



ILLUSTRATED GIRL

BOOK ONE IN THE CHRONICLES OF LUCITOPIA

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Title Page

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For John McLeod, my font of dry wit

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I HAVE FIFTEEN DAYS TO LIVE

Fifteen days. I still can't believe my time is almost up. Three hundred and fifty days have passed since I got myself into this mess, and now I've only got one choice left to make. I can either give up, or I can keep doing what I've been doing for nearly a year, which is trying to find a real boy to kiss me and break this spell.

Not easy to do when you've been turned into an illustration in a book.

The book I live in is LONG. It has many characters, but I don't come in until nearly the end. Which is lucky for me because the beginning of this book has all kinds of monsters and stab-happy warriors, and a huge battle against an evil sorcerer. Spoiler alert. He wins. So, yeah, that's the world I live in. The one ruled by an evil sorcerer turned king.

I spend most of my days hiding at the top of a tall tower because said evil sorcerer king is rattling around out there somewhere in the margins and there aren't a lot of good characters left in this book. Most of the heroes died in the Great Battle between good and evil at Knob Knoll and the rest of almost-heroes (the ones with enough common sense to run for it when the battle went sideways) are being hunted down. Makes me almost grateful that I can't skip back a bunch of pages and go there. Way too much senseless slaughter for my tastes.

Other characters who have survived up to the point where I come in have told me bits and pieces about what happened; and not kidding here, but I have about a snowball's chance in hell of making it through one week in the majority of this book.

My problem is, all the real boys who read my book *love* the beginning, the middle, and most of the end. Then they stop reading before the final pages. They never make it to the part where I come in. Any eligible boy who might possibly fall madly in love with me when he reads about my imprisonment tends to get angry when the main character, some swashbuckling blockhead named Torvold, gets killed with only fifty pages left to go.

Readers start the book, but so far, every single one of them has stopped reading as soon as Torvold dies. One kid even put the book in the freezer to punish it, which I thought was a little excessive. Twenty-four prospective kissers have read my book in the past three hundred and fifty days, and not one of them has gotten all the way through to the words: THE END.

Now I've got just fifteen days, and then I'm stuck here. And I will definitely die here. People shoot each other in the *face* with *arrows* here. On a regular basis. They don't even fight first; they just go, "Ho there! Stop or I'll lose my arrow!" and then they just shoot without waiting to see if the other guy stops.

It's a miracle I've lasted this long. That's not to say that I'm completely incapable of taking care of myself. Since I got trapped here, I've gotten pretty handy with a dagger. Sixteen-going-on-seventeen-year-old virgins are a hot commodity in this book, and I have no intention of being carried off by anyone.

Even if I have learned to hold my own, I'm not meant for this type of life. Mostly because of the "commodity" thing that I just mentioned.

In this world women are ranked somewhere above goats, but definitely below horses. I've managed to reduce my reaction to an eyeroll every time someone says something dumbfoundingly misogynistic, rather than launch into a diatribe, but I've had it. The princess thing is not what I thought it was going to be. Not at all.

I've got to get out of here. I have to go back *lots* of pages, to way before Mother Maybe tricked me, turned me into a character, and stuck me in this book. I have to find a way to get into this story before Torvold dies his heroically lame-brained death. If I can do that, there's bound to be a reader out there who'll fall in love with me and kiss me.

Failing that, at least I might get a pity kiss. I'll take a kiss from anyone. Boy, girl, doesn't matter to me. Lots of girls could be reading this story.

I am not picky. I might even kiss a girl and like it. Who knows? I've never kissed anyone so why limit myself so early in the game?

Someone, please, kiss me.

Still nothing?

sigh

I know you're reading this. It could be you, you know. *You* could be my hero.

crickets

Dang it.

Maybe no one is reading. I can't tell if I'm being read or not. All I hear is gossip in the market about Jinksy the Blind Man who, paradoxically, can only see when a pair of giant eyes are hovering in the sky. The other characters in this book have no idea what that is, but I've always thought that it's a *reader*.

But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I have no audience, and yet my story continues—my pathetic story of unobserved desperation. At least I know the answer to that question about the tree falling in the woods. It makes a sound, alright. And, if my life is any analogy, it's saying *ohcrapwhyme!*

If you're wondering why I'm not using stronger language to describe my situation, it's not because I don't want to use every colorful curse word in the book. It's because I can't. The story I'm in is rated middle grade. That means if I couldn't say it in front of a ten-year-old, I can't say it in here. *The Chronicles of Lucitopia* has other stories in it, stories where they can say more than *hang it all* when they stub their toe really hard, but not in my story. Figures I'd pick the one that was suitable for all ages. It's a special kind of torture.

I'll just have to get myself out of this story alone if I want to curse properly, I suppose.

Not exactly what I had in mind when I wished to live in in a world of knights and princesses and magic and...okay, yes, I admit it. Romance. Big, sweeping romance with life-or-death stakes, and a gorgeous boy who'd die for me. You know, real epic fantasy type stuff, with a steamy romance that makes you swoon when you read about it. I used to do a lot of reading, and a lot of swooning.

I made a wish and I got it, only to find that in the world of Lucitopia, if you walk around with your head in the clouds, someone will chop it off for

you.

Today is market day. It's the one day every month that the last few surviving non-evil people of Lucitopia get together to buy, sell, trade, beg, barter, and steal. And I know what you're thinking—if someone steals, they're one of the bad guys, right? Heck no. Real bad guys burn villages to the ground and carry off all the women under the age of twenty. Stealing is, like...*nice* here. Almost a compliment, really. If someone tries to take your stuff it's because your stuff is useful, and they probably really need it.

