

# Saboteur

We imagine a king who, on his nuptial eve, pursues his ensign beyond a citadel's stone boundary. The populace are largely dozing, many wishing to be sprightly for the coming day's event. The king and the ensign are both swaddled, so as to be disguised as foreign traders. On foot, the ensign glances back at his lord intermittently – a much lower frequency than he ought. Samsun, the servant, is more focused on rushing to their location than the fitness and attachment of his peerless companion. After the city walls, it's woodland; a snarling density of all that's barred from the city, or which, of its own accord, takes a dim view of walled norms. They pass between hermitages, campfires, incidents of shrieking, and it's dark enough that their shadows could belong to traders, well and true.

We've pictured a king, in such a backdrop, because this is also the sort of the study that needs an apothecary. The man's name shall be Georges. He's mildly batty from his own product, lion-haired, and he lives in a stone cottage that preserves his own strange conditions. The location, away from the city, is in any case more convenient for accessing special ingredients. As the cottage is near the peak of a hillock, the rushing 'Moorish traders' arrive at its door somewhat breathless. Georges offers greetings at the step, and claims, though he'd received no notice, to have been expecting them – a cheap trick which tries adding 'soothsaying' to his retinue.

Samsun, who's recommended this option, hangs back in the doorway, while the king is seen at a puddle-shaped table. Its surface is made busy by jars of pickled eyeballs, plates of candlewax, books furrier and heavier than a common man – predictable things.

The king says, straight to his point, so we can ourselves dodge much preamble, "I'm informed, Georges, you have a soup or a disc that may ensure the most joyful day of my life."

His host – insofar as a king can ever be hosted in his own land – is unruffled at being sought and addressed by the sovereign for the first time ever. Georges replies, "I have something that fits. I've valued it beyond the means of most – though you, of course, would be an exception."

Although his days are crowded by preparing concoctions, Georges is no dullard regarding current events. He has heard enough, via customers or woodland neighbours, to be able to place tomorrow's being the king's wedding. And to Magdalene, no less, a princess and acclaimed stateswoman, whose temperance and purity are renowned right throughout the geography connecting her own domain to this fortunate king's. You may wish to illustrate Magdalene with ruby cheeks defying pale skin, a thicket of hazel hair, a healthy shape – however it shan't be too disruptive for contrasting ideals of beauty to be granted instead.

Boldly, the apothecary says, "Sire, you wish for the wedding to be the warmest day of your life, if I'm correct?"

So fixated is the king on the tumult which has put him here, seeking last gasp remedies at an unusual table, he doesn't scold Georges for his presumption. The man's right, after all – yet due to the obviousness, Georges' campaign to become a recognised prognosticator wins nothing. In their age, the idea of a wedding properly being the happiest day in one's full collection is incipient – alongside other fresh aspects of romance – but already it's a standard that's made no less than a *king* nervous. He's powerful in every respect, including the introspective depths to which he can plunge. Specific to the wedding, he's recognised the threat of a low mood rearing – he's famous for these – and, worse, the chance he'll be intimidated, overawed, by the rumours of Magdalene's tantamount perfection. To eager Samsun, this evening, the king's admitted that his own engrained crystal ball – more a portal to worst possible scenarios – includes the day sliding into disaster, and the publicity of the ceremony makes this doubly frightening. He feels stuck, in some ways, in a special monarchic problem.

Rather than confirming Georges' guess, the king asks (and lays bare his intelligence), "What is to say I couldn't ever try the piece again and experience another day, just as good?"

"Your carriage shall afterwards acquire a tolerance. It won't be possible to achieve such altitude again."

The king nods. Despite many hundreds of supporting anecdotes and all the popular superstitions, he does kindle small doubts towards the trustworthiness of practitioners such as this one.

He insists to Georges, "It's not the sort of thing, is it, that makes me a maniac for the occasion? That places me in a private glow which, from the outside, looks like something wretched?"

The smirk of the druggist, who'd gone to collect the sought potion from a hidden cabinet, shows forgetfulness towards the king's stature. As Georges places a vial on his weird table, candlelight turns lion-hair into a crown of his own.

"Not in the slightest," Georges says. "You're entitled to usual faculties. It's only your environment that should adjust."

"But you've just reported it targets my carriage?" the king retorts.

