

Remember Me

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I find myself kneeling on the dusty road, doubled over as if in pain—though I remember no pain.

Before me stands a woman, dressed all in black. Her face is wrinkled and old, her eyes blue green and cold. She says, “Let that be a lesson to you, you arrogant pig.” Then she raises her arms and all in an instant is transformed into a crow and flies away.

I try to take notice of her direction, which I feel is probably important, but almost immediately lose the tiny speck of black in the glare of the sun. Also, I’m distracted by the thought that I have no idea who the woman is, or why she should have said such a thing to me.

More alarming, I realize I have no idea who I am.

A young man—that I can tell. I frantically ransack my brain, but no name surfaces. No face, either—my own or anyone else’s, except the one I’ve just seen, the old woman’s with the cold eyes. *This is ridiculous*, I think, *I’m . . .*

But even with this running start I can’t finish the thought. No name. I can’t even think: I’m so-and-so’s son. I feel no connection to anyone or anything before fifteen seconds ago.

My clothes are satin and brocade.¹ I have two rings, one on each hand—one is set with two emeralds; the other is simple gold, in the form of a dragon eating its own tail. I also have a gold clasp for my cloak. So, I reason, *I’m a wealthy man*. And, it takes no memory but only common

¹ **brocade**: a luxurious fabric with raised designs

sense to know, wealth means power. But I don't feel powerful, without even having a name.

I look around. The countryside is unfamiliar without being strange. I am on a road, fairly wide and clear. The land is a bit hilly, behind me more so, ahead of me less. Also ahead of me, rising above the tops of the trees, I can make out a distant tower. Much closer is a horse, grazing on the weeds by the edge of the road. I think he must be mine, for he is saddled and bridled, and there is no one else in sight, and what need does a woman who can turn herself into a crow have for a horse?

But I have no name for the horse, any more than I have for myself, and he looks at me warily as I rise to my feet.

"It's all right," I assure him, making soft clucking noises to calm him. "Everything is fine."

Obviously we can both see everything is *not* fine, but he lets me approach, although he watches me with eyes so alarmed the whites show around them.

I can tell that the horse, like the clothing, is expensive. So are the horse's accouterments.² The saddle is soft leather, just worn enough to be broken in and comfortable, not old or scuffed. The saddlecloth is expensive material and looks brand-new. There are no saddlebags, nothing to tell me who I am or where I'm from.

"Steady," I tell the horse, and I swing up into the saddle. The action seems natural and familiar. I gather I'm accustomed to riding, but there's no further enlightenment. I face the horse in the direction of the tower, which I hope is a castle. Where I hope someone will recognize me.

I imagine someone—there is no face: I'm imagining, not planning—that someone placing a cool cloth on my head. I imagine this person saying, "The poor dear had a nasty spill from the horse, but he'll be fine in the morning."

But I remember the blue-green eyes of the black-clothed woman, and in my heart I know it's not going to be that simple.

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The tower does turn out to be part of a castle. The castle overlooks a town. Still, no names come to mind.

I ride through the town gate, and people scurry out of the way of my horse. When I get to the gate of the castle itself, guards standing at either

² **accouterments:** pieces of equipment, such as a bridle and reins

side bow, which might mean they recognize me. Or which might mean my clothes and my horse make me look important enough to warrant polite behavior.

In the courtyard, I dismount and a steward³ comes and bows. "Good day, sir," he says. "May I announce you?" He gestures for a page to come take the horse.

Somewhat reluctantly, for the horse is my only connection to any past at all, I let go of the reins and watch the boy lead the horse in the direction that must be the stables. "Yes," I tell the senior servant. "Please do."

"Your name, sir?" the steward asks.

I sigh, thinking everything would have been so much simpler if this had turned out to be my home. "Don't you know me?" I ask hopefully. Perhaps he'll take guesses, and one of them will sound familiar.

But the steward just says, apologetically, "I'm afraid your lordship's face is unfamiliar to me." His smile gets just the least bit impatient as he waits.

"I . . ." I say. "I seem to have had a mishap on the road . . ."

"Indeed?" the old servant says, sounding decidedly cooler by now.

"I think I may have been struck on the head," I say, unwilling to share the thought that I seem to have gotten on the wrong side of a woman who can turn herself into a crow.

"How unfortunate," the steward says, his tone bland, but his face disapproving. I can tell, by his face, that people of real quality, such as he is used to dealing with, don't have such things happen to them.

"I was hoping," I admit, "that someone might recognize me."

"I don't," the steward says.

"Perhaps someone else," I suggest.

The steward thinks I am insulting him. "I know everyone who comes and goes at this castle," he tells me.

"But maybe," I insist, "the lord of this castle might know me."

