

The Menacing Shaker

By

Joel Ramey

Mayton entered the dining room with his typical casual gate. As the young wizard passed close to banners and strolled by the servers, it fascinated the king how this young man could move across a room as if he weren't sure where he was going, but showing the confidence of one who was certain to arrive on time. It did not surprise the king that some of the young ladies also noticed how Mayton walked. Heads with elaborate curls over decorated eyes followed the unusual young man as he set his direction of travel toward the king's table.

He paused near a padded wooden chair across from the king. Mayton bowed from his waist in a slow, respectful obeisance. He straightened up about half way and, with his eyes still on the floor and his dark brown hair dangling said, "Your Exalted Majesty. If it would please you, I would ask for the honor of joining you at your table."

"Stand up," the king said curtly. "And then sit down." As Mayton obeyed, the king picked up a table knife and stabbed a roast goose with his fork. He cut off a slice of breast and asked, "And what trickery are you up to?"

Mayton looked a little too shocked for the king's comfort. "Why Majesty," he replied in a smooth voice. "I only want to show you the respect you deserve as benevolent leader of your country. It is my desire demonstrate your greatness to the world by my homage to your..."

“ENOUGH!” The king’s voice took on the growl of a menacing dog. “It hasn’t escaped me that you’ve arranged it so the only thing between us at this dinner is this roast fowl. And your words have more butter on them than the cook put in the sauce.” The king wiped his hands on an embroidered napkin. “So my young friend, I think your purpose at my table tonight is either the need of funding for some wizardly undertaking or you’ve committed yourself and your friends to play music at some festival when you know you’re supposed to be here. Which is it, or could there be a darker reason for your lavish show of deference?”

The young wizard smiled. “Your Majesty, the first two choices cover my only interests, which are both done to serve you. I don’t know what a darker reason could possibly include.”

The king looked down at the food on his silver plate, then raised his head just enough to shoot a look through his graying eyebrows at Mayton. “You’re stalling, and that makes me concerned that the father one of these former maidens here will be bursting into my dining hall at any moment, calling for a marriage or for your blood...possibly both.”

The young wizard threw his head back in a laugh, as did most of the guests in the hall. It was common knowledge that Mayton was the king’s favorite and that no harm would come to him from playing word games at dinner. “My Liege-lord, I did in fact come to enjoy the favor of your hospitality at dinner, but, if in your most esteemed royal generosity you could grant me the gift of your attention for a short time, I would be your grateful servant so long as there were clouds in the sky and...”

“ENOUGH, BOY!” The king’s voice was changing from a growl to the sound of a tree trunk snapping in the wind. “Just say it quickly and plainly, and without your words dancing. What do you want?”

“Well Exalted One,” Mayton said while smiling, “I did play my music at a minor festival in the village of Gamewoods recently.” Mayton folded his arms across his chest and leaned forward with his elbows touching the tablecloth. “And My Lord, the tale I need to tell you is not for everyone’s ears.”

The king’s expression hardened as his tolerance for Mayton’s delays drew thin. He pointed to his musicians at the side of the hall. “Play something, and make it something long so we can have this protracted conversation without boring everyone here.” As he turned again to Mayton, the king freed his beard from where it caught in the gold beads on his jacket and asked, “Will that be good enough to have you speak your mind?”

“Well, Majesty.” Mayton looked at the gentleman sitting in the chair next to his and then back to the king, who motioned with his head for the man to leave. Mayton smiled as the gentleman took his plate, bowed and walked away. The wizard leaned into the cushion of his chair for a moment, listening to the music start. Then he caught the dining captain’s eyes and made a circular motion with his finger at the table. The captain nodded, then stepped off. “Sire,” he said turning back to the king, “As I said, my friends and I were playing music in Gamewoods, at a tavern owned by my cousin. Between songs, some men who sat at a table near the stage began speaking loudly enough for me to hear. One of them held up an empty ale picture and spoke of how sad

it was that they still used clay to serve their ale. Another agreed and said it did taste like the floor of a cave.” Mayton toyed with the lapel on his coat.

