Tales of the Kingdom: A Collection of Short Stories

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Tales of the Kingdom: A Collection of Short Stories
by
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Dedication:

This is capstone project is dedicated to Dr. Taylor, who I couldn’t have done this without. Thank you for taking everything I gave you in stride and constantly dealing with my procrastination, both inside and outside of class!
Abstract

*Tales of the Kingdom: A Collection of Short Stories* takes place in a fantasy world with a Medieval setting. Each tale follows a new character as they navigate life in a war-torn kingdom. There are connections between each of the tales that allow readers to think and interpret what is happening in each and how they all tie together. The collection takes inspiration from fantasy novels and works of fiction, such as the *Game of Thrones* series by George R.R. Martin and the *Lord of the Rings* series by J.R.R Tolkien. It also takes inspiration from research done on real life events and people such as Queen Elizabeth the First.

The first tale introduces a young queen as she deals with the aftermath of the battle that allowed her to take back the kingdom that is rightfully hers. The second tale involves a young man as he sets out with his best friend to fight for what is right. The third and final tale tells the story of a small village in the kingdom and the length one mother will go to protect her children.
The Queen

“Milady”

She looked up from her perch on the bed to see her handmaiden leaning in her doorframe. She could see what the time and fighting had done, the pronounced wrinkles and stress evident on her face. The struggle she had been through seemed to weigh down her normally bubbly handmaiden. After all, she grew up with her handmaiden by her side. Standing up from the bed, she nodded, indicating she would be down soon. A smile was returned to her as her handmaiden softly closed the door, leaving her to her thoughts. She stood there, taking deep breaths. In and out, in and out, just like her father had taught her to do when she was panicked. She slowly and methodically made her way over to the chair by her bedside, as it seemed the object resting there stared her down. Finally, she made it to the chair but made no move to grab the item. A sheathed sword lay there, the finality of the situation now hitting her. Today would be the day that made her fate and that of her entire kingdom.

She moved to take the sword, only hesitating slightly before wrapping her hand around the leather sheath and strapping it upon her waist. Walking towards her door, she saw motion out of her peripheral vision. She turned to find a woman staring back at her. This person had a regal look to her appearance, with defined cheekbones and a slim face. She was battle worn, a person who has seen death and battle firsthand, a person who has spent her whole life fighting. The years had forced the young woman to mature and take responsibility at a young age. Her eyes were the most prominent of her features, one sky blue and the other a forest green; the only trait she inherited from her father. If she looked most like her mother, according to others,
her eyes were those of her father. She remembered those same eyes as she watched the life
leave him, the same face as her mother spoke one last time.

_No, she thought bitterly to herself. I can’t...I can’t... I won’t think of that now._ Glimpses
of that night flashed in her mind as she squeezed her eyes shut, hoping they would disappear,
wishing it to be over.

_Do not worry, my child_

_Everything will be alright_

_I need you to be brave sweetheart_

_He wiped the tears from her eyes_

_We love you so much honey_

_The sound of the door crashing in_

_Screams_

_Blood_

_Chaos_

_Silence_

She shook the thoughts from her head and angrily whipped her head away from the
mirror. Striding to the door, she refused to let those memories get the best of her today. She
began her trek through the damaged halls, evidence of the previous night still evident in every
broken door and burned wall. The castle was in shambles, but effort of the cleanup was visible
in all the wreckage. They would come back from this. They had come this far, fought this long.
They would rebuild, stronger and better than ever.
Finally, she reached the top of the stairs leading to the great hall. She could see her handmaiden and a group of soldiers waiting for her by the grand entrance. She descended the stairs, taking in the faces of the people who had stuck by her through thick and thin. The captain of the guard greeted her as she reached the bottom, offering his arm which she took gratefully.

“Are you ready?” he asked, leading her to the door. She nodded her head simply, not having the power to state her real thoughts. She faced the door, closing her eyes. Deep breath in, deep breath out. She squared her shoulders, steeled her nerves, and pushed open the door to the outside.