The steward looks me up and down as though I'm a disgrace to my fine clothing. But he doesn't dare turn me away for fear that maybe his lord *would* recognize me, so he says, "The lord and his lady may or may not be in the audience hall this afternoon. You may wait there."

"There was a lady on the road . . ." I say, with a flash of remembrance of hard eyes, of the swish of fabric as arms are raised. . . .

"Not *our* lady," the steward assures me, and turns his back on me.

³ **steward:** a person who manages household matters in a large estate

I'm so annoyed by his attitude, I call after him, though I know my presence here is dependent on his goodwill, "Once I regain my identity, you'll apologize for your bad manners."

He looks back scornfully. "Doubtful," he says.

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All afternoon long I wait with a crowd of other petitioners⁴ for the arrival of the castle's lord.

As evening shadows lengthen and the wonderful smells of cooking waft into the audience hall, we are told that the lord will not be seeing us today. Go home. Try again some other day.

I ask to see the steward, but he is not available, either. The servants are very sorry, very polite, but in no time I'm back out in the courtyard, and the castle door shuts in my face.

I find out where the stables are, but my horse is not there. When I admit to the stable master that I'm not a guest at the castle, he tells me that the stables only house the horses of the castle inhabitants and their guests.

"But a boy took my horse away," I protest, "when I first arrived and the steward greeted me."

"Ah," the stable master says, "I know who you are."

My heart starts to beat faster, but he only means that the steward has warned him about me. The horse was originally brought to the stable, he says, but the steward ordered him removed when it was discovered I had no legitimate business at the castle. The horse, the stable master says, is tied up out back behind the smallest stable building, and with that he closes the stable door in my face as firmly as the castle servants closed the castle door in my face.

I am unable to remember who I am or anything else about me, but I am fairly certain I have never had doors shut in my face before.

Going to the back of the building, I find my horse tied to a post, looking disconsolate. His saddle has been removed and is sitting on the ground beside him, but the grooms did not have time to curry⁵ him before the steward changed their orders. The horse's healthy coat beneath a layer of road dust shows that he's used to better treatment, and, worse yet, there is no vegetation within reach of his tether.

⁴ **petitioners:** people who come to ask favors or make requests of those in power

⁵ **curry:** clean the coat of a horse

"Come on, horse," I say, untying him. The area around the castle is all paving stones and packed dirt, so—carrying the saddle—I lead the horse out through the castle gate, through the winding streets of the town, and out the town gate. The smell of all that fine hay and grain just the other side of the stable wall must have been just as frustrating for him as the smell of the castle supper being prepared was for me.

Beyond the town walls there's grass, and the horse is happy with that. We have to wander farther to find a stream, and we both drink from there.

Distantly we hear a bell ringing, and too late I realize it's the town curfew. By the time we get back to the wall, the gates have been shut and locked for the night.

I tie the horse's reins to a tree, then put the saddle on the ground to use as a pillow. This does *not* feel natural and familiar, and I have the feeling this is *not* something I've done before. Another unpleasant first for me.

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The night does not bring back any of my lost memories. I try to convince myself that I imagined the old woman with the blue-green eyes, that I really did get struck on the head, and that eventually my memory is bound to return.

But in my heart I know this is not true. In my heart I know that the woman was there, that she was a witch, and that for some reason she has bespelled me.

In the darkest hours I wonder just how far her spell has worked: Has she destroyed my memories, or do I have no memories because previously I did not exist to *have* memories? I think with alarm of all those stories with witches and frogs. *But she didn't call me a frog*. I console myself; *she called me a pig*. Still, while I cannot remember my name, or my family, or my country, there are certain things I know: I know, for one, there is a certain connection between witches and frogs; I know the difference between north, south, east, and west; I know to be embarrassed and humiliated by the way the servants have treated me; I know how to walk on two legs, and that feels natural to me, as does riding a horse and sleeping—if I could—indoors. But anything personal, anything that could lead me to who I am, is gone. And my only hope is that the unknown lord of this unknown castle in this unknown land will somehow miraculously know me.

In the morning, when the town gates open, I pick what grass and leaves I can feel out of my hair and once again approach the castle.

There's nothing I can do about the grass stains on my clothes. I use the saddlecloth to rub the horse down, and the horse gives me a look that says he's used to *much* better.

I find the steward again, looking more disapproving than before. Perhaps it's the grass stains. Perhaps it's the horse trailing behind me, as far as the reins will let him get so that it appears even *he* doesn't want to be associated with me. Perhaps the steward is worried that I plan to bring the horse with me into the audience hall.

When I ask the steward what the chances are of seeing the lord today, he snorts and says it's Sunday. No audiences on Sunday.