A young woman approached the table carrying a tray on one hand. She paused at a respectful distance, waiting while nervously playing with her reddish-brown hair that came out in shocks from where she tied it, just below her ears. Mayton saw her and motioned her to the table. Glancing at the king, who nodded, the girl approached and set a plate, cup and service, all made of silver, in front of Mayton. As she lifted the tray, Mayton said, “No, don’t leave. You should sit.” He motioned her to the chair the gentleman had been forced to abandon.

The server’s eyes became very large and she looked quickly to the floor. “Oh no, sir,” she mumbled as she looked down. “I couldn’t.”

“Sit girl, if it means he will continue his story.” With his bare hand, the king grabbed a roll and started chewing on it.

Mayton had taken a hold of the girl’s arm and wouldn’t let her slip away. “Please Milady,” he said gently. “I do need you here.”

The king gave another exasperated nod and the young woman quietly sat.

Mayton served himself some of the thigh from the goose, some bread and some berries from a bowl that was now in front of the serving girl. “Majesty, the men in the tavern I mentioned spoke of a wondrous new way to shape glass. I don’t know all the details, but I’ve seen with my own eyes that it has gone far beyond blowing bulbs to make into containers for wine or powders.” The young man took a bite of goose and nodded knowingly as he chewed. “Majesty, this new technique for shaping glass will make our pottery business obsolete. Imagine bowls, bottles, pitchers, all quickly made

of glass and each looking like the one before it. Vendors will have cartloads of them. Houses will be filled with them. An all the while, our potters will be losing their business and your kingdom will be facing economic ruin.”

The king cocked his head to one side. “All of this is because someone has figured a new way to make a bottle out of glass?”

Mayton shook his head and his hands, and looked most urgently at the king. “Oh My Lord, please do not be so quick to dismiss this.” Mayton looked at the serving girl and asked “What is your name, Milady?”

With her voice trembling, the girl answered, “Cynthia.”

Mayton smiled and gently reaching to the young lady’s lap said “May I borrow your tray, Cynthia?”

Looking puzzled, Cynthia responded, “Of course, sir.”

Mayton took a hold of the tray and lifted his plate. He sat the tray in front of himself and then the plate in front of Cynthia. “Try the goose,” he suggested as he handed her his fork and knife. “It’s delicious.” The girl looked shocked that the king’s wizard would ask her to eat at the king’s table.

Mayton glanced from side to side, making a show of discovering whether anyone else was watching, which of course they were. “My Lord, the men at Gamewoods Tavern said that this process to make glassware was quick and inexpensive.” The young wizard reached carefully to an inside pocket of his jacket. He brought his hand out and cupped it with his other hand around a small object. “It was no small amount of peril that I dared to bring you this proof of my report.” The king sat up a little and watched his wizard’s movements closely.

“Majesty!” The young man spoke the king’s title like an announcement.

“Cynthia.” He smiled at the girl, who shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

“And everyone else who should not be listening!” He said the last loudly enough for everyone at the king’s table to hear. “I give you the greatest threat to our kingdom’s well-being that we have ever faced.”

Mayton slowly reached his hands forward to the center of the serving tray. He set the object he held gently down while still hiding it, then with a dramatic flare of his fingers quickly let the object go.

The king flinched just a little at the movement from his wizard, then realized what the young man had set in front of him. His eyes found the holes in the cap and the threading, and then moved down the translucent sides to its circular bottom. “This is a salt shaker!”

“Only in function,” said Mayton. “It’s really a greater menace than an army of barbarians.”

“Mayton,” the king’s voice lowered to the growl again. “This is a salt shaker, not a force of invaders. Why are you disturbing my dinner with this?” The king thought he saw the tip of a smile on the young man’s mouth.

