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Green Horn

by

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On the morning of the Prince's twelfth birthday, Buck woke up with horns. He didn't have them when he went to bed. But there they were. Two inches long and sticking out of the sides of his head.

While Buck looked into his mirror, he rubbed the soft, green horns with his fingers. Not soft, like they were squishy. But soft and velvety, like puppy ears. Otherwise, the horns were hard and didn't bend, or twist, or really do anything at all except be green and soft and stick out of the side of his head.

It was Buck's twelfth birthday today, as well. But nobody cared about that.

What folks did care about was that Buck's father could play the lyre really well. And he, Buck's father, had been invited to the Prince's birthday feast to serve as background music while the real guests ate and drank and played party games.

Buck was very excited about today. His father convinced the knight who delivered the King's request to allow Buck to attend the birthday party, as his rhythm accompaniment. Buck could play the lyre almost as well as his father could.

So, it's understandable why Buck would be very excited about today. But then, Buck woke up with soft, green horns. Now, Buck was still excited but not in a fun way, but in a scared for his life way.

Buck knew about the Horned, of course. Humanoid monsters, with horns, who steal children in the dark of night. Only, Buck wasn't a monster. He was just Buck. And he didn't steal anything. Well, there was that one candied lizard he pocketed last week, but that's nowhere near the same as stealing a child.

Buck rummaged through his hats and counted himself fortunate his mother was a seamstress—she made every one of his father's performance costumes. She also loved to make Buck hats, mostly because Buck loved to wear hats. Hats made Buck feel more confident, more at ease when talking to people, especially strangers.

Wearing a helmet was the main reason Buck wanted to become a knight. He heard you get to wear a helmet whenever you want. To Buck, nothing could be better than having a metal hat all his own. If he had a helmet, no one at school would make fun of him. No one.

But Buck didn't have a knight's helmet, and now he had a pair of brand-new horns. He had to do something to cover the horns before his mother, or peace forbid, his father, saw them.

And so, Buck spent the next few minutes trying on different hats, trying to find one that would cover his horns. The King wouldn't hesitate to command his knights to attack if he saw someone with horns inside the castle.

Buck's father would be glad to join the attack. His father hated the Horned. And many of his favorite songs were about how stupid and impure the Horned were.

Buck grabbed another hat and tried to fit it over his horns. The hat sat too high on his head and left his horns exposed. Buck's desperation was about to turn into panic. He threw the

hat across his bedroom. What if he can't cover his horns? What would he do? He'd have to run away, to a cave in the mountains. He'd heard that's where the Horned lived.

"Buck, breakfast!" Buck's mother said from the kitchen.

Buck's heartbeat quickened.

"Just a moment, I'm still getting dressed," Buck said, raising his voice so she could hear him through his closed bedroom door.

Buck found the floppiest hat he had. It looked like a deflated soufflé and that always made Buck laugh, well, except for now. Instead, Buck let out a huge sigh of relief. The floppy hat was the perfect hat to cover his horns. And it looked like a hat a performer would wear.

Buck wasn't sure what he would do if someone asked him to take the floppy hat off. But that was a problem for later. First things first, he had to make it through breakfast.

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Truth be told, breakfast was Buck's favorite meal. He could devour half a dozen scrambled eggs and three honey-biscuits and still ask for more. It's as if Buck had a separate stomach just for breakfast. That's why, when Buck barely touched his eggs and sausage, his mother knew something was wrong.

"Are you nervous about your birthday present?" she asked.

By "birthday present," she meant Buck being allowed to perform with his father at the Prince's birthday party.

Buck didn't know what to say. He wasn't nervous about performing. He was nervous about having horns. But Buck couldn't tell his mother that. She hated the Horned almost as much as his father did.

Instead, Buck lied.

"Yeah," Buck said. "I mean, it's such an honor to even be allowed in the castle, let alone perform for the Prince. What if I mess up?"

