

The King Who Did Not See

A king stands on a wall. He surveys all that is his: the city, the land, the villages, and the mountains too. If he could see beyond the mountains, there would be more that was his. But, of course, he is just a king, and sees no further than what mortal eyes can see. So, he does not know what is beyond those mountains, and he never will.

“You there, squire!” he calls to one who wishes to stand on the wall, and look out too. “Come, and stand beside me on this wall, and tell me what you see.”

The squire, a young girl—no older than fourteen—salutes stiffly, then, with the nods of her companions to encourage her, she steps up and onto the wall, coming to stand beside the king. She looks out at the world and sees everything there is.

There is a bustling marketplace down in the bowels of the city, just on the outskirts, where pigs are sold and pork is baked long and fragrant. The squire has been there before, and her mouth waters as the scents ride the wind to her nose. She sees a river winding away from the city, past many villages and a small farmstead with chickens and cows and—of course—nice fat pigs. Her father and mother and twin brothers work in those fields, tending the crops, the feed, and the little stone wall that keeps nothing important away. Her brothers are laughing there, but wishing they had a sister to chase and be chased by. Her mother and father wish for their daughter too, but they know she’s happy in the city, with all the other young squires, training with their swords and what-not.

And over the stone wall and into the fields and forests and beyond, all the way to the mountains the little squire sees—but no more and no further, for the mountains are tall and dark, and block all sight, for she is just a mortal. Be them a squire or knight or king, none who try can see over those peaks.

The squire tells this all to the king, who stands rigid—much like the wall upon which he stands. He is clearly unsatisfied with what she sees, or has not seen, and the squire returns to her fellows.

“And you there, mage!” the king says, addressing an elderly figure wearing robes of gray and black. “Will you come up and look beyond this wall, and tell me what you see?”

The mage, who is so hard of hearing he needs to be asked twice, eventually climbs onto the wall and limps to the side of the king. From there he looks out into the distance, brow furrowed and hand raised to block the setting sun. The mage sees not much, for, much like his skin, his eyesight has grown weak and withered. There are shades of brown near the front of the wall—perhaps houses and wheat fields. There is a strand of blue surrounded by swaths of green, both bright and deep. The mage has a sister who lives somewhere in that green sea, but he couldn’t tell you now or later where exactly she is. Then over the green is the gray, which the mage tells the king must be mountains, and the king agrees, albeit gruffly and conclusively, that “Yes, great mage, you have found the mountains. But can you see beyond them, to the rest of the lands?” to which the mage, who is smiling with pride from being called

great, replies, "Of course not, your grace, for I am but a mortal man, and becoming a mage does not change this."

And the king stands on the wall and looks out again for quite some time, long enough for all his attendants to quietly dismiss themselves to dinner, and then to bed. Long enough, even, for the sun itself to go to sleep beyond the mountains, and for the moon to awaken and brighten the night with her pale light and dancing stars. The king is still standing on the wall, all alone, when he hears a voice calling to him from the sky.

"Oh dear king, why is it that you stare out across the land from atop this wall? Surely you will grow weary and tired like this?"

It is the voice of the moon, and the king replies with great haste: "Mistress Moon, I wish to see all that is my land."

"Do you not see it, dear king?" says the Moon. "Your city spreads beneath your feet, towns and roads spiral from your city, forests burgeon around your roads, and mountains loom beyond it all."

"But, Mistress Moon," he says. "I wish to see *all* that is my land. Even that which exists beyond the mountains."

"Ah," says the Moon, softly, "but no mortal may see beyond the mountains. Not even the king of that land that hides behind them."

"I would see it if I could, Mistress Moon," he says, and there is so much sorrow in his words that the moon feels for this king and decides to offer him a gift.

"Dear king, I will let you see these lands beyond the mountains. For tonight only, you may see all that you rule."

"Truly you would do this for me?" the king asks, but hardly waiting for an answer, he says "I would like to see these lands beyond the mountains. I accept—please, let me see them."

The moon laughs quietly to herself, and says "I should warn you, dear king, it will require the eyes of an immortal to see what you cannot. An immortal's eyes will not feel right to you, and it will take much time to recover."

The king, excited as he is, thinks about this for a moment. He wants to see the extent of his domain, and wants very badly to know what is beyond those mountains. It is a place no mortal can ever go, or ever see, and yet it is somehow his. It is under the claim of any king or queen, always.

However, the moon's words scare the king. Her talk of an immortal's eyes and a long recovery do not sit quite right in the king's stomach. How would rule, if he was sick, or injured?

"What kind of recovery would it require, Mistress Moon, and whose eyes would I use?" he asks, now very afraid.

"I would share my own eyes, the eyes of the moon, with you, dear king. To see all that lies within your domain, beyond the wall and over the mountains, into the land where no mortal sight can linger. And it would be a *long* recovery, one you may never emerge from."

The king ponders laboriously. Conflict tosses and turns within his gut and mind, about accepting the Moon's offer, about seeing all that could be seen. To share the moon's eyes would be incredible—more remarkable than anything any other king or queen had ever done, ever *would* do.

But to face injury—or worse—with no assurance of his own safety—that could spell doom for the king, especially if he wanted to be a kind and just and lengthy ruler, and to be capable of protecting his people. To be able to continue looking upon his land—this land before the mountains—*is* truly important to the king, and he is not sure he can give it up if required.

“Mistress Moon, a final question,” the king says. “Will this recovery take the use of my own, mortal eyes?”

The moon says no words, her light shining down on the king, with all her little stars circling about, like children playing in a field. And her silence is enough of an answer for the king.

“Mistress Moon, I thank you for the offer of sharing your gaze. I must decline, and remain wishful of the lands beyond, for I cannot be a king if my eyes are not my own.”

A king stands on a wall. He surveys the moonlit lands that encompass all that is his. He sees his city, asleep and well. He sees the towns of his vassals and lords and ladies. He sees the farms and animals that feed his people. He sees the forests that have built his towns and cities. He sees the river that ferries his merchants. And he sees the mountains. The mountains that protect his mortal eyes from the rest of his domain, the land which no mortal may see or enter. He does not see beyond those mountains, and he never will.