

The Challenge

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Jack Storm could think of a million other things to be doing than sitting in the small building that was supposed to be his winter post. The fireplace in the corner had only a few smoldering embers left, giving off their last remnants of warmth. He knew the trainer for his barracks hated him, but he didn't think he would be sent out to this snowy wasteland to train as the apprentice to this strange sword master named Soren.

Like all the others in his barracks, he wore the white coverings that fit snugly over his light armor. This armor consisted of shoulder guards, a light breastplate, gauntlets, a groin guard, and leggings.

Jack was sixteen, with short, flaming red hair. His family heirloom was a ring made completely of rubies. He wore rabbit fur boots that were finally broken in after a few years of wear. His exceptional sword skills gained him entrance to the Dorin Kingdom barracks, where he continued his training.

Jack could hear grunting and yawning in the other room, signaling that Soren was up and moving. Jack started to make their breakfast and had it ready by the time Soren finally got up.

"Aye! Up and at 'em already, I see! Good!" His deep voice boomed in the small shack.

"Here's your breakfast, sir," Jack said as he sat down across from Soren.

When they finished eating, Soren said, "I think you're ready for a challenge."

Jack was slightly surprised. "A... A challenge, sir?"

"Yes, a challenge, boy. Have you gone deaf?"

"No, sir."

"Then listen as I explain it. You must go into the high mountains and kill a wild buck for our dinner. As you know, our food is running low... and don't die. If you succeed, I might let you go home."

"Yes, sir!"

After a few hours of hunting, Jack discovered a deer track. He followed it to the edge of a clearing where he found the biggest buck he had ever seen. Its enormous antlers seemed to tower above its head. He was glad for the white coverings that blended in with the snow. He had just started to wonder why Soren had said, "Don't die," when he heard an ominous sound off in the distance.

He stopped his forward crawl instantly and unsheathed his sword. The buck heard the *shing* of the sword, and moved away at a trot. It was the last thing it did.

Jack had seen the figure appear. It was easily as tall as the trees that surrounded it. It was a mountain troll. The troll carried a huge club over his shoulder. In one swing, the buck's head was flying.

Jack saw the head's trajectory and knew he had to move in order to not be impaled by the antlers. The troll saw the movement, and realized he wasn't alone. He hated other creatures that interrupted his lunch. In two huge steps, he was towering over Jack.

So that's what Soren meant, thought Jack, trembling. He held his sword in a defensive stance as the troll inspected him.

"Another petty human interrupting Curin's feast. You will die like the others." Curin swung the club in a huge sideways arc, and Jack could tell he didn't stand a chance of staying in one piece if that club hit him. He ducked, but the wind of the club seemed to grab him and throw him. He hit the ground about ten feet away.

Now it was whistling through the air back towards Jack. He waited for the right moment, then launched himself in a sideways flip over the club. *Curin must have incredible strength in order to keep himself in one place as he swings that club.* Jack wondered if he could use that factor against his enemy.

He had just started to make a plan when the club came in a downwards strike towards Jack. He rolled out of the way, then sprang back up onto the club as Curin picked it up. *Well, this could be an alternative,* Jack thought.

"Get off! You're heavy!" Curin shouted as he tried to fling Jack off. He jumped off the club before he was flung into the stars. Jack somersaulted in the air then came shooting down, his sword swinging.

Jack had aimed to cut off Curin's head as he came down, but the club was in the way. He settled for Curin's left arm.

"RRAAAUUUGGH!" Curin roared. In blind rage, he threw his club in Jack's direction. Jack was recovering from the fall when he saw the club. He tried to jump out of the way, but the club caught his right foot.

Jack screamed. He collapsed in the snow, pain coursing through his body. He took one look at his foot and knew it was broken. *Thankfully it didn't crush it, if that's even a blessing.*

"You... little... swine... I... will kill you now!" Curin shouted. Since his club was gone, he swung his fist at Jack. Dazed and in pain, Jack still managed to thrust his sword into Curin's fist before it could hit him.

Curin reared back, screaming, and flung the sword into the air. He fell back into the snow, clutching his hand. Jack saw the sword's arc and figured out what would happen when that sword came down.

He heard a thunk, and saw his sword in Curin's heart. He pitied the troll. Then his foot flared in pain, and that thought vanished. He retrieved his sword from Curin, and half crawled, half dragged himself over to the headless carcass of the buck.

He thought he saw a movement in the forest to his right, but he couldn't investigate. He had already passed out.

When Jack finally came to, he didn't know where he was. Light flooded in through huge glass windows. He was in a warm, comfortable bed, in what looked like a big chamber. A door at the far end opened, and a very official looking nurse walked in. She was carrying a silver tray that had some medical supplies and food.

"You're finally up. You have some visitors. Enjoy the meal."

A few minutes later, Jack's parents, William and Helen, entered the chamber.

"Jack! What happened?" they said in unison.

"Where are we?"

"In the king's hospital chamber." Helen said. William added, "Soren told us what he saw you do. You were incredibly brave."

"Soren was there?"

"Yes, he was. He made sure you weren't killed."

"He also saw how I failed."

"On the contrary! You passed!" Soren shouted. *Loud as ever, I see*, Jack thought. "I did? How?"

"You had your sword in the buck when you passed out. That means you succeeded. I brought you here on my horse. Congratulations!"

"And thank you," said a voice behind Soren. Soren moved aside, and Jack gasped. The king was there, in his royal robes, and wearing the Royal Crown. Jack felt humiliated.

"My king! Forgive me, as I cannot kneel in this condition or bed." The king's soft laughter echoed around the chamber.

"It's quite all right, young Jack. The troll Curin has been causing lots of trouble in the northern fiefs. You did us a great service getting rid of him. For that, I give you this medal." He reached inside his robes, and pulled out a gold medal with jewels in it. "And that's not all. I would request you to kneel before me, if you can."

"I think I can manage, your majesty"

Jack didn't know how he overcame the pain, but he got out of the bed and kneeled before the king. The king unsheathed his sword and tapped Jack on both shoulders.

"Let it be known from this day forward that for the brave actions of young Jack, I knight thee, Sir Storm." Jack stood, and a feeling of severe gratitude flowed over him. His foot may have been broken, but that didn't stop him from jumping with joy into the air on his good leg.

His parents' tears splashed on the floor as they hugged him. Soren's smile stretched from ear to ear. Even the king smiled. For Jack, this was the best day of his life.

He wasn't going to let anyone tell him otherwise.