The lie seemed to work because Buck's mother put her hand on his arm and said, "My dear, the honor lies in the invitation, not the performance. You and your father's music will likely be drowned out by the conversation and party games. No one will hear your music let alone your mistakes." She patted his arm and smiled. "Try to finish the eggs. They will fill you longer than the sausage."

Buck scooped some eggs into his mouth. They were cooked to perfection and seasoned with sage but to Buck they tasted like sand. Buck swallowed them and felt his stomach lurch. There was no way he could finish them, so he tried to distract his mother.

"Is Father tending the chickens?" Buck asked.

"No." his mother said. "He's still sleeping."

"Still?" Buck asked. "Shouldn't we be leaving shortly?"

"You have time. Dawn just broke."

Buck looked down at his plate to hide his frustrated expression.

"Too much wine, makes one lose time," Buck said.

Buck's mother smacked Buck's hand with a wooden spoon and said, "Watch the tone, boy. That could be taken as disrespect."

Buck rubbed his hand and apologized, but he didn't mean it. He stood up and said, "I'm going to make sure my Performer's kit is properly stocked, and my lyre is in tune."

Buck went back to his room and waited for his father to wake up.

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Buck and his father arrived at the castle almost an hour late. Of course, Buck's father blamed Buck for not waking him up sooner.

Peace be praised, no one at the castle noticed their tardiness. In fact, the castle appeared to be empty. No knights standing guard. No servants dashing to and fro doing chores. No King. No Queen. And No Prince.

Buck and his father wandered about the castle's interior in awe of its splendor. When they drew close to the throne room, they at last heard the sound of voices.

Buck's father slapped the back of Buck's head, nearly knocking his floppy hat off.

"Ow! What was that for?" Buck asked, repositioning his hat.

"Be quiet. Or else we might get caught," Buck's father said.

Slow and careful, they approached the doors to the throne room. One of the doors was opened wide enough for Buck to squeeze through. Not that he needed to, because the knight who was speaking had a powerful voice.

"And that's when it was first reported to me that the Prince was missing," said the knight.

Buck ducked low and poked his head inside the throne room. Knights and squires and servants from all areas of the castle filled the room.

The King responded to the knight with questions. "And all that was heard was the roar of a dragon? No one saw anything?"

"One did, Sire, but I pray it isn't true."

"What did they see? Tell me!"

The knight cleared his throat. "They say they saw a Horned leaving the castle through the Royal exit in the gardens."

Whispers and gasps erupted from those in attendance, including Buck.

The Queen, a pillar of motherly strength until this moment, spat and said, "The Horned have crossed the ultimate line. The Royal Line. This will not stand. Tell me husband, what is your plan?"

The King couldn't meet his Queen's eyes. "I have no plan," the King said. "What plan is there that would defeat the Horned?"

The throne room fell silent. Nobody had a plan. Not the knights. Not the servants. Not the Queen. Not the King. Not Buck's father. Not even—

"I have a plan," said Buck, loud and clear. He used a trick he taught himself to project his voice, so that it carries across a room, as perfect as magic. Everybody in the room turned to look at Buck's head poking through the gap in the throne room doors.

"Who said that?" asked the King.

Buck's father cursed under his breath and grabbed Buck by the back of his neck, squeezing hard. Buck winced at the pain but stayed silent.

"My son, said it, Your Majesty," Buck's father said, as he pushed open the throne room door. "Forgive his outburst. He doesn't understand the real reasons the Horned are so vile. That they are not pure, like we are, Sire. He doesn't understand the danger. Or why all Horned deserve to die. He is a fool boy of twelve that knows nothing but playground whispers and bedtime stories."

A chuckle passed through the crowd of servants. Even a knight or two let out a laugh. The King remained stone-faced.

Buck's father swallowed hard and said, "He greatly desires to become a knight for you, Sire. But knights require discipline, so I will be sure to see that he is suitably beat—I mean, disciplined, Sire."