I don't even get upset about it because the coin I use to buy what I need at market isn't really mine. I found a giant chest full of loot in my tower and I've just been helping myself to it ever since. And also because there are a lot of old people in this world. They're all that's left after the Final Battle that killed all the young men, and then after the battle, all the young-maiden-carrying-off stuff. These old people are not as nimble as I am, and if they've mustered up the gumption to do a snatch-and-grab on a loaf of bread I've been stupid enough to leave sticking out of my satchel, I don't try to chase them much. They never get more than a dozen paces before they have to stop and wheeze for a bit anyway. I usually let them have it.

If you don't want to get robbed, stay in your tower. That's just common sense.

But I'm okay with a completely non-violent and arthritically impaired mugging today because last market day I heard that Mother Maybe, the old boot who totally hoodwinked me, is going to be there this time. News of her coming was quite a hullabaloo (I use words like hoodwinked and hullabaloo now to fit in) because it had been rumored that our new sovereign, King Asphodel the Ghastly, had killed her.

King Asphodel has been hunting down a lot of people since the Final Battle at Knob Knoll. It's sort of his thing, actually. Even before he was King Asphodel the Ghastly, back when he was just Evil Sorcerer Asphodel, he had a penchant for hunting people down. In his tumescent rise to glory, Asphodel killed off all the White Witches, who were the anthropomorphic personifications of the Virtues. He took them out one by one, and thusly clawed his way to the top of the poop-heap that is current Lucitopia.

Compassion was the first to go because, by nature, she was a giant sucker, quickly followed by Humility, who apologized during her own murder. Next went Cleanliness who was too busy mopping up the blood spilled by Compassion and Humility to protect herself, and then Punctuality who showed up right on time for her own funeral.

After that, Lucitopia went to hell in a handbasket. There isn't even a record of when and how each of the remaining White Witches was bumped off. Probably because Vigilance was killed before she could write it down.

That's the world that I'm stuck in. Do you know what a knight is without Virtue? Meat in a tin can. About as appealing as cat food.

It's so stinky here without Cleanliness, and everyone's late now that Punctuality's dead. I hate BO, I hate it when people don't show up on time, and I can't take it anymore. I feel like I'm always waiting around for smelly people. I'm getting out while I still can, even if it kills me. So I've packed a few things in my satchel just in case I'm able to set out from the market immediately. Of course, this is *if* I can get Mother Maybe to put me in the story earlier.

I double-check my pack, because you can never be too prepared. I've got a bedroll, flint, and spare daggers—replacements for the ones I keep in my bodice, my garters, my sleeves. Oh, and in my boots. I've got some animal traps, so I can feed myself. I've got a waterskin, and salt. I never understood how important salt was until I got here. Ever try to eat squirrel with no seasoning? If you haven't, don't. I've also got a few spells in here in case everything goes bunk.

I'm as prepared as I can get, I guess. Here I go, out of my nice, safe tower with all its salt, provisions, and easily defensible positioning. I'm stalling. I know. It just *really* sucks out there. Okay. Here I go. One, two, three...

I heave my collection of skirts and corsets over the ledge and use the braid of crazy long hair left here by the former inhabitant (I assume she made it out okay) to lower myself down. Now I just have to navigate through the magical mine field around my tower. The mine field is harder to get through going *out* than coming *in*. I have a feeling the former owner of the hair was not exactly a willing participant in her tower dwelling.

Magical spells come in all shapes and sizes, as you'd imagine, but they have a few basic design parameters in common. Most of them have a small

radius of influence, and they only work a few times. Think of spells as semi-reusable land mines (if you step on one) or grenades (if you cast one). They are also one-hundred-percent illusion.

Magic doesn't actually change anything; it only tricks your brain into believing something has happened. That being said, if your brain thinks a poisonous monster just bit your arm off, it's still going to hurt. A lot. The spell will go away on its own eventually, but in the meantime, you will not be able to see, use, or feel that arm—except for the excruciating agony that you would expect from having your arm bit off.

Of course, none of what I just said applies to really strong spells cast by great sorcerers. Those *can* change the world around them. Luckily, that kind of magic is extremely rare and difficult to do. Even a great sorcerer can only pull off a handful of such spells in a lifetime because they kind of almost kill the sorcerer to do them.

But illusion messes with your head enough, in my opinion.

On my first foray out of the tower, way back when I still believed in things like Kindness (dead) and Fairness (*way* dead), I stumbled over an ax-in-the-face spell. That was a very bad day. After a few hours of writhing around on the ground in blinding pain I concluded that it couldn't be real. There was no way I could survive an ax in my face for longer than about a millisecond. From that point on, I understood how magic worked in this stupid book and now if something happens to me and it seems impossible, I call baloney and ignore it until it goes away.

Still, I place my boots carefully as I work my way across the open ground surrounding my tower and toward the outer stone wall circling the hold.

I know there's a bug-crawling-all-over you spell at the gate between the outer stone wall and the path, thanks to some bandits who unsuccessfully tried to carry me off. I never go through the front gate. Instead, I jump the wall to the right of it; put my skirts over my head to slog through some sludge, which I assume was some kind of moat at one time; scramble up the other bank; and then haul myself up onto the path.

I'm damp, muddy, and cranky by the time I start my six-mile hike to the market.

Another lovely day dawns in Lucitopia.

MOTHER MAYBE CAN KISS MY A**

They call it a market, but really, it's more like a carnival. Except pretty much everyone looks like a skeevy Carnie, even the people who come here to buy stuff.

There are acrobats, artisans, games of chance, clowns (who are utterly terrifying) and jugglers. There are those dudes on stilts, strong men, and bearded ladies. There are food stands and magical animal auctions (up for sale today: two angry trolls dressed like pixies, and one very confused goose that probably does not lay golden eggs) and of course, there's a greased-warthog-catching contest. I mean, who can pass up the chance to try and grab a greased warthog?