Georges says nothing. It's 'magic', evidently, and a robust explanation of how it works is beyond his remit. The king is left to accept that, within the confines of this time and this tale, the 'soup' is merely one he must trust. Through the glass, the potion looks crimson. The king lifts it for closer inspection while, in a pocket, his other hand stirs those coins he's been told the stuff is worth – nothing, essentially, with his grip on the economy. Samsun is suddenly at his shoulder, taking-up the prudent questions. From what the sovereign's faithful thoughts imbue, the fluid may even glow. He imagines it luminescent when soon he tucks it beneath his cloak; like it is his most joyful day, right there, time concentrated in a bottle. At fresh contact, the night air has chilled, but the bottle's a deterrent. Naturally, by his new armour, the king feels immune to any bandits that might wait behind eery trunks, as he and the ensign rush back towards a city that must generally presume him asleep, or sleepless, tossing with anticipation in his chamber.

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Now take this easy concept, with its convenient drug, a dozen hours forward to the wedding afternoon itself. In actuality, Magdalene's beauty surpasses even the favourable portraiture, which the king had aptly researched. When she lifts her veil, smiling nervously, there's a sense of his really finding somebody, of his stumbling, via high birth, into conjugal alliance with the most wonderful person in the chapel, nay the country, nay the unfurled cosmos. He'd always suspected the success, or 'magic', of a wedding day might depend on the pull of such fictions, and so it comes as a relief, in his benighted case, that these have so conspicuously arrived.

During the ceremony, the king is painted with nerves of his own. By the post-celebration, however, with his bride at his left, whispering her lovely commentary, and a crowd of goodwill spread before them in his castle hall, the king is struck with warmth and attachment – to Magdalene, yes, and to this very juncture in his life, also. His topsoil of angst is removed. Associates, advisors, and neighbouring dignitaries shuffle past to congratulate and announce typical gifts – diamond eggs, gilded atlases, an ostrich, a resplendent cutlery set, teak salt and pepper shakers. The hall is bisected by a table containing a colourful array of food and alcohol, prepared with the nuptials' preferences in mind. The king places a hand on Magdalene's, beneath the table, and feels her warm and squeezing back, more forceful. They're sharing goblets of customary, sweet wine, and soon they're daring each other to the bottom. The king's consoled, as well, that their mood is matched by the merriment of others in the hall, many of his favourite advisors laughing dangerously as they're gorging themselves on the food. And detectable beneath musical compositions made especially for this afternoon is the low roar of revelry among the populace, coming from beyond the castle boundary.

The king's eye falls occasionally on Georges, that wild-haired apothecary who'd received a hasty invitation, and in these flashes he wonders of the extent to which the potion-maker understands what's really transpired. Because, despite how the day's positively congealing, the king has opted to manage *without* the tonic, after all. Bobbing among the sea of guests, happy despite his strangeness, Georges does appear settled, like all of reality's in his grasp, and perhaps this is suggestive the king's choice, of last-minute avoidance, was all along so predictable. Faced with what purported to be the physical liquid certainty of his warmest day, by what logic should he have swallowed it? Better and more reassuring, no, to leave such a triumphant package as always ahead, as something to be moving *towards*, even if he wasn't wholly a believer in its power? Despite the time-honoured significance of weddings, and recent ideals regarding their *mood*, the king surely would have been regretful for arranging this day, today, as the apex of his own happiness, when it afterwards would be consigned to recede over his shoulder. Now, he sees it as an obvious calculation, and he's slightly abashed it occurred to him so late. He's left the vial, passion-red, unlabelled, sitting on the bench of his washroom, at exactly the spot where he'd been about to prise it open before gracing his own ceremony downstairs.

He explains none of this to Magdalene – prudently, given she may have become frightened at the kind of person she's been committed to. There is hardly a need anyway, with the day altogether seeming to progress as it should. The king melts into the music and, in holding Magdalene's hand again, stirs with intimate thoughts. The alcohol might be clutching him, as well. Truly, he gets to the stage of hardly even considering the 'happy' potion – so small and several floors above them – until, as he moves towards the dancing floor, his prime ensign pulls him into confidence. Their exchange is concealed by all the sounds of celebrating.

Samsun says, "You may already be aware by your experience, my lord, but I added that batch to your drink a short while ago. I was up in the rooms and saw you'd left it behind. It hadn't been possible to get a message, but I wanted to take this chance to reassure you."