"Not a single soul in this room claims to have what your son has," the King said to Buck's father. "If the boy has a plan, let him speak it."

Buck's father squeezed Buck's neck tighter. After a few moments, he let go.

"Tell the King your plan," Buck's father said. "It had better be good."

Buck made his way up to the throne. The throng of people moved out of his way like he was Royalty. Buck enjoyed the sensation of respect he felt, and he found himself smiling by the time he reached the King.

"Your Majesty." Buck bowed, hoping it would be enough, and that nobody would demand he remove his floppy hat. "My plan is this. I will follow the path that the Horned was seen taking—the Royal exit in the gardens. I will track them back to their cave, because as we all know the Horned are cave dwellers. And I will attempt to rescue the Prince, if possible."

Buck's father barked out a laugh. "Fool boy, how do you plan to get past the Horned?"

The King looked Buck in the eyes. The King's face was full of worry. He was desperate for hope.

"Yes," the King said. "What is your plan for that?"

"I will disguise myself as one of the Horned," Buck said.

Everyone gasped. The Queen spat again. Buck opened his Performer's kit—a tackle box of glues, face paints, wigs, fake moustaches, fake beards, fake eyelashes, and fake pimples. "I am a fair hand at disguises, Sire. And who better to send into their midst than a child that looks like one of their own?"

"They would never suspect such a clever ruse, Sire," said the knight with the powerful voice. "It may work."

"But what of the dragon? People heard a Dragon roar," a woman wearing a chef's outfit said. The crowd murmured to each other.

"Then, I better hope my disguise is convincing," Buck said, with way more confidence than he had.

The King laughed and the Queen smiled. Even the spirits of the dour group of knights seemed lifted.

At the back of the crowd, Buck's father, scowled and clenched his fists. "No son of mine is going to pretend to be Horned. I won't allow it!"

"But I will," said the King. "You, musician, may go home. A messenger will inform you of our return."

Buck's father opened his mouth to speak. The King raised an eyebrow. Buck's father bowed instead.

"As you say, Sire," Buck's father said, as he glared at Buck. Then he spun on one foot and left the throne room.

"You said, 'our return,' Sire. What did you mean by that?" Buck asked.

"I meant my knights and I will be joining you," said the King.

The knights shifted and several glanced at one another. The King picked up on their anxiousness.

"Are my knights afraid to join their King and this boy on a quest to rescue their Prince?" asked the King. The knights all responded, assuring the King they were not afraid.

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They left the castle and entered the gardens. Buck sang "A Chorus of Courage" as he played the tune on his lyre. None of the knights joined in the song until the King commanded

them to. Thanks to the knights grim and half-hearted singing, Buck ended the song with less courage, instead of more. The King praised Buck's playing, but Buck knew he had badly misread his audience. This was not a good start to their quest.

Buck thanked the King, slung his lyre over his shoulder, and avoided looking any of the knights in the eyes.

The ground outside the castle was muddy, and it made tracking the Prince's footprints easy. They all followed them through the Gray Forest—known for its peculiar gray pine trees and their bright red berries. At the edge of the forest, just before it opened up into a rocky field, the Prince's footprints stopped.

While the King and his knights discussed how to proceed, Buck examined the last few footprints. They went from deep to shallow to gone. Buck swallowed hard. He'd seen footprints exactly like that before. He had made them himself. Buck called the trick "Featherfoot" and he had never told anyone about it, especially not the Prince!

The first time Buck did Featherfoot was on accident. He had just turned six and was playing on the shore of the Sea of Serpents. Not a good place to swim, but the beaches are very nice. As he chased a flock of sea birds resting on the beach, Buck tried to mimic the way the sea birds ran along the wet sand, leaving less and less of a footprint, before finally taking off.