Hawkers tell me I'd be getting the opportunity of a lifetime—*three beans could grow you a palace in the sky*—as I walk by. The air smells like fried dough and cotton candy when I get a lucky twist in the breeze, and like foot and armpit when I don't. There's a lot of energy and glitter, but like any carnival that isn't part of an entertainment park owned by a massive corporation, there is also the dinginess of poverty creeping up all the brightly striped tents and banners like mold. Actually, I think most of it is mold.

Harmless spells create the illusion of pomp and circumstance. Unicorns paw at the ground in front of gilded temples, but turn the corner and you can see—in one glimpse out of a thousand—that they're really just some sway-backed nags in front of a tattered tent. Fireworks burst endlessly in

the sky with no smoke or boom. Everything that is beautiful is magic, and magic is nothing but illusion.

And there aren't any kids. That's one of the weirdest things about Lucitopia. No babies, no children. I'm the youngest person here by far.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not baby-crazy or anything. I mean, I *like* babies. I used to babysit on the weekends for my neighbors, and they had this little boy who was kind of great because he used to laugh every time I blew raspberries on his cheek and he only cried when he had a wet diaper. His parents would leave for date night; we'd play ten minutes of peek-a-boo, I'd give him a bottle, a bath, and that kid was out like a light while I ate Doritos and read books until the 'rents came home at midnight. I was basically getting paid to do what I would be doing on a Saturday night anyway, but without having to listen to my parents arguing in the background. Easy money.

I know babies can be really annoying. Except when there aren't any. Just try to picture it. You look around and realize that you're at a carnival, but there's no one laughing or screaming because they're so happy they can't keep it in anymore. No one is jumping up and down in front of the glass blower because a person used fire to melt glass into syrup that became a dragon. There isn't even anyone to run screaming from the terrifying clowns. That's when you realize that kids are annoying, yes, but they are also *supposed* to be there. And there aren't any here.

Lucitopia is dying.

Being the youngest person by an average of six decades does not mean that I don't get harassed by the way. Not in Lucitopia. Once, this dusty mummy of a dude tried to reverse whistle at me—you know, that type of whistle where they pretend you're so hot that they got burned just looking at you and they suck the air *in* through their teeth? Well, while he was sucking in, his last tooth came out and he choked on it, and I had to give him the Heimlich. Afterwards he asked me to marry him, which I thought was decent of him, considering the unintentional intimacy of the maneuver.

"Buying or selling?" a thousand-year-old creep asks, right on cue. "Please tell me you're selling."

"Stow it, Dracula, or I'll plunk a stake in your heart," I tell him.

I feign a British accent to fit in. Everyone here has one. Don't know why, exactly, except that British accents are pretty much required in these

kinds of vaguely medieval magical epic fantasy stories. If you think about it, how ridiculous would a movie about knights and sorcerers be if everyone had a Brooklyn accent?

“Dracula” laughs so hard he sends himself into a coughing fit. He has no idea what I’m talking about, of course. There is no Dracula in Lucitopia, I don’t think. He’s just having a laugh because I gave him some sass.

At this point the geezers at market just hassle me to see what I’ll say to them. We all sort of know each other by now—but only in a side-eyes sort of way. I keep my hand on the dagger in my belt as I pass him, just in case, and quash a smile.

I shake my head at someone who’s paying a little too much attention to my satchel and when he abruptly abandons his attempted robbery, I make my way down Fortune Alley, where all the old con-ladies flock together like a murder of crows.

“Come for your fortune, dearie?” cackles a heavy set woman with a sequined shawl, dyed black hair, and mawkishly painted-on lips.

“That’d be stupid,” I say bluntly. “There is no future here.”

She closes her mouth with a snap. Then she adjusts her shawl and sniffs, like she’s too good for me. Her eyes dart up to the golden circlet around my head.

“Why come down Fortune Alley then, princess?” she asks. “You won’t find any real boys to kiss you here.”

I have to be careful, because one of the rules of being in Lucitopia is that I can’t let on to anyone that I’m from another world, or I’m stuck here forever. But if she already knows...

“How did you know that?” I hazard.

“The Great Griselda sees all and knows all,” she intones, totally not answering my question.

“How fortuitous.” I get in her face. “Because I need to find Mother Maybe.”

“I know all, for a *price*,” Griselda corrects.

“Yeah.” I chuckle, pulling out my dagger. “But I bet you’ll tell all to save your life.” Her face goes blank. She’s not so sure she likes where this is headed anymore. “Didn’t see *that* coming, did you?” I say.

I’m being a jerk, but so is she. Why can’t anyone here just give me directions or help me find someone or not try and take me for every cent if I

ask them for the frigging time of day? Everyone in Lucitopia is a jerk, and I hate having to be one in return.

And let me be clear about something. I'm not going to hurt her. But here in Lucitopia if you haul out your purse like a gap-toothed bumpkin and say *how much* every time someone tells you *it's going to cost you*, they never give you what you want. They just keep finding new and interesting ways to take your money while they lead you on a merry jaunt across this rat-infested hell. I don't know if she's in on the whole Lucitopia thing or not, but quite frankly I don't have the time to find out.

"Just take me to Mother Maybe," I tell her, shrugging tiredly. "If you do, I'll give you enough money to buy ten sparkly shawls. Okay?"

She nods hastily, never taking her eyes off my dagger. I do sort of have a reputation for being good with a dagger.

To be honest, in the beginning I got lucky. Couple of bandits, a few well thrown knives that by some miracle hit a few tender bits, and word got around. Then I practiced. A lot. I don't know if I could live up to the reputation I've got now, but like I said—bunch of old people. When the majority of my opponents would sooner throw their backs out than throw a dagger, I probably don't have to be all that good to be considered amazing.

