be my home, but the people there love me. I have been quite welcome since my sister married into the royal house of Llyr."

"It's not the people of Llyr I'm worried about," Frederick explained.

Gerrard raised an eyebrow. "Thieves? Do you really think I need the protection of a fool?"

Frederick looked seriously at him. "I am no fool when it comes to sword play. You know that. But it is Nicholas I wish to protect in this negotiation."

Gerrard turned to leave. "You waste my time. I am in a hurry." He began to head to the door.

"Stop!" Nicholas called. "I want Frederick to go and represent me in the negotiations. It is my command."

Gerrard turned back. "King Edward, who gives the commands here, him or you?"

"You will take Frederick," Edward announced. "I will support my son on this. It is wise."

"The king is no fool!" Frederick called. He looked over at Nicholas. "I will make sure all is well and protect your interest. Be careful on your quest. I fear it will be more dangerous than we expect."

Nicholas nodded in agreement. "You are no fool."

"I tire of this," Gerrard huffed. "Let's go. I am in a hurry." He headed out the door and Frederick followed.