Buck imagined himself light as a feather and, just like magic, he did it. He ran across the sand without leaving any footprints. Soon, with practice, he got to where he could do it on command, and he could do it forever, as long as he concentrated on being light as a feather. It didn't feel like magic to Buck when he did it. It felt natural. And really, all Buck was doing was concentrating. How is that magic?

But then, Buck saw the Prince's footprints. And he understood that he wasn't the only one who could do Featherfoot. And that made Buck happy. He had never really considered there were people out there who were just like him.

One thing Buck did know is people feared magic. Because only the evil, vile Horned could do it. At least, that's what his parents told him. That's why Buck never told anyone about Featherfoot. Not a single friend, not his mother, and definitely not his father, because Buck was afraid of their fear. So, Buck kept his magic a secret.

Buck reached up and touched one of his horns through his floppy hat. If what they said about magic and the Horned was true, then anyone who was Horned could perform magic.

And if the Prince could do Featherfoot, then the Prince could be—

"Right!" the King said. "We march in the direction the Prince's prints point!"

Buck tried to say, "Prince's prints point," three times fast and tied his tongue on the second try.

As they crossed the tree line of the forest and stepped into the rocky field, Buck noted that many of the gray pines had been picked clean of their bright red berries. But only up to a certain height—about Buck's height, actually—which Buck decided was strange.

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The rocky field became rocky hills, which became rocky ridges, which at last led them to rocky mountains. Between two peaks, a rocky path led them down into a deep canyon. The walls of the canyon rose up, higher and higher, enclosing them in a rocky corridor. It was here that the first sign of danger appeared.

Someone, or something, had written the word "DANGER" on a flat section of the canyon wall. The word was written in bright red ink.

"Danger? Sire, should we be going this way?" asked a knight.

"I fear no danger. And neither should you, my brave knight," said the King.

"Is that blood?" asked another knight. "Sire, I feel queasy. May I return to the castle?"

"Yes, of course," the King said. "You're no good to me ill. Go home and rest up."

The queasy knight thanked the King and ran out of the canyon. A handful of knights said that they were feeling queasy as well and the King sent them back to the castle to rest.

Buck examined the writing on the wall. It was red, like blood. And it did spell out the word "DANGER" which was scary. But something didn't smell right to Buck.

Buck ran a finger through the writing, smearing the letter D, leaving behind the word "ANGER." Buck sniffed the shiny red goo on his fingertip. The red goo smelled delicious.

Buck licked the goo.

A knight saw Buck and threw up inside his helmet. The King sent him back to the castle.

Buck approached the King.

"Your Majesty, " Buck said, "this ink is not blood. It's pine berries."

The King let out a sigh of relief and said, "Thank goodness. Would've been much scarier if it were blood." The remaining knights all agreed.

"But," the King continued, "it did say 'DANGER.' So, let us still use caution."

A short time later, they saw another sign. This sign was not a word but a picture.

"Dr-Dragon!" cried out a knight, as he pointed to what appeared to be a bright red dragon painted onto a flat section of canyon wall. The picture was no bigger than the word "DANGER" from before. And was drawn using the same bright red pine berries.

Buck thought the picture was well drawn but saw no reason to be scared. After all, it was just a drawing. Many of the knights, though, trembled in their armor. Buck could hear them rattling as they approached the King.

"Sire," a knight said to the King, "surely we will all perish if we go any further. And some of us knights have families to think of. Let those with families return to the castle so they don't make widows of their wives and orphans of their children."

The King frowned. He thought for a long time.

Buck licked more pine berry goo off of his finger. It really was delicious.

Finally, the King agreed, and he allowed any knights with families to return to the castle.

"Sire, why do the knights flee?" Buck asked. "Am I braver than a knight?"

A fresh wave of worry passed over the King.

"It would appear so, my lad," said the King. "It would appear so."

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Buck, the King, and what was left of the knights rode deeper into the canyon. Buck was the first to spot another warning sign. And it was the most terrifying one yet. A bright red skull and the words "DEATH AHEAD" were painted on to the canyon wall.