"This way," Griselda says with far less cackle in her voice than previously.

As she walks in front of me, I notice the rounding in her back eases away and the fat in her middle stretches out as she stands up taller. She is, in fact, neither short nor fat. Nor is she all that old. Maybe in her fifties? Not young, but certainly not old and feeble. In fact, she looks quite hale.

Griselda leads me down a few switchback alleys behind the main drag. The tents here are made of less garish material, but they're cleaner and they reek less. She comes to a small canvass tent that's a basic olive-green color and stops at the opening flap.

"I'm not saying she'll help you," Griselda says. She suddenly has a beautiful voice, and not a cackle to be found. "But she's been waiting for you. Too long, I think."

I don't know what to say. This Griselda is much different from the Great Griselda who tried to swindle me. She seems almost *stately*, is the only word that comes to mind.

I take a step. I don't know why I'm hesitating. I shake myself and reach for my purse. A deal's a deal. Griselda holds up a hand.

"Please," she says, refusing to take my money. "Mother Maybe is waiting." She holds the tent flap open for me and follows me in.

"She's here," Griselda calls out.

"Well, well, well," says a sighing voice.

Mother Maybe looks the same as she did at the swap meet on Fairfax and Melrose. Like a tatty Stevie Nicks. She wears fringed, dreamy boho clothes that are a little worse for wear. She has thick, long, curly blonde hair, an upturned nose, and just enough of a figure left to let you know she was smoking hot about twenty years ago. She comes out from behind a partition that runs the length of the tent carrying tea in a mug that says *unicorns are boneheads* in worn words on the side of it.

She gives me a look that's normally accompanied by a tisking sound, and then goes back to stirring her tea. "Finally done waiting for Prince Charming to come and save you?"

I hate it when people say *well, well, well*. I also hate it when they trap me in dangerous fairy tales. I should give her a piece of my mind. Too bad I'm still hung up on that last thing she said about waiting to be saved.

"What do you even mean by that? You're the one—you *told* me I had to get someone to kiss me!" I stammer.

"And you thought the best way to go about that was to climb a tower and sit on your butt?" She perches a fist on her hip. "No wonder everyone stops reading you. You're passive. No one likes a passive character."

"The king sent me in that tower!" I think anyway. I was in the tower when I got to Lucitopia, and I'm pretty sure my story father, the former king, had sent me there at the beginning of the book—which we've already established, I did *not* read.

"But you didn't have to stay there," Mother Maybe countered infuriatingly.

"I was trying to not get killed!"

She smirks at me. "And you think trying not to get killed is going to win you a huge fan base, do you?"

My mouth is hanging open. I shut it and try to look outraged. "You never told me it was going to be like this."

She makes a face like she knows *I* know I'm lying. "You came to my table and started digging through my books. I asked you what you liked to read." She gestures around her. "Ta-da!"

"You made me get this stupid book—and by the way, you are a *terrible* used book saleswoman because I specifically said that I liked a strong romance in my epic fantasy. Where's the romance!?" I put a fist on my hip to match hers, but it's really just a watered-down version of hers. Fists on hips only work if you've got some meat there to really land it. I recover and get back to picking the bone I have with her. "Plus, I never thought it would be real."

She smiles at me. "But you *hoped* with all of your heart that it would be. I told you to be careful, that you couldn't take it back, and you went right ahead and said the words."

I don't have an answer for her because she's right. Crap, I think I might cry. It was impulsive. Stupid. I wanted out of my crappy life, thinking there couldn't be anything worse, and you know what? I was wrong. Very, very wrong.

"I misjudged you, that's true," she admits, nodding sadly. "I thought you could be the one."

"Oh. Great. *You're* disappointed in *me* now?" I retort. Good old sarcasm. Saving me from yet another emotional moment. "I stayed alive. I didn't want to die like a—a..."

"Like a hero," she finishes for me.

"I'm from *Fresno*. There are no heroes in Fresno!"

She turns away from me, heading for the partition. She's going to leave. She's going to leave and I'm going to be stuck in miserable Lucitopia forever.

"Wait!" I plead. "You have to help me."

"I don't know what you think I can do for you. You had a shot, and you blew it. Everyone stops reading when you go and hide."

"Then send me back to the middle of the book, where there are still people reading," I whisper. "Send me back before the battle on Knob Knoll. Please. I still have fifteen days."

"Fourteen and a half," she corrects sternly.

"Better than nothing."

She smiles. "That's the spirit."

Then she looks me over. She's got green eyes—that kind of green that can be mistaken for blue unless you're looking right into them. And she smells like patchouli, but not in a head-shop way. She smells nice, actually. And she's got great skin. Lucitopia's one perk. I haven't had a pimple since I got here, but in the real world I have a face full of acne. Too bad I haven't been able to enjoy my newly awesome complexion because I've been too busy avoiding rape and pillage.

Mother Maybe turns to Griselda. "What do you think?" she asks her.

Griselda narrows her eyes, considering. "She's got some skills now, but skipping back that far?" She shakes her head.

Mother Maybe smiles at her. "You wouldn't be you if you weren't cautious," she says, and then she turns to me. "Okay. I'll send you back, but on one condition."

I roll my eyes. "Anything. And, yes, please, give me a condition or a clue or something because I have no idea what the heck you want from me."

Mother Maybe pushes back a panel of the partition and gestures for me to go behind it. "No more waiting around to be saved. Make your life the story you'd want to read."

TORVOLD THE BOLD IS TOTALLY HOT

I've done the shift through time, space, and most likely reality itself once before to get to Lucitopia, but it's still really disorienting.