By now I'm so hungry I think: *If the horse gives me any trouble, I'll eat him.* But I know I won't. He may well be my only way to get home.

I find one of the young boys who helps in the stables. First I throw myself on his mercy, but he's pitiless. Then I offer him my ring with the emeralds. One of the things I have no memory of, no sense for, is money. Either I've never had money, or—more likely—I've never not had enough money. I can tell, though, by the glint in the young page's eyes, what a good bargain he's struck. A gold ring with two emeralds for a stall big enough for my horse and—since I have no better choice—myself to stay in until after I've been seen by the lord of the castle. The ring pays for oats and water for the horse, what food the boy can smuggle from the kitchen for me, the use of a currycomb⁶ so I can groom the horse, and the boy's secrecy, because I suspect if the steward or the stable master knew, they'd throw us right out.

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True to his word, the boy keeps me fed with hard cheese and harder bread. This diet does nothing to improve my memory.

After three days the lord finally comes to the audience hall to speak to the petitioners, but there isn't time for him to deal with each of us, and he leaves without seeing me.

The fourth day the lord returns. I realize I'm getting more and more disreputable-looking as I sleep in my clothes, and straw gets ground into my hair, and I pick up the scent of the stables. The servants must be getting alarmed by my continuing presence, for as the lord starts to leave, once again without glancing at me, I see the steward whisper to him. The lord looks up, over the heads of the bowing crowd, and directly at me.

⁶ **currycomb**: a comb with metal teeth or notched edges

I take a step forward.

The lord leans down to whisper to the steward, shaking his head.

He doesn't know me.

After all this, he doesn't know me.

The lord leaves, the crowd disperses, and the steward comes up to me and smirks, "Ready for your apology?"

He has two younger, burlier servants with him, and they take hold of my arms and fling me out the door.

When I pick myself up, I find my young stable boy watching me. He's holding on to the reins of my horse, and my saddle is flung over the horse's back, though it's not fastened. The boy says, "The stable master found your horse and says you have to leave."

As I take the reins, the boy whispers to me, "For your other ring, I could find another place for you."

I shake my head, knowing I cannot afford his prices.

Heading for the castle gate, I pass the stable master. "It's a good horse, though," he calls out to me. "Are you willing to sell him?"

I shake my head, for the horse is my ride home.

I go out through the castle gate and into the town itself. But I stop short of leaving the town. What should I do? I know I'm lost; but when someone is lost, it's best to stay in one place, lest you accidentally elude anyone searching for you.

Is there anyone searching for me?

I could go from town to town, one step ahead of my would-be rescuers. And quickly run through all my possessions and be no better off. I decide to stay in this town and hope that there is someone missing me, trying to find me.

Looking from the horse and his saddle to my dragon ring, to the gold sunburst pin that holds my cloak, I notice how shabby my once-fine clothes are beginning to appear. They won't last long, so they're what I'll start with. I begin to search for someone who'll buy the clothes off my back—trade sturdiness for finery and hopefully give me a few extra coins in the bargain so I can eat.

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With the money I get for trading my clothes and selling my pin, I can afford a week's meals and lodgings for myself and a stall for my horse in the stable of a small inn. Every day I take the horse out to graze on the

grass outside the town walls, so I don't have to use up my small amount of money to buy food for him.

I go around the town, talking to people, hungry for names. Nothing sounds familiar. Nobody looks familiar to me. And I look familiar to no one.

The dragon emblem on my ring seems to be just a decoration—it means nothing to anyone. So, after the week, I offer the ring to the owner of the inn. He says it will buy me two more weeks' lodging. I bargain with him. I say: "Three weeks' worth of food, and I'll stay in the stable with the horse."

The innkeeper is not pleased with the arrangement, but finally he agrees. *I'm* not happy with the arrangement, for the stalls are much smaller than at the castle's stables, and I'll be lucky if I don't get stepped on. Still, I'm assuming that in three weeks I'm bound to remember or find out *something* about my past.

But after three weeks I have to approach the innkeeper with yet another bargain. "I'll work for my keep," I offer, "mine and the horse's."

The innkeeper lifts up my hand, which is soft and white compared to his. "Never done a day's work in your life," he snorts.

I don't remember, one way or the other, but my hands say he is right.

"I can learn," I tell him.

The innkeeper raises his eyes to the heavens and shakes his head, but he agrees.

My job is to muck out⁷ the stable twice every day. In addition, I have to keep the inn clean, too, the common room and the guest rooms. My hands are blistered and my muscles are sore, but I get to eat all the leftovers I can scrape from customers' plates.

Unfortunately, all this work leaves little time for taking my horse out to graze, and meanwhile the weather is beginning to turn colder. Soon there will be no foraging. First I sell the saddle, telling myself that once I find out where home is I can ride there without a saddle. With the money I get from selling it, I buy enough oats to make the horse happy again. For a time.

But then that runs out, and I see he's getting skinnier and skinnier. Eventually I realize I have to sell him soon, or the castle's stable master won't want him.

"I'm sorry, horse," I whisper. I still don't remember his name, and I have no way of knowing how fond of him I was before. Now he is the

⁷ muck out: clean manure from

only thing I have left to connect me to the furthest back I can remember: the day on the road with the blue-green-eyed witch.

The stable master buys the horse, with much grumbling and shaking of his head over the horse's sad state. After all we've been through together—maybe *because* of all we've been through—the horse doesn't look sorry to leave me.

As I walk through the town, I give one of my coins to the man with the withered hand who stands on the same street corner every day, begging. It isn't that I have money to spare, but I recognize that this may well be where I end up next.

At the inn the innkeeper tells me that he's sorry—I've been a better worker than he ever imagined—but his nephew has arrived from the country, looking for a job, and the innkeeper has given him mine.

It's been so long since I've been clean, or comfortable, or well fed, I'm desperate enough to be willing to spend some of my money from the sale of my horse to take a room. But when I reach into my pocket, I find nothing there but a hole.

I leave, so that the innkeeper doesn't have to throw me out, the way the castle steward threw me out.

I walk down the street, wondering if I should beg my coin back from the beggar. From behind me, I hear the clatter of horses' hooves on the street. I press against the wall to get out of the way—the lord and lady of the castle and their friends are always tearing through the streets on their fast mounts,⁸ careless of the poor folk who have to scurry out of their way.

The riders, two men, have to slow down to take the corner. I look to see if either of the horses is mine, but neither is. I keep walking, the only way to stay warm, but one of the men pulls his horse to a stop; and the second man stops, also, to avoid colliding with him.

"Your Highness?" a voice says.

I look up and around, and it's the first man, and he's looking at me.

"Is it you?" he asks in sick amazement.

"I don't know," I have to admit. "Is it?"

He leaps from his horse for a closer look, then practically kneels, he bows so low.

"Our long-lost prince, found at last," he proclaims to any of the town's inhabitants who might be wondering. He whips off his cloak and puts it

⁸ mounts: saddle horses

around me. "Oh, well met,⁹ sir," he exclaims with such joy it nearly breaks my heart.

He orders the younger man with him to get off his horse. "Help His Highness up," he says, "and you walk along behind."

Belatedly the younger man scrambles off his horse, and he actually does kneel on the cobblestones.

"How far to home?" I ask.

"Two weeks' journey," the older man tells me.

I know how sore my feet have been since I sold my fine boots with the rest of my clothing, and I can't subject this poor young squire to walking for two weeks. "We can ride together," I say, which makes his eyes go wide in amazement.

And so we do.

I learn my name, which does not sound familiar, and I learn that I have a father and mother who have been frantic concerning my whereabouts, and there is a princess to whom I am betrothed¹⁰—foreign born but lovely, I'm assured—and none of their names sound familiar, either. And when we finally reach my ancestral lands, nothing *looks* familiar.

The man who found me—one of many such searchers, he informs me—sends word ahead that I have been found, but that my memory has been lost. We enter the courtyard to my own castle—which looks less familiar to me than the castle in the town where I stayed. I return to the sound of trumpets blaring and men cheering and maidens throwing flower petals out the windows to greet me.

A gray-bearded man and a plump woman are standing by the fountain, and before the horses even stop, the woman is rushing forward, crying out, "Oh, my poor, sweet baby."

"Mother," I say, which seems a fairly safe guess, and she throws her arms around me, then turns to the crowd and says, triumphantly, defiantly, "See? He *does* remember."

But I don't.

I have to take other people's word for who I know, and who I like, and what I did as a boy, and what my interests are, and that I love my parents, and that I'm happy with my betrothal to the princess.

They tell me I'm calmer than I ever was before, and more patient, and kinder. Which sound like compliments, until I think about it. When I point

9 **well met:** an old-fashioned term used as an enthusiastic greeting

10 **betrothed:** engaged to be married

this out, everybody laughs and says, *No, no, but we mean it—we loved you before, but you're gentler and more considerate since your adventure.*

Whatever my adventure was.

Which is the one thing none of them knows, either.

And *nothing* seems familiar.

Except, sometimes, when I look at the princess I'm to marry, I find her looking at me with an expression that's almost familiar, watching carefully, appraisingly, and her eyes are cool blue green, and that's something I don't want to think about at all. ∞