Buck and the King examined the writing, trying to determine how recently it was written. Buck ran his finger through the skull drawing and licked it.

"This is the freshest pine berry goo so far," Buck said.

"Then, we may be close," said the King. "My knights, prepare yourselves, for a battle draws close."

But there was no answer from the knights. Buck and the King turned to find they were alone in the canyon. The King sighed.

"If only my knights were as courageous as you, Buck," the King said.

Buck felt honored by the King's words, but he also felt afraid. What if the dragon was real? What if there really was nothing but death ahead? What if—

A deep rumble filled the canyon, reverberating and echoing all around Buck and the King. The rumble built up to a bone shaking roar.

The dragon was here.

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The King ducked behind a boulder, leaving Buck alone to face the dragon.

"Go on, lad. Make use of your disguise," said the King, as he cowered.

Buck heard the King's words, but they were muffled by the pounding of Buck's heartbeat. What was he thinking? How could he have been so foolish? Buck shook his head. Now was not the time for fear. Buck was Horned. He was a monster, just like the dragon.

No one watched Buck, and so, he decided there was no reason to pretend to disguise himself. Instead, Buck pulled off his floppy hat, exposing his soft, green horns, and stepped into the center of the canyon.

"Dragon! Do not eat me, for I am Horned," Buck said. "I wish to speak with you, or the one who commands you."

The dragon roared again, louder this time, more vicious. But Buck still saw no dragon. No claws. No tail. And no teeth. The only proof the dragon was real was its booming voice.

"Show yourself, dragon!" Buck said.

The dragon snarled. The dragon snorted. The dragon screamed, "Leave me alone!"

There was something about the dragon's voice that struck Buck as odd. His keen ear, trained by his father, picked up on a second voice. It was a young boy's, around Buck's age. Could that voice be the Horned in control of the dragon?

"Go! Before I get really angry," the dragon said.

Buck focused on the younger voice. There was a familiar energy to it. The same energy Buck felt when he projected his voice across the crowded throne room. Was he actually using magic every time he'd projected his voice? Did he also have the voice of a dragon inside of him?

Buck concentrated on being as loud as a dragon. And then, he roared.

The ground shook, kicking up clouds of dust and sand. Debris rained down from the canyon walls and bounced all around him.

Buck felt goofy with excitement.

Cowering behind his boulder, the King whimpered and moaned. "Oh no, now I hear two dragons."

Buck used his trick to make his voice loud, but not dragon loud.

"I know your trick, dragon," said Buck. "I know you are Horned because you can do magic. I know that you are young because I can hear your true voice. And I know exactly who you are."

"Leave or die!" said the dragon, unleashing another bone shaking roar.

The King leapt out from behind his boulder. And, as he ran away, the King said over his shoulder, "Flee, lad, before all is lost!"

Before Buck could respond, the dragon said, "Father, is that you?"

The King stopped running. He turned to face the direction of the dragon's voice.

"Father?" the King asked.

Buck saw the Prince walking toward him. The Prince's eyes darted to Buck's horns and the Prince smiled. Buck smiled back.

The King dashed to the Prince and hugged him.

"My son, you are safe. Peace be praised," said the King.

"But Father, did you not see my horns?" the Prince asked. "Aren't you ashamed of me?"

The King said. "My son, I feel shame at my behavior. I see now the Horned were not kidnapping children. The children were running away from their homes in fear. Fear that I fostered. I am a poor King for not being able to see the truth until it was right in front of me."

The King put a hand on Buck's shoulder.

"You my boy, my brave hero," said the King. "How can I ever reward you?"

"I want to be knighted, Sire. So, I can always wear a helmet," Buck said. "So, I can always hide my horns."

The King studied Buck a moment, then said, "I have enough knights, and you are far too short for a suit of armor. I'm sorry, lad, I cannot make you a knight."