Being instantaneously *placed* somewhere and somewhen else is a complete who's-your-daddy of all your senses. There's a feeling of apprehension, like a giant butterfly in your stomach—except not a good one. A barfy one. Everything looks wavy around the edges, but it's more than a visual change. There's a temperature shift, too, and the smells in the air are completely different. Oh, and just a suggestion, if you're walking, *stop*.

Suddenly blinded by bright sunlight, I take a step and put my foot down on a loose rock. I think I recover for a second, only to realize that, no, I do not have my balance yet, because I'm not standing on the flat bottom of a tent anymore, but on a slope. Then, while I'm waving my arms about and doing some kind of goofy hip thrust that probably looks a lot like the Pee-Wee Herman dance, I pitch head-long into a gurgling stream, scraping the palms of my hands on the gravel at the bottom, soaking myself with cold mountain melt water.

"Ho, there!" calls a young man's voice.

And apparently, I'm about to get shot in the face with an arrow. Great.

"Are you injured?" He sounds worried. About my well-being. That's new.

I must have moved to a part of the book where Kindness hasn't gotten the ax yet.

“No,” I say, switching to my fake British accent. My hair is plastered over my eyes. I inch out of the river on my hands and knees rather than attempt to stand up while still partially blinded.

“Stay where you are, milady. I will cross the river and assist you,” he says. I hear splashing and clanking coming toward me as I crawl. That clanking is probably armor. Hopefully, he’s a knight and not a bandit. Kindness is probably still around, but this is Lucitopia, after all. He could be a *kind* bandit.

“What horrible spell has abandoned you in such a state in the Forest of Woe? Was it Asphodel—curse his name!”

Passionate fellow. And that British accent he’s got makes everything sound more poetic.

“Ah. No. And you don’t have to—” I say, but he’s already lifting me up and carrying me.

I’d protest, but he moves fast. Before I have much chance to push myself away from his chainmail-covered chest, he places me down on a convenient hillock of grass. I throw my bedraggled hair off my face. It takes a few tries to get enough hair out of my face to see because the stupid circlet around my head keeps getting in the way. And I’ve got a ton of smooth, wavy, auburn hair; it’s so long I can sit on it. Another perk courtesy of Lucitopia. In the real world my head is covered in something that looks suspiciously like rusty brown yeti fur. It’s dull, frizzy, and won’t grow much past my shoulders.

He looks stunned. “Princess Pleasant?” he says. Then he moves back and, distressingly, goes down on one knee in front of me. “What are you doing out here in the wild? You should be safe in your tower!”

“No more towers,” I say, stopping him right there. “I’m out in the wild because—”

Why am I out here in the wild? What could my character, the only child of the true king, be doing running around the dreaded Forest of Woe? I have no idea. I take my pack off my shoulder and start going through it, like I’m making sure nothing important is damaged, to give myself a chance to think.

In the small part of the book I had time to read before I said the spell and got myself stuck in here, Princess Pleasant is hidden away because Asphodel the Ghastly (at this point in the story still just Asphodel the Evil

Sorcerer) has been demanding her hand in marriage so that he can be the next king, and her father won't allow it, because no one wants an evil sorcerer in the family. Or as a future king.

That's the story as it is written. Princess Pleasant doesn't even have any dialogue in the book, as far as I know. There's just an illustration of her. She's really pretty, and she's wearing a great dress and a golden circlet on her head, and I loved the illustration as soon as I saw it. She was like that Waterhouse painting of the Lady of Shalott, but less horsy-faced. She had great skin, great hair, a killer wardrobe, but that's about all there is in the book about Princess Pleasant. She isn't even a full character, like Torvold is. She's just an illustration. Like an idiot, I thought that being pretty and having great clothes would make my life perfect. Dead wrong about that, by the way.

I'm going to have to make up a darn good reason for me to be wandering around a monster-infested forest, or this knight is going to drag me back to some dumb tower, and I know how that ends for me. I want to get out of here, and the only direction Mother Maybe gave me was to make my story the one I'd want to read.

So, what would I want to read?

"I'm on an important quest...er...from my father...um...the king." That didn't sound wishy-washy at all. "I need your help, brave knight."

He bows even lower, which shouldn't be possible in chain mail, but he's quite flexible, apparently.

"And I, Sir Torvold the Bold, will aid you in your quest, my princess," he swears. He looks up at me.

Wow. He's really good looking, but he's not cute. He's no baby face, even though I can tell he's young—probably my age, maybe a year or two older. He's got brown hair, brown eyes, and a cleft chin. It's very heroic, that cleft. Not something I would personally choose if I had written this book, but it works. He's got the whole sharp cheekbones and granite jaw thing going, and the cleft really pulls it all together. I bet he wasn't one of those angelic looking little boys who people went goo-goo over, but you can tell he's growing into himself. And several other people, from the size of him. He's *huge*. Not in a freaky knuckle-dragging way, but tall and muscular and just, wow.

While I'm staring, something warm, soft and hairy blows hot air down my neck. I'm doing the Pee-Wee Herman again trying to get away from it and headed back into the river for another dunking, but Torvold catches me and swings me up in his arms. This guy is nimble.

"Fear not, my princess," Sir Torvold says with a smile and a dimple. "That is my trusty steed, Thunder. Come, do your duty to her highness, Thunder."

Sir Torvold places me back on my feet for the second time while I hold out my hand for the horse to sniff. I don't have a lot of experience with horses, but they can't be too different from dogs, can they? He nudges my hand and I pet him between the eyes.

Thunder is one of those horses with the furry hooves that I've only ever seen pulling giant sleighs in beer commercials during football games, except he's all white. His face is bigger than my torso. He nods his head, tossing his long, silky mane and paws to the ground with a hoof. Almost like he's bowing, strangely enough.

"A-hem," a small voice says from somewhere in the back. Since horse's heinies can't speak, not even here in Lucitopia, I assume there's someone else with us.