Her eyes immediately went to the platform in the middle of the courtyard, where she vaguely made out a figure kneeling. She tore her eyes away to find a throng of people regarding her. The murmurs from the group died away as they noticed her standing at the door. She strode towards the platform, the people parting before her. They regarded her with admiration; their queen moved confidently, every bit the queen they knew her to be. She reached the platform, climbing up to stand over the kneeling man. Silence followed her steps, not a sound could be heard from the crowd. The two soldiers guarding the man backed away, respectfully bowing their heads. She glanced down at him, regarding his torn clothes and ragged appearance. She beheld the crowd before her, taking in their appearances. The expressions she found in their eyes was not excitement or anger of what was to come; she could only find exhaustion and relief that it would all end soon. She looked down once more at the man, who had yet to acknowledge her or any of the events going on around him. She cleared her throat and began.
“You are being tried for the following crimes against the country.” She turned to face him fully. “You destroyed hundreds of homes and towns. You tore apart thousands of families, killed thousands of people. Innocent men, women, children all brought down because of your orders. Orphans left on the streets, without a family or home to call their own. You killed friends, families, neighbors, soldiers, peasants, kings...queens.” She paused for only a moment before continuing on. “Your tyranny will end today. Those innocents who have lost their lives will be avenged. For your crimes against the country, you will die.” The man slowly lifted his head and looked her straight in the eyes. No pity or remorse, only malice and chaos, could be found in his expression. He started laughing, a ragged noise that was grating to her ears. His laughing increased into a full-fledged cackle before he was cut off by his own coughing, courtesy of a damp, cold night in prison.

“You expect me to grovel at your feet, repenting my sins, don’t you? Expect me to beg for mercy at the feet of the great and wonderful queen, don’t you niece?” His voice was harsh, the same voice that had been haunting her nightmares. Her face was blank. She gazed down at him stoically, and he returned her look icily. Transfixed by his gaze, she raised the sword above her head. Here he was, the murderer of her parents and of thousands of other parents. She would not shirk at his gaze. His expression began to waver; for a split second, she saw the first true emotions flash across his face. “You wouldn’t kill me, would you?” His voice was softer as he stared up at her. “I have done horrible things, but you wouldn’t kill me. Throw me in jail for the rest of my life, torture me every day if you want, but killing me? To have my blood on your hands for the rest of your life, to have my death on your conscience? We’re family. You wouldn’t kill your only living family, would you?” She brought her arms down only slightly,
hesitating to bring down the sword. He smirked inwardly, feeling victorious. She was weak, always letting her emotions rule her, and he knew he could take advantage of that. He knew he had her and was feeling smug. She would neve—
The Best Friend

The light was comforting. It seemed to embrace him as he walked forward, though he did not know where he was heading or why.

“Callum.”

The woman’s voice was barely above a whisper, seeming to come from all directions. It sounded familiar to him.

“Mom?” He asked hopefully. He hadn’t seen her in years. Not since he had left her and his brother behind.

“Is that you?” He picked up his pace as he headed towards where he believed the voice was coming from.

“Callum.” The voice was louder and came with more urgency this time.

“Callum.” He was sprinting now, as the light got brighter and brighter. It was starting to blind him, but he couldn’t stop.

“Callum.” He couldn’t let her go, not again.

“Callum!” He jolted upright, slamming heads with the person above him.

“Ow!” His best friend reeled back, rubbing her head as she glared at him.

“I’m sorry.” He said sheepishly, rubbing his head as well. “I guess I overslept.” He glanced past her to see the light was coming in through a hole in his tent as the sun rose above the horizon.

That must have been why it was getting brighter in my dream, he thought as he got himself off the ground.
“You always were hardheaded when it came to sleeping in,” she replied as she chuckled to herself. He couldn’t help but laugh a little too. Here she was making jokes and finding the energy to smile on one of the most important days of her life. He was not sure how she kept going. The fate of the kingdom rested on her shoulders; hundreds of thousands of people looked to her for hope. And today she would decide it all. He vowed he would not let her face the day alone. She glanced over at him and saw his stormy expression.

“I know what you’re thinking, but it will be alright. You need to have hope that we will get through this. Together.” She smiled at him and held out her hand. Grabbing it, he smiled in return.

“Together,” he echoed as they stepped out into the light.

The field was covered with identical tents stretched endlessly in all directions. The camp was slowly beginning to come alive with the bustle of activity. A nervous energy encompassed it. As the pair walked along, people stopped and bowed to their queen. She nodded graciously at each of them. Callum couldn’t help but be in awe of his best friend at that moment. She had come so far in such a short amount of time. Embracing the role as queen, she was handling it quite well despite all that had happened to her. Her advisors constantly questioned her ability or made it seem as if she didn’t have experience. Yet, she proved them wrong each time. Her confidence and poise in tough situations may have fooled everyone else, but he knew she was nervous. Callum always noticed when she changed her breathing pattern to try and contain her panic. They’d been friends for too long.

Finally, they reached the war meetings. The generals were already gathered inside the tent along with their advisors. They all bowed as she entered. Discussions began immediately as
they planned out the battle that was going to take place today. It had been a week of fighting, with neither side giving up ground. Today was an end-all-be-all. This would decide the fate of the kingdom.