Buck's heart sank. He hung his head and said, "I understand."

The King laughed. "Instead, you will be on my inner council. While brute strength is abundant, wisdom and levelheadedness like yours are in short supply. Well, lad, what do you say to that?"

"No thanks," said Buck. "That sounds boring. Can I be your court musician instead?"

The King grinned. "Deal. Are you sure there's nothing else, lad?"

"My parents, Sire, could you speak to my parents on my behalf?" Buck asked, as he pointed to his soft, green horns.

"I'll do one better. You and your parents are to have a suite in the castle. I'd like to keep my Royal musician nearby."

Buck couldn't focus his eyes and he struggled to form complete sentences.

"Come live," Buck said. "Castle me family?"

The King and the Prince laughed. Then Buck, feeling a little better, also laughed. Which made them all laugh, together.

"So, young Buck," said the King, "what is your answer?"

"Oh, yes! Of course, yes!" Buck said. "I can't wait to tell my parents the good news."

####

Buck, the King, and the Prince returned. But not through the Royal exit in the gardens. The King took the long way around to the main road which passed right through the middle of Buck's town. Soon, a crowd of people followed the King and the two Horned boys as they made their way to the castle.

At the castle gates, they were met by the Queen. She ran to them, but as she got close, her run turned into a trot which turned into a slow walk. The Queen put her hands on the Prince's shoulders. She cupped his face in her hands. And then, as if she were about to touch the edge of a blade, the Queen placed her fingers on the soft, green horns of the Prince.

Crying, the Prince looked away. But the Queen lifted his chin and looked into the Prince's eyes. She smiled, then, pulled him close to her. The Queen hugged the Prince for a long, long time.

Some in the crowd cheered and whistled. Some booed and hissed.

The King and Queen faced the gathering crowd. The King motioned for silence. Then he pointed to Buck.

"This brave lad," the King said, "has shown me that I have done a great injustice to the people of this land. Judging others without knowing them is the peak of foolishness. And so, from this day forward, we are at peace with all who are Horned!"

The whole crowd fell silent as a library. The King and Queen glanced at each other. Buck had a strong urge to put on his floppy hat, but he stayed brave and kept it tucked in his pocket.

Then, a young woman stepped in front of the King and Queen. She gave a polite curtsy and pulled off her bonnet. Underneath were smooth, white horns about six inches long. The crowd let out a collective gasp.

Some gasped because of their fear, but more gasped because of their joy.

The King and Queen smiled and kneeled before the young woman, even though the road was muddy and wet. They bowed their heads and looked up to her. They each took one of her hands and kissed it. The young woman, beaming with pride, ran back to her friends and family and they danced and celebrated.

An older woman stepped forward and removed a huge wig, showing off her curved two-foot long gray horns. When her hands were kissed by the King and Queen, she thanked them and said, "What a relief! Those wigs were heavy."

A big, burly man took off his tall hat to show that he was also Horned. He lifted the King and Queen off their knees and hugged them both with his strong, hairy arms.

Buck scanned the crowd for his parents. He found his mother staring at him with wide, frightened eyes, one hand over her mouth. All Buck saw of his father was his father's back, as he pulled Buck's mother away.

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When Buck went home later that evening, a sack filled with his clothes, and a folded note from his parents was set outside the door of his home.

Buck didn't need to open the note. He already knew what it said.

He did anyways, of course.

Inside was a message more dangerous than any magic trick Buck could do: "Your kind are all MONSTERS. Every single last one. Don't knock. We won't answer. You are dead to us. Now, and forever."

Buck's father meant to wound Buck with those words. But, in truth, the only pain Buck felt was sympathy for his parents. They would've loved living in the castle with him.

Buck lifted the sack of clothes. He placed his hand on the door frame and said the prayer of peace that his mother taught him. Then, Buck left, and went to his new home, where Buck was accepted and loved by all.