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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Invisible Prince

Once upon a time, the king of a great land had a dispute with a goblin. As fate would have it, the king emerged victorious from the argument, which made the goblin so angry that he left the kingdom and set out to find an opportunity to harm his enemy.

Meanwhile, as the goblin bided his time, the king and queen, who had been childless for a long time, became proud parents of a baby boy. From a pink summer morning to the rustling quiet of a summer night, the entire kingdom surrendered to joy. Bells rang from towers in cities and towers in the fields, cannons boomed from castle towers, and small cakes, each with the prince's monogram in red and white sugar and covered in icing, were distributed among the children of the realm by royal command.

Now, it was the custom of the land that the heir to the throne be presented to the nobility of the realm on the first day of his seventh week, and soon this day was on the calendar.

On the afternoon of the ceremony, the scene in the great hall was magnificent! With thousands gathered together, the nobility of the land, all in ceremonial dress, or rather trying to move; because the huge hall was packed to the brim, it was difficult, and I regret to say, but quite a few people fainted due to lack of air,

protest cries, rebellious shoving, crumpled collars, and lost jewels.

Suddenly, the palace's great bell sounded a heavy and solemn toll – the ceremony was about to begin! Several messengers managed to open an aisle the length of the hall, and when this feat was accomplished, the two highest sergeants of the royal army opened the double portals leading from the royal salon. And now, announced by a great ringing of golden trumpets and accompanied by a jubilant thunder on the palace organ, a noble procession slowly entered the hall through the gate. A procession of people entered, generals, musicians, florists, and finally, the baby.

The wheels and push handle of the baby carriage were made of the finest gold, while the carriage body was hollowed out of amazing opal! Amidst a deafening roar of cheers, the procession solemnly made its way to a platform at the head of the hall.

Suddenly, an invisible form fluttered in through a window, muttered something next to the baby's crib, let out a mocking goblin laugh, and fled unnoticed.

After driving the baby to the center of the stage, the Lord Chancellor signaled for the trumpeters to break into the national anthem and leaned over the crib to take the baby and show him to the crowd. To his horror, the crib was empty! The little prince's pillow was there, the turquoise-bordered spread, and the rattle filled with seed pearls – but no baby.

"The baby! The baby! Where is the baby?" swallowed the Lord Chancellor, barely able to speak, inside. An

uncomfortable pause followed: excited whispers, suspicions, rumors buzzing through the crowd. Soon, as the truth began to spread, there was a great commotion. Soon everyone was busy looking here and there – lifting edges of carpets, rummaging behind curtains, staring at the ceiling, and investigating corners.



Suddenly, the weak but unmistakable cry of a baby could be heard. "Search, search, my friends!" cried the king. "A royal reward for whoever finds my child!" The cry of the baby could be heard again! Where could he be? Suddenly, a clever young court lady who had searched the opal carriage let out a piercing scream. While feeling around the carriage, she had felt the baby but could not see him. The terrible truth dawned on everyone...

The baby had become invisible!

Invisible he was, and invisible he remained. You may imagine that his upbringing was indeed a difficult task! To make matters worse, it was soon discovered that not only was the prince himself completely invisible, but also that any clothing that touched him became invisible as

well. You could feel the little prince, you could hear him – and that was all. So when he crawled away in the nursery, one had to either grope for him through the clear air, carefully feeling here and there, or wait until he cried. No wonder the poor queen scoured the country for new court nurses and sent home sisters whose nerves could not handle the strain! You could never tell what might happen.

Once, for example, the child managed to escape from his nursery to the sprawling lawns of the royal palace, and the entire national army had to crawl on hands and knees for the whole afternoon before the prince was found sleeping under a plum tree.

Now, when every attempt to undo the enchantment had failed, the king visited the Wise Man of Pansophia, a learned sage who sat in an armchair under a green striped umbrella at the crossroads of the world and gave advice to all corners of the world. This sage was dressed in the stately folds of a full black robe, a round black velvet cap rested on the crown of his snow-white head, a broad white beard was spread out on his chest, and on his nose was a huge round pair of glasses, over which he looked with a solemn authority.

Starting from the umbrella, there was a long line of questioners patiently waiting in a single file, tens of kilometers long over the rolling land and disappearing, still unbroken, over the top of a distant hill. These patient people made way for the unfortunate king. After hearing the king's story, the wise man shook his head and replied, "The enchantment that binds your son is a powerful one and can only be removed by touching

him with the enchantment-dispeller, the all-powerful talisman that your ancestor, King Decimo, received from his fairy bride.”

Unfortunately,” replied the king, “the spell-dispeller was stolen from the royal treasury twenty years ago. Can you not tell us who stole it or where it can be found?”

