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Writer/s: [Ziggy Edwards](#)

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Once, in a faraway land, an evil king ruled.

Well, let's back up a bit. Some times had been more prosperous than others; some kings had shown more benevolence than others. Every king, however peaceful, owned the land and everything on it. He and his royal court wore silk robes and attended balls in the palace, while most of his subjects spent their days toiling in His Majesty's fields, and nights lancing their own boils and huddling together over bowls of gruel. From time to time, desperate peasants would abandon their children in the deep dark forest, or even trade their newborn babies to witches for a head of lettuce.

This imbalance of wealth was just the inherent nature of a kingdom; no one argued otherwise. They weren't communists! (Young David's mother often made this last statement while pounding her fist emphatically on the dinner table, splashing gruel on a passing field mouse.)

What made this king different was his list. Rumors spread slowly and erratically across the countryside that King Bertrand had employed a dark wizard, a wizard so powerful no one knew his real name. A shepherd, who told his friend, the shoemaker, who told his friend, the woodsman, who was David's father, said that he had seen this wizard at a distance, riding a stallion through remote meadows toward the palace. All grass brushed by the wizard's cape had wilted, then turned dry and brown in a trail behind him.

The wizard sat behind King Bertrand's throne, gathering enough power to cast a spell over the land that would make crops harvest themselves. Not only that, it would put an invisible wall around the kingdom's borders that no enemy could break through. The wizard's spell would enable King Bertrand to have anything he wanted, without having to depend on his peasants at all. In fact, with no use for peasants, King Bertrand could get rid of them all!

'What do you mean, "get rid of"?' young David asked his father one autumn afternoon as they chopped trees at the edge of the deep dark forest.

'I'm not sure,' young David's father said. 'Guess the wizard will just cast spells to make them disappear.'

'"Them?"' young David asked, 'You mean "us", don't you?'

Meanwhile, to pass the time and amuse himself while sitting on his throne, King Bertrand rearranged all the names on the royal census, chuckling as he passed parchments to the wizard. 'I'll be particularly happy to see these three go,' he'd say, or, 'Move this one down. He's entertaining as court jesters go.'

'This is horrible!' David said to the shoemaker. 'We've got to do something to stop the king.'

'Stop the king?' the shoemaker laughed, but when he saw David was not laughing with him his mouth fell to a pale, thin line. 'Listen dear boy, be happy you're not important enough to make the top of that list. If I were you, I wouldn't go around spouting off about it.'

David fumed. 'How about this,' he said. 'Make the finest pair of shoes money can buy, and give them to me. I'll take them to the palace for the king. That way I can get

inside and see what's really going on, and whether it can be stopped. I'll make sure to tell King Bertrand the shoes are a gift from you.'

While the shoemaker worked on the king's new shoes, David packed a sack with sun-dried gruel patties and a mouse-hair cloak his mother made especially for him. He promised his parents that despite the long journey, he would return when the leaves had fallen again. The villagers knew only that David would present the king a splendid pair of shoes from their own shoemaker. They sent him off with the largest feast they could manage, a celebration with lots of dancing.

David was gone so long everyone except David's parents stopped waiting, though none forgot him. Finally, just as the last leaf hit the dirt path before him, a bedraggled, bearded wanderer stumbled into the village.

'It's me, Mother,' David said, sinking luxuriously into his old straw pallet. And then he slept for three days.

On the third day, David called the entire village together.

'King Bertrand loved the shoes,' he began to loud applause, 'and after spending three months as his court jester, I've found his weakness. The wizard's power is strong, but not infinite,' David continued through dumbfounded silence. 'He can't cast all his spells at once! That's why King Bertrand has to make his Black List—there are too many of us to fit under a single spell!'

The crowd, still silent, blinked at David expectantly.

'To stop King Bertrand from going down his list one by one, we must all jump to the top spot.' David explained how this would only work if every person in the kingdom participated.

'How do we get to the top of the list?' a tiny girl called out.

David smiled. 'That's the easy part,' he said. 'All we have to do is piss off the king.'

Now the villagers cheered. They agreed to the hard part, which involved traveling to all regions of the kingdom, talking to people from other villages and convincing them to join the march on the palace. Goat herders had to march alongside goat haters; court jesters alongside pinched, severe witches.

When they finally stormed the castle, the wizard disappeared in a thick puff of dark smoke, leaving King Bertrand alone on his throne.

The king lifted both palms in the air. 'Oh yes, I love my people!' he proclaimed, grinning nervously. 'Heh heh. Uh, hello good folk.'

But no one spoke to him. Instead, King Bertrand's people torched every room of the castle—except the basement dungeons, where they kept the king with plenty of fresh water and gruel, and where he lived to a ripish old age.

And for the rest—they lived happily ever after—well, at least for a while.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ziggy Edwards.*