The ensign delivers this guilelessly, prattling onwards, asleep to colour and *temperature* draining from his sovereign's face as, behind it, the king's recalling an assignment of wine which had not been so sweet as the custom. In fact, this goblet had shown a disastrous sourness, and was consumed by not only his royal self, but his bride. He's scanning the hall anew – the merry shouts, now, as good as taunting – afraid that *this*, after all, is the very scene, the 'environment', of his zenith. And that of innocent Magdalene, as well. With them never having conversed before the wedding, the king doesn't know what expectations she'd held towards this day. He's sure of her wherewithal however, and thus she'd have to consider exhausting her happiness, her highlight, in a such a fashion as this a proper tragedy.

Samsun is flashing the empty vial while he talks. The king knows good intentions had lain behind the ensign's act, but he can't manage to grunt insincere thanks. He shuffles back to the table, where Magdalene's still waiting, oblivious, and he takes his chair with seemingly thrice the weight he'd owned before. He considers his options. He might travel to the washroom to confirm the exact potion was really employed – but what would be the use in Samsun playing such a prank? He could go to Georges instead – urgently, angrily – and send that apothecary scrambling for an antidote. Perhaps a health emergency, such as this, was the subliminal, prudent reason for that man's invitation, all along. And yet, before taking this course, the king gets the kernel for an antidote of his own.

"I'm going to the floor. Will you come?" Magdalene asks. They've already done their obligatory dance, and both had shown good training.

"Shortly, yes," the king says, because he's still mulling.

He feels a protective urge, the most powerful he's known in his scant hours of matrimony, as he watches her glide away in the heavy dress, each move of hers a special event to the hall. Then, several minutes pass before he summons the courage. He at last emits a shocking, resounding belch, far

beyond the range of what's complimentary to the food. He drains more of the wine – so sweet, this time – and lets its purple bubble murderously on his lips. Next, he begins a destructive march. Going past a determined lute-player, he loudly attests any goat could have produced a better melody, driving the musician to tears. He ventures to an advisor's table, a man he's always disliked but he's never had the gumption to verbally assail, and now he does exactly this, shouting about errors the advisor's made in the realm of trade. In the same tirade, the king manages to implicate one of the travelling dignitaries, a ruler of a different city, and risks the kind of geopolitical offence other minders rush to douse, as if a fire's been sprung. On the dancing floor, the king spares Magdalene, but moves ungraciously with several other ladies, stepping on toes and letting his gaze sag with disinterest. As well as continued belching, there are false, performative yawns. He pretends being partly asleep for a later round of speeches, yet resists entreaties (including those from his wife) that he might recover with a nap upstairs. Consensus is that the king has consumed something *bad* – this generating cruel looks towards fearful caterers, which perhaps, in truth, would be fairer directed at the apothecary. Samsun is the one who knows to seek out Georges, amidst the crowd, to make enquiries about what's gone awry with the batch. The apothecary, still calm-faced, can only suggest the king must be *enjoying* the damage he's causing, hence the potion is working as it should. This is wrong, though; most of the king's innards are mortified. It pains him to need to untether the ostrich, to rile it into a frenzy that has it charging and shitting throughout the hall. He gets no pleasure from insulting more of his guests, and from seeing mystification upon Magdalene's sweet countenance. There's only, perhaps, a degree of enthusiasm in his pulling Samsun aside – in the abrupt style the ensign had chosen earlier – to *fire* him, effective immediately, for his recurring poor judgement. As the king delivers this, however, he still worries about the rationality of the saving path he's attempting, and whether it shall work. Magdalene, wanting to believe the 'food poisoning' theory, stoically withstands her mad husband, retires with him to the envy of none, and in his bedchamber – yes, even this can't be exempt – employs some of her diplomatic nous by her reactions to his sabotaged, underwhelming effort at consummation. More sober than he's given credit for, the king falls asleep fast, keen to escape a day he's rendered a disaster for them both, so that the drug they had imbibed could be rendered a dud, a mere piece of superstition, in turn.

He'll rouse first, in the morning, and try to interpret all the citadel's ambiguous sounds. He'll wonder if, to feel safe, he needs to keep up his wretched campaign as far as the new afternoon – for then a full 'day' will lie between the sour goblet. Such technicalities the ensign may have been good for explaining, were he still employed. Moreover, the king will watch Magdalene's sleeping face – its magnificence, however it's compiled – and be practicing different explanations in his head. Most shall refer to 'sacrifice', although he won't fully clean himself of embarrassing her. For as long as she's asleep in the new bed, her review's a secret, and the king shall fling between equal visions of anger and acceptance, awaiting a proper clue as to how much of their hard-won 'happiness' they'll even be spending together.