Planning started to wind down as the sun rose higher in the sky. The time for strategizing was over. Callum followed the others out of the tent towards the armory. It was a whirlwind of activity as all around them, soldiers prepared for battle. Soon, he found himself at her side looking out over the troops. She was speaking but it sounded far off as he thrummed with nervous energy. He hadn’t been in many battles, but he had been taught alongside her as she learned sword fighting. He would stick by her side today, ensuring that she was protected.

The enemy line stood in the distance. Cheers rang out as she finished her speech, and the soldiers raced across the field towards each other, the queen included in the fray. Callum was right there with her, knowing full well they should be hanging back in safety to survey the field and make adjustments as the battle called for them. But she was stubborn, and he wasn’t going to let her do it alone. The battle raged around them as Callum expertly moved through the chaos, making sure no one made his way close enough to the queen. The ones that did met the queen’s blade.

An enemy soldier made his way through the crowd, taking down men as he went. He was big. Very big, and his eyes were now locked on Callum.

*This is going to be interesting,* Callum thought as he prepared himself for the onslaught he knew was to come. The knight let out a battle cry as he swung down with all his might. Callum rolled to avoid the blade. He lunged forward to counter, but the knight blocked his strike. Their delicate dance continued, neither gaining an advantage. Callum was starting to tire.
He could feel his reactions slowing, an array of cuts on his body were the price. But his foe was equally tired, and his swings were becoming less and less dangerous.

*I have to end this*, Callum thought. *Now.* He feinted left and as the knight moved to block the blow, Callum shot his arm out with a dagger from his belt that found its mark. With a look of shock, the knight fell to the ground with a final thud.

Callum took this small break to regain his bearings. The tide seemed to have turned in their favor. The queen was a few yards away, locked in combat with an enemy soldier. However, another foe was sneaking up from behind, ready to strike her down.

*Oh no...* Callum started running towards her. *He will not hurt her, not while I’m around.* She still hadn’t noticed the soldier. Callum could make it in time. He had to.

*I won’t let her die.* He was sprinting now, not caring who was in his way. His only thoughts were only getting to her.

*Just a little further.* He was almost there but so was the soldier. His vision was getting hazy as he pushed himself harder. He didn’t know he could run this fast. The soldier raised his arm, sword glinting in the light.

“NO!” Callum leaped forward, throwing himself in front of the soldier’s sword as he brought it down. He glanced down, feeling the cold metal through his skin. Oddly, there was no pain. Looking back up as the sword was pulled from his stomach, he realized a sword had found his attacker as well. As the soldier fell, he saw his best friend standing there.

*Kind of like an angel,* he mused as his legs could no longer hold his weight. She caught him in her arms, gently sliding them down to the ground.
“No, no, no, no, no!” The words were muffled as she cupped his face in her hands.

“You can’t leave me. You can’t. You promised we’d always be together. Please Callum.”

It was odd. It seemed to be raining yet the sun was overhead with no clouds in sight. The sun. It was so bright. Almost too bright. Her face was the only thing he could see as the light blurred everything out. He struggled to get words out as even breathing was getting harder to do.

“Hey,” he whispered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to leave so soon.” The rain only came down harder as the light seemed to threaten to overtake him.

“Callum. Don’t go.” Her voice seemed far off.

“Callum.”

The light was comforting. It seemed to embrace him.

“Callum.” It was barely above a whisper now.

“Callum.”

“…Mom?”
The Village

A woman bustled around as a cool breeze came in through an open window, giving her a small reprieve from the fire in the kitchen. Her baked goods were almost done, just in time for the Fall Harvest Festival. Already, she could hear the villager’s chatter and their children’s laughter as they all made their way to the town square. The festival had always been a happy occasion, allowing the village to gather for food, games and fun to celebrate the first fruits of the season. It was especially needed this year as the turmoil of the kingdom had come to affect even their small village. The king’s soldiers were ransacking villages, taking food, supplies and boys deemed old enough to fight.

Her youngest son was bouncing up and down by the door, anxious to get going and enjoy the festival. She couldn’t imagine what would happen if they came to take him; he was barely a young teen and did not have the mental toughness to survive that kind of environment. He was the more free-spirited and goofier of her sons. His brother, however, had always been the strong protector, making sure no harm came to his younger brother, that is, before he left.

I just hope he’s safe... wherever he is, she thought as she put the finishing touches on her pastries. Now that they were ready, she and her youngest made their way towards the town square. The music wafted through the air as people mingled about, looking at different wares and sampling the foods. Her son immediately bounded off to find his friends. She kept going, stopping to chat occasionally with friends. Her booth was set up towards the center as she had the best pastries and baked goods in town. At least, that’s she was told. Her sons might be a little biased though.
The festival was in full swing. People stopped at her booth to try and buy her pastries as both children and adults took part in village games. Yells of victory mixed with the screams of frustration could all be heard as the games continued down the street. It was chaotic, yet it was familiar and comforting at the same time. She had been coming to the festivals since she was a child and passed the tradition on to her two sons as well. It was a time for happiness, love, celebration and thankfulness.