"Ah! And that's my trusty squire, Jackanet the Tidy," Torvold says heartily.

Jackanet comes out from behind Thunder, twisting his cap in his hands. He gives me a very shaky bow and then stands again, still clutching his cap in filthy hands. His hose is wrinkled and slipping down on his scrawny legs, giving him baggy ankles. There are several gravy stains on his jerkin and his cape is covered in horse hair.

Jackanet the Tidy does not live up to the hype. I would accuse Sir Torvold of sarcasm, but I don't think he knows what that is.

"Pleased to meet you?" Jackanet says uncertainly, probably because I'm still staring at him, trying to figure out if they're both just messing with me or not. "Would you like me to help you...you know...tidy up?" he asks me.

"Oh, no," I say too loudly. I'm a hot mess right now, but he'd definitely make it worse. And probably give me pinkeye. "Modesty forbids it," I say, playing the girl card.

"Well, I should go and find the...you know..." Jackanet says, sidling away from us with Thunder.

“Sorry, the what?” Sir Torvold says.

“The er-tues that we’re er-tecting,” he grumbles incoherently, glaring at Torvold.

Torvold scrunches up his face. “Have you got something in your throat, Jackanet?”

The squire gives his master a blank look followed by an eye roll, and then he simply walks away from us, taking the horse with him.

“And now, my princess, tell me your quest so I might aid you in it,” Sir Torvold says, not missing a beat in his up-beatness.

My quest. My quest? My quest, quest, questidty quest-quest. Not many q words are there? Rats. I don’t have a quest. I must deflect.

“How remiss of me! What is *your* quest, brave knight?”

“I have been given the sacred task of protecting Virtue itself. I must find and protect every White Witch still alive,” he replies gravely.

Now that’s a quest. But I wouldn’t go around announcing that if I were him. This is Lucitopia. Nobody tells anyone what they want unless they want that other person to try to take it away from them. Or make them pay double for it.

But that’s *my* Lucitopia, the one with no Virtue. I look at Torvold and realize that he is from another place entirely, even if it does have the exact same name. And then I mentally translate what his squire was mumbling about.

“Oh! Is that what Squire Jackanet left to seek? Have you lost your Virtues?” I ask. Torvold blushes deeply and I backpedal. “Obviously, good sir, you are virtuous to the core; I only meant—”

“Yes, yes,” he says, nodding a little too vigorously. “They are not *my* virtue—I’ve still got that—though I hope I have their Virtues in me as well.” He seems to realize that this is getting worse by the second. “I am the guardian of two White Witches. There. That’s what I’ll call them from now on. White Witches.”

“Much easier,” I agree. I’m nervous. I don’t know why. He basically just told me he was a big, hot virgin.

“But enough about my quest. Tell me yours, my princess.”

He’s on a quest to find and protect all that is good in the world. I don’t have anything that comes close to that. I’m going to have to vamp until I come up with something.

“My quest is so unexpected...and secret...and...and...clandestine that my father could trust none with it but me,” I say, waving one arm and clutching my bosom with the other.

I’ll give him a little of the old razzle dazzle until I can come up with a really good quest. No—a *great* quest. One that would definitely make tons of guys desperate to keep reading until they fall in love with me. Or girls. Still not picky, because that’s how these stories go, right? I’m convinced through the whole thing that I’m supposed to kiss a guy, but it turns out it’s a girl in the end. Well, I’m not getting hung up on that, I can tell you. I’d totally kiss a girl. Just saying, if any girls are reading this and want to give it a go.

Still nothing, huh?

“Forgive me, Princess, but you seem distracted,” Torvold interjects politely.

“Just contemplating the onerous task I have been given, kind sir,” I reply. Onerous? I’ve got to stop using adjectives or I’m going to paint myself into a corner. Now I’ve got to come up with an *onerous* quest. Great.

His big brown eyes round with empathy. Holy *gawd*. They actually glimmer. A saintly beam of light has fallen through the trees, hit his face at just the right angle, and made his eyes freaking glimmer. These romance books. They’ll be the death of me.

“Share your burden with me. I will help you shoulder it,” he says in his deep, soft voice.

Wow. I just stare at him like a nitwit.

“How is your father?” he asks when I don’t answer.

“Not well,” I reply, thinking of my own father and too stunned by Sir Sexy to put my cosplay filter on.

But I get lucky. Sir Torvold is nodding sadly. “I’d heard. He’s been very ill for quite some time now.”

“We all hope for his recovery,” I say politely.

He looks uncertain, like he is about to say something, and then he changes his mind. He smiles winningly. “And now, princess,” he says, “what brings you here to the Forest of Woe?”

“Monster,” I say, pointing.

Because there is a giant lion-lizard-eagle monster coming up behind him.

DO YOU LIKE YOUR EGGS SCRAMBLED?

Here's how I know it's a real monster and not just a spell.

One: this is the Forest of Woe, which is known for its monsters and not its spells. Two: spells tend to hit you right away, not stand there yelling at you for a while. If this monster was a spell, I'd both see it and be getting gnawed on by it at the same time. And three: Torvold sees it, too.

Casting a spell on more than one person is really difficult. Not impossible, but difficult. If a sorcerer was going to spend the life force necessary to cast a spell on more than one person, said sorcerer wouldn't just drop it in a forest that had perfectly real monsters of its own.

This monster is completely real. And completely terrifying.

I'm heading back into the river for a third time, but Torvold catches me yet again. He pulls out his sword with one hand and hoists me over one of his shoulders with the other.

"Fear not, my princess," he shouts as he runs into the rushing water, "these types of beasts loathe water."

I push against Torvold's back so I can prop myself up and see behind us while he runs. The view isn't good.