“Was it not the only spell-dispeller in the entire world?” asked the wise man. “It was,” answered the king with a sad, affirmative nod. “It was stolen from you by the Master Thief of the Adamant Mountains,” roared the Wise Man. “And perhaps you can tell us where to find him,” said the king. The wise man shook his head.

“Ask me where the raindrop lies that fell into the river yesterday,” replied the Wise, “but do not ask me where the Master Thief lives. I do not know. Nobody knows. But as for breaking the enchantment, it is the spell-dispeller or nothing. If only I could help you more!” And the Wise bid farewell to the king.

But now I must tell you about the Master Thief of the Adamant Mountains.

This mysterious person, of whom everyone had heard but whom no one had seen, lived in a secret house in a lost valley of the mountains, a house so artistically formed and so cunningly hidden with vines and branches that birds were deceived by it and often came to perch on the chimney, mistaking it for a chestnut tree! As for the Master Thief himself, he was a kind of living beanstalk, for he was taller than the tallest, thinner than the thinnest, and endowed with a pair of long,

tireless legs that were swifter than the swiftest runners in the land. At night he moved through the world in a strange suit of pitch-blue that clung to him as tightly as the skin of an eel; by day he wore a magnificent garment on which painted leaves, sunspots, blue shadows, and streaks of earthy brown were displayed.



Now this master thief was no ordinary robber, for he did not steal to steal, but only to gather new rarities for a splendid museum that he housed beneath his dwelling. Never was there such a splendid museum as the Master Thief's! Deep in the solemn echoing caves, each furnished with a card and a label, and arranged in order, shelf on shelf, could be found the finest specimen of everything in the world that men had made or loved. The most comfortable chair in the world was there, the sharpest pin, the warmest blanket, the loudest drum, the stickiest glue, the most interesting book, the funniest joke, the biggest diamond, the most lifelike stuffed cat, the prettiest lampshade, and a thousand things more. To rename his collection, to move things about, to do things with them, was the greatest joy of the Master Thief. Seated in the most comfortable chair in the world,

fingertips pressed together, he spent hours enjoying his treasures and wondering if there was anything lacking to him under the sun. Presently he heard, by chance, of the opal baby carriage of the Invisible Baby, and immediately he resolved to add this new wonder to his gallery.

He went first to his secret den, turned a glass globe, spoke five words into it, and sealed them inside. Then he dressed in a two-colored suit, pocketed the glass globe, and fled on his long legs over hill and dale to the royal city.

When he arrived in the afternoon, he easily made his way into the gardens of the palace. It was a beautiful day, and the opal baby carriage stood unattended in the shade of a group of ancient trees. Several nurses stood around the silver fence that enclosed the prince's play-place.

And now, creeping unnoticed closer, the Master Thief took the ball out of his pocket and threw it towards the group. The ball hit the ground and shattered, and the words the sly Master Thief had sealed inside it escaped into the air. And these words were: "Oh, look at the balloon!"

Immediately, all the nurses looked up at the sky to see the imaginary balloon, and while they looked around, the Master Thief jumped towards the opal baby carriage, released the brake on the golden wheels, and pushed the carriage in front of him, running wildly through the flower-lined alleys and garden gates towards the main road. In a long straight line, the

Master Thief fled while pushing the baby carriage the entire time.

Soon, the city bells began to ring loudly; soldiers were sent out on the roads and horses were sent galloping after him, but all to no avail – the jewel-encrusted carriage sped like a meteor across the land. The last thing they saw of it was a moving streak of light along the steep slope of a mountain, a light that glowed like a great star for a moment at the top and then quickly sank out of sight.

When the Master Thief reached his secret refuge in the valley, he shouted triumphantly and quickly rode the baby carriage to the museum. The most magnificent baby carriage in the world! The Master Thief, once again producing the most comfortable chair, sank into it and thought about his latest prize.

Suddenly, a strange sound, half weeping, half gurgling, made him sit up. Had someone discovered his secret treasure trove? What could it mean? And now, a second cry came, ending in a long protesting wail. The Master Thief had stolen the invisible baby along with the carriage!

The idea of having to care for a baby, any baby, troubled the Master Thief; but as for an invisible baby, that was indeed a trial! But suddenly, the Master Thief slapped his knee and grinned with joy – he had thought of the spell-dispeller! The robber held up the brightest lantern in the world and went to the small side cave where he had placed the talisman. His heart skipped a beat. The spell-dispeller was gone!

Bewildered, the Master Thief began searching the small cave but could find no sign of the spell-dispeller. Eventually, he gave up the search and carried the prince back to his dwelling.

And so, days and months and even years passed without the spell-dispeller coming to light. From an invisible baby, the prince grew into an invisible boy whose cheerful voice and kind presence filled the Master Thief's house.

As it turned out, being invisible was not so bad after all! You could see things and find things that were hidden from all other mortals; you could climb to the side of a bird's nest, sit quietly, and watch the mother bird feed her young; you could dive unseen into the clear, cold pools of the mountain streams and snap at the lurking trout with their bobbing tails; you could follow the squirrel to his secret granary!