“Sire, if not for the slip of a tongue in a tavern, we could have been completely taken unawares by this threat.” The wizard reached with his right hand and, after quickly touching the shaker as if to test whether it was hot, gently picked it up. “See the shape of the cylinder, Sire. It surely speaks of simplicity in its size.” The king’s eyes closed for a moment as he shook his head slowly. “The curve of its cap captivates and captures. The tinsmith must have been supremely skilled.” The king drew in a breath to speak, but

Mayton went on, "The very visibility, the seeing of the salt should send several sizeable statements of sincerity as to the seriousness of the slippage of our sense of security, Sire."

The king slapped both of his hands on the table and stood halfway. The wizard's eyes grew wide and he leaned back in his chair. Cynthia gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. The dinner guests looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Wizard! If there is a point to this, you'd better get to it soon."

"My King, your perplexity points to my prime point." Mayton held the shaker at the middle of the tray, tipped it and poured some of the salt. Then as he spoke, he made a show of pushing the salt into a small pile. "Just as the salt pours from this shaker, Sire, your royal treasury will pour itself empty and go to gain of the Gamewoods glassmakers."

"Quit your rhyming." The king waved to the dining captain who bowed and set off to have the king's desert brought.

"And," Mayton continued as if there had been no interruption, "What will become of your land's prosperity?" The wizard had set the edge of the shaker's bottom in the middle of the pile of salt. He carefully moved his hands away and the shaker stayed balanced at an angle. "Like this shaker, it will tilt and fall." As he said "and fall" the shaker tipped over, spilling a little more salt.

"And, this proves what?" asked the king. "What action do you suggest I take? Send an army of chefs to defeat the glassmakers and hold their works hostage in my kitchen?"

Mayton leaned back in his chair, making a show of admiring the stitching on the padded arm. He ran his fingers down the pad and then reached over and toyed with the padding on Cynthia's chair, barley touching her arm as he did. "Majesty, I would not presume to tell you what to do with your chefs or armies. I only saw what I believed to be a threat to your kingdom's well being and reported it to you straight away. What you choose to do with the information is your own royal business."

"Do you mean, that's it?" The king put both hands onto the royal tablecloth and leaned forward as he stood. "This whole dread menace that you've disturbed my dinner with is a salt shaker?" The guests who were closest began standing and moving away as the king's voice rose in volume. "Are you out of your wizardly mind?"

"Your Exalted Majesty," Mayton paused and then he smiled. "If you do not view the invasion of this salt shaker as a menace to your kingdom, perhaps I should go about my wandering ways until I spot a different threat."

"Yes," replied the king, "Perhaps you should." The king paused for effect. "And you should start your wandering now!"

"As your Majesty commands." The young wizard stood, bowed low, and backed away from the royal dinner table. He started to turn when the king stopped him.

"Mayton!" The young man turned toward his king again. "You forgot something." The king held out his hand with his finger pointed toward Cynthia.

"Oh! Yes." Mayton sounded surprised at himself. "I really should get you out of this situation, Cynthia." He walked up to her chair, bowed as if he were approaching a fine lady, and put out his hand to help her out of the chair.

As Cynthia stood and took Mayton's hand, the king asked, "Why did you have her sit in the first place? She didn't help you in your trickery."

"Well, My Lord, she's young and pretty." He paused for a moment. "And, I'm young and pretty." The young man paused again. "And it just seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Out!" shouted the king. "Out now, before I have your ears for desert." Mayton smiled at the king. "Out, before I have that spinning tongue of yours made into a treat for my dogs." Mayton placed Cynthia's hand on his arm and moved toward the door, not looking back. "And stay out until you can show your king the proper respect he deserves."

The guards at the door could see Mayton grinning broadly as he walked Cynthia out of the king's dining hall.

His Majesty sat down and motioned to the server who was waiting with his cake. He was shaking his head as his plate was set in front of him. Then the king laughed, not too loudly, but with a wide smile on his face. "I wonder," he said aloud to no one in particular, "if he was here to entertain me with his twisted words, or if he was after the girl the whole time and I was just his pawn." The king picked up his fork and cut into his cake. "And I'll probably never know."

The End