"Yes, well, this one can fly!" I shout over the sound of the river.

The lion-lizard-eagle flaps its great wings twice and it's over the river and landing on the far bank before I'm done warning Torvold. The monster starts striding back and forth on the river bank, waiting for dinner to be done washing itself and get in his belly.

Torvold switches gears quickly. He stops where he is, wades to about mid-river, finds a rock and puts me on it.

“Fear not—” Torvold begins, but I cut him off.

“You’ve got to stop saying that. Fear is an entirely appropriate sentiment, given the situation.”

He grins at me. Hello, dimple.

“Stay here. I’ll go kill it,” he says simply. He brandishes his sword once and charges through the water as if he were on flat ground. I would be eating gravel right now if I tried that.

Torvold scrambles for the bank, but here he’s at a serious disadvantage. He’s got to fight the thing uphill across broken ground. Not to mention the fact that the monster is about fifteen feet tall and nearly three times as long.

I see him lose his footing and think, *well that was nice while it lasted*, and then Torvold feints to the side on his actually perfectly solid footing as the monster dips his head down to snap him up. Torvold swings his sword up and around and nearly chops the lion’s head off. Unfortunately, the mane is probably two feet thick and all that gets cut off is a hank of fur.

Torvold rolls easily up onto the bank next to the monster as it rears back, enraged. He crouches down into a fighting stance, rushes in, but then thinks better of it when the reptilian tail swings around and practically knocks him down. Torvold tries another approach only to find flashing talons almost piercing his chest.

The knight and the monster start circling each other, sizing each other up.

“I’ll lead him away! You cross back to other side and find Jackanet! If I do not return, good luck on your quest, princess!” Torvold yells to me, never taking his eyes off the beast.

Torvold starts to back up the far bank to lead the beast away, but as he does so, the long tail that is now facing me shoots out. I try to jump into the river as soon as I see what old anaconda-rear is about, but it catches me in midair. The tail coils around my waist so tightly I feel like I’m going to puke.

There is suddenly a lot more noise. I can hear Sir Torvold shouting to me, the flapping of wings, and the ringing of a sword against tough scales. The lion’s head of the monster starts roaring in pain, but the tail keeps coiling me in. Torvold is fighting like crazy up there as he tries to save me,

but in the meantime, I'm rolled up like a burrito underneath this monster's poop shoot.

It is *pungent* down here. And there's something soft and fuzzy resting on my forehead. I don't want to think about what it is because, just based on the little I know about general anatomy, I'm pretty sure it's gotta be his boy bits.

My arms are squeezed close enough together that I can just barely graze the hilt of one of the blades that I've got tucked up my left sleeve with my right fingertips. I inch the blade out and nick myself pretty good as I spin it around, but I do finally manage to get the hilt held solidly in my right fist. Then I bring it around sharply and cut into a coil of monster muscle.

That loosens his grip enough that I can yank my arms out, but the blade stays stuck inside of Mr. Stinky. My other blades are in my bodice, garters, and my boots and as such they are inaccessible right now. I get an idea. It's the definition of low blow, but this is life or death here. I grab a hold of the soft and fuzzy thing resting on my forehead and squeeze.

The monster makes a yelping sound that's legitimately pathetic. He tries to drop me and fly away, but I don't let go of him. I'm too terrified that he'll slash me with the talons on his hind legs as I fall past them. Not to mention the fact that I could break a leg in a bad landing. There's no emergency room in Lucitopia. You break a leg, you've got a limp for the rest of your life.

The monster's flapping his wings, trying to get airborne, and I'm swinging from his tenders like a baller hanging from the rim, still twisting and grinding whatever he's got in there like I'm wringing out a pair of wet jeans. Finally, the monster drops back down to earth and keels over.

Torvold vaults onto the monster's belly and slashes it open with a swing that would have every golfer in my world drooling. The beast makes a screeching sound. I decide it's safe to let go and I roll off to the side as Torvold searches under the opened scales for the heart. When he finds it, he drives his blade home, putting the poor creature out of his misery.

Torvold jumps down next to me. "You're bleeding," he says urgently.

He tries to gather me up in his arms again, but at this point I think I've spent more time being carried around by him than on my own two feet.

"I need no assistance, brave knight—no more than you've supplied by killing this hideous beast," I say, holding up a hand to stop him. He looks

dismayed and I realize my hand is covered in blood.

“Your hand,” he says, unbuckling his chain mail at the shoulder. Underneath is a white linen shirt.

“Tis but a scratch,” I protest, but he’s already taking off his shirt. I stop talking and just let it happen.

Wow. I never realized how mesmerizing muscles could be. I mean, I’ve always liked them, but Torvold’s are hypnotic. He’s not puffed up or anything, but everything flows from his broad chest and shoulders, down his rippling six pack, to trim hips, in such a harmonious way. Even his back is carved out of thick, curved muscle and his skin is so smooth. I wonder if he shaves—no, that’s silly. Guys here don’t shave their bodies.

Torvold is just about to start ripping up his shirt to make bandages for my hand when we hear Thunder whinny.

“That was horrible!” Jackanet shouts. He’s leading Thunder across the river. On the stallion’s back are two barefooted women in white dresses.

Torvold stands and bows to them, and then puts on his shirt. Unfortunately.

“Good. You’re here,” Torvold says hurriedly as Jackanet arrives on our side of the bank. “I need bandages.” He looks Jackanet over. “What’s wrong with you? You’re as pale as a sheet.”

“I’ve never seen an animal so horribly abused,” Jackanet says as he digs in the horse’s saddle bags.

“What are you talking about? You’ve seen me slay dozens of monsters,” Torvold replies as he takes some cloths from his squire.

“Not you—her!”

“Jackanet,” Torvold scolds, as he wraps my hand.