When the prince was fifteen, it happened that the Master Thief suddenly became ashamed of his bad manners, so ashamed that he not only decided to give up further collecting but also to return everything he had stolen! The invisible prince could help the Master Thief greatly with this task. People in all the kingdoms of the world began to find their stolen possessions waiting for them when they came to breakfast in the morning: the teddy cat became once again the pride of the Blue Tower, the most interesting book went back to its place on the shelves of the royal library, the golden scroll of the funniest joke appeared as if by magic on the wall of the king's room.

At the end of the fifth year, the opal baby carriage and the invisible prince were the only two stolen things left to return. The invisible prince was now twenty years old. With a heavy heart, for the boy was as dear to him as a son, the remorseful Master Thief began to prepare to return the prince and carriage to the unhappy parents.

On the morning of departure, the Master Thief descended for the last time to the abandoned museum and walked through dusty corridors, leaving footprints in the dust and musing on the glory that had been. Here had stood the shiny rubber plant, here the most beautiful coat rack, here the only eraser that had never rubbed a hole in the paper. A tear gathered in his eye. He had loved them; he had stolen them; he had restored them; he was free!

Suddenly his gaze, which was wandering through empty shelves, fell on a small box wedged in a gloomy corner. With a loud cry of joy, the Master Thief recognized the spell remover! It had fallen behind a shelf and had been hidden there for almost twenty years! The Master Thief put it in his pocket and jumped up the stairs. After a pleasant journey, the Master Thief and the invisible prince reached the city and took lodging at an inn. The invisible prince, I must remind you, was still invisible.

The Master Thief and the invisible Prince took a walk through the royal city. To the surprise of the travelers, they found the city full of decorations. Stranger still, despite the festivity, the citizens of the royal city seemed particularly moody.

"Good host," said the Master Thief to the innkeeper, "what does this jubilation mean? Are you celebrating some royal event?"

"A festival, yes," answered the host, looking around to see if anyone was listening, "it's a festival, but only in name. Haven't you heard the news? Let's step aside a bit and I'll tell you the story.

"Three years ago, our King Valdoro the Fourth, tired of the worries of the state and still deeply struck in his heart by the loss of his son, the invisible prince of whom you may have heard, handed over the reign of the kingdom to the Marquis Malicorn. Last week, this official seized the royal power, put our beloved King and Queen in a dark tower, and proclaimed himself heir to the throne. The coronation takes place tomorrow afternoon in the great hall of the royal palace. Oh, if only the invisible prince would return!"

The Master Thief nodded, while his busy brain was planning all the time. Suddenly he smiled. He had come up with a plan.

Just like 20 years ago, everyone was in the great hall of the castle. The nobility, packed as tightly as twenty years ago, were waiting sullenly for the arrival of the new king and his procession. The portals were opened, revealing Malicorn and his followers. Everyone remained silent.

The wicked Marquis walked to the podium and the coronation chair. The sound of the bells and cannons stopped. An official came forward with the royal robe. Just as he was about to throw it over the waiting

shoulders of the Marquis, something invisible snatched the robe away from him and disappeared into the air. Extraordinarily angry but also worried, Malicorn hoped for more luck with the scepter, but this too was seized by an invisible hand. As for the royal crown, it disappeared in an instant from its purple cushion. Malicorn, still standing in shock, looked up and saw the newly crowned king, his face a mixture of anger and disbelief. The rest of the aristocracy shouted and jeered, and in the midst of the uproar, the Master Thief emerged from behind the curtains, pushed Malicorn aside with a sweep of his long arms, and addressed the crowd:

"People, you have come to see your king. Your rightful king is here. Do you want to see him?"

"Yes!" everyone shouted. And then the Master Thief touched the invisible prince with the charm remover. At that moment, a flash of light made everyone blink, fairy music was heard, and suddenly the invisible prince appeared visible before the throne. He was tall, dark-haired, with brown eyes and a slight build, and the crown was on his head, the cloak on his shoulders, and the scepter in his hand.

Now the bells and the cannon really began to ring, and a cheerful breeze blew in to toss the flags and banners that had hung so still in the air. The soldiers all threw their hats into the air and cheered wildly, while the organist was so happy that he began to play two tunes at once. Everyone was laughing and shouting HOORAY!

As for the wicked Marquis, he tumbled out the back door as fast as his legs could carry him, and no one ever saw him again.

The old king and queen, released from the dark tower, quickly came inside to greet their son. "He looks like you, my dearest," the king whispered to the queen.

The Master Thief was forgiven everything.

Singing and cheering, the people of the city poured out of their homes into the sunny streets.

Clang, clink! Boom! Clang, clink! Boom, boom! Boom!
Boom!

And they lived happily ever after.