She had met her late husband at the festival when they were young. He was her knight in shining armor, sweeping her off her feet from the moment she met him. He always knew how to make her laugh, even when she was crying. There wasn’t a cruel bone in his body. The laughter, the love, and the tears they shared were the best times of her life. And then he left, joining a small group of men who went to protect the village from raiders, despite her desperate pleas to him not to go. When the group returned, bloody and battered but successful, he was not among them. He had sacrificed himself so that his group could get away. He was stubborn but brave to the end. Traits that she knew were passed on to their sons.

Her reminiscing was interrupted as a particularly loud scream cut through the air.

*That child is not happy he lost,* she mused as she turned to see what was happening. The sight was not something she was expecting. Her son was bolting towards her at a speed she’s never seen before. Eyes wild and out of breath, he skidded to a halt in front of her.

“What’s wrong? Are you alright?” she asked alarmed as she took in his disheveled hair and dirt stained clothes. He couldn’t seem to get the words out as a crowd of onlookers started to inch closer, wondering what was wrong. Finally, he caught his breath and looked her straight in the eyes, the most serious she’s ever seen him.
“They’re here,” he whispered. The world seemed to stop for a moment as everyone took in the gravity of his words. Then, chaos erupted. Women screamed for their children as the men sprinted home to grab their weapons.

“Are you sure?” She frantically questioned, gripping him by the shoulders. “Were they coming from the forest?”

“Yes! We were out near the edge of the village playing when our ball flew into the trees. When Finn went to go get it, a soldier came back out holding him by his shirt. Finn screamed at us to run as more of them appeared from the trees.”

“We need to get to the house. Now,” she ordered as she immediately grabbed him and starting dashing towards their home. The clash of swords and screams could be heard behind her as the men of the village met the raiding soldiers in combat. She knew they would not be able to hold off the soldiers for long. Pushing herself faster to keep up with her son, she turned the corner and could see her house in sight.

Just a little further, she thought as her son reached their front door and waited for her to catch up. She risked a glance back and almost stopped in her tracks in shock. Fire licked the horizon as the village slowly surrendered to flames. The fire quickly gained momentum, and she could start to feel the heat prickling on her skin.

Finally bursting through the door, she slammed it shut behind her and locked it. Her son was frozen in shock as the events seemed to crash down on him all at once.

“What are we going to do?” He whispered, a look of trepidation crossing his features.

“Help me move the bed,” she instructed. Together, they were able to move the bed enough to reveal a trapdoor underneath.
“Wha-” She cut him off by opening the hatch and shoving him towards it.

“You need to go in. It’s a hiding spot built by your father in case something like this were to ever happen,” she explained as she hurried him down into the hidden room. “The soldiers will be here any minute and if they find you, they will take you. I won’t let that happen.”

“But what about you? What will they do to you?” He inquired. “I can protect us! I can help you!” Looking up at her, she could see in his face he was terrified yet determined to protect the ones he loved. Just like his father and brother. The resemblance was uncanny.

“No. You need to stay here and hide. Don’t come out, no matter what happens or what you hear. I won’t put you in harm’s way. I’ll be okay. I promise,” she responded as she moved to close him in.

“Wait!” He exclaimed, reaching up towards her. He leaned his forehead against hers, just as he remembered his father always doing. Both mother and son were holding back tears.

“I love you,” he whispered, lowering himself back down.

“I love you too,” she replied as she closed the hatch, plunging him into darkness. Moving as quickly as possible, she managed to get the bed moved back into place. The fire from outside cast flickering shadows on the walls as a particular object caught her eye. Without thinking, she moved towards it and removed it from the wall. The sword had been hanging there untouched since her husband’s death. She had hoped it would never have to be used again.

Strapping it onto her waist, she could now clearly hear the screams of mothers and children as the soldiers were making their way through the village, tearing families apart without remorse. She jumped as one started banging on her door.
“Open up! By order of the king, all boys of age will be recruited to join his forces to fight the rebels.” Pulling the sword from its sheath, she methodically made her way to the door.

More banging ensued. “Don’t make us come in there. It won’t end well for you.”

No, she thought. It won’t end well for you. She took one last glance back at the bed where the trapdoor was secured safely beneath its frame. It seemed to take an eternity as she unlocked the door.

I’ll protect him until my last breath, she vowed. Steeling herself, she opened the door and stepped into the light.