Jackanet continues pointing at me. “She was ringing his bells like there was a village on fire!”

Torvold is blushing and angry and sputtering, and I figure the best way to handle it is to ignore it.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, good squire,” I say. “But Sir Torvold was quite the hero this afternoon. He saved me from being carried off by that chimera-griff.”

“I can’t take all the praise. You fought bravely, too, princess,” Torvold insists. I can feel my cheeks heat up at the compliment. But princesses aren’t supposed to do things like swing from giant scrotums.

“She’s the one who did him in,” Jackanet reiterates.

“I was merely holding on for dear life until Sir Torvold could come to my rescue,” I say. That sounded princess-y.

Jackanet gives me a disbelieving look, followed by a wary one, like he’s deciding to keep his eye on me.

As Torvold finishes with my bandages, Jackanet turns to help the two women down from Thunder’s back.

“Princess Pleasant, this is the White Witch Fortitude.” Torvold gestures to a stout little woman, maybe in her mid-thirties, with big brown eyes and a long shiny black braid. Her caramel-colored face is round and jolly, yet there is something about her eyes that say she’s not as soft on the inside as she is on the outside.

I curtsy to her, “Your Grace,” I say.

“No, no. Just call me Tudie, dear. I don’t stand on ceremony,” she says with a crisp nod.

I smile at her while Torvold directs me to the other White Witch. “And this is Dexterity,” he informs me.

I’m momentarily thrown while I have a quick mental debate as to whether or not dexterity could be considered a virtue, but I recover fast and give her a semi-decent curtsy.

“Call me Dex,” Dexterity tells me. She has an open, earnest smile. I smile back at her, deciding immediately that I like her.

Dexterity is in her late twenties, and she wears her blonde hair cropped close across the back and around the ears, but with a grown-out mop left on top. She’s got long features and lanky limbs. She moves in a loose way, like she’s built out of rubber bands. Standing next to short and stout Fortitude, they look like a vaudeville comedy act.

“I’m honored,” I tell them, and I’m happy to note that I’m telling the truth. “You may call me—”and here I pause for a moment.

I’ve always hated the name Princess Pleasant. The writer really phoned it in with that one, but I can’t think of a snazzy way to shorten it. *Plez* doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue.

“Don’t trouble yourself, dearie,” Tudie says, waving it away. “We’ll come up with something to call you as we travel apace together, to be sure.”

“Come, let us move away from this gory sight,” Sir Torvold says considerately. “We will sup together, and the princess can tell us all about

her perilous quest.”

Drat. I’d rather fight another monster.

The party starts to move upstream from the dead chimera-griff, but I hang back.

“I left my...er...pack back there,” I say.

Jackanet unhooks my pack from the pommel of Thunder’s saddle and passes it to me. “You left it on the other side of the river.”

“Right! Many thanks, trusty squire, for retrieving it for me,” I say while I put my pack back over my shoulder. “I meant something else I dropped in the fight.”

I run back and hastily pull my knife out of poor Mr. Stinky. He was just doing what monsters do. I give him a little pet and whisper, “sorry,” as I clean my blade hastily in the grass. As I’m sliding the blade back into my arm sheath, I catch Jackanet watching me. He hustles off as soon as we make eye contact.

I join the group again and there’s a little argument about who is going to ride on Thunder. Everyone insists that I ride because I’m injured, but mostly because I’m a princess, I suspect. I dissent, but I can’t really wiggle out of it, though I don’t feel right about making two Virtues walk.



We travel upstream until we find a good spot to camp. I’m thinking about what my quest should be the whole way, but I can’t come up with anything both believable and heroic.

“This looks like a favorable place to pass the night,” Torvold declares. The spot he’s picked is close to the riverbank, but far enough away to be dry. There’s a lovely shade tree to sleep under. I look up into the branches to make sure there are no nests above us. I don’t want to get pooped on in the middle of the night. And, yes, it has happened to me before.

While I’m looking up into the branches for any possible late-night bombardiers, I feel Torvold’s huge, warm hands wrap around my waist. I stiffen with surprise, but he’s already sliding me out of the saddle and setting me down on the ground between him and Thunder.

We are awfully close together. I stare at his chest for a moment, thinking about what's under all that chain mail, before I look up at him. Another beam of light is filtering down through the leaves and landing perfectly on his head like a halo. The writer must have spent a lot of time describing the light around Torvold, although I bet this guy would look good in the dark. Not that you can see anything in the dark. Why am I thinking about being in the dark with Torvold?

"I have to unsaddle Thunder," he tells me.

"Oh, right," I say, hastily stepping aside when I realize he's been waiting for me to move. I resist the urge to smack myself on the forehead and nonchalantly go over to the White Witches like I didn't just make a fool of myself.

Dex pulls out a pocketknife and some flint. She spins the little blade in her fingers, and quicker than I can see she's got a spark smoldering in a small pile of leaves and tinder.

"You're quite good at that," I remark, impressed.

"I am dexterous," Dex replies, giving me a little wink.

"Show off." Jackanet snorts.

"He's just jealous because he can't start a fire," Tudie whispers to me, loudly enough for the squire to hear. She's already got her knitting out, and the needles are clacking away in her hands.

Grumbling, Jackanet goes to collect wood while Torvold joins us at the fire's edge with a black pot and a haunch of monster meat.

"I'd like to say that I know the perfect way to prepare chimera-griff, but sadly, I do not," he says with a sheepish grin.

I take a look at the haunch Torvold's holding. It still has a few feathers clinging to it.

"Looks more like poultry than snake. Probably from the eagle portion. I'd go with rosemary," I say, already digging in my pack for the herb. "And lots of salt."

Torvold looks taken aback. "Have you eaten snake, my princess?"

Yes, actually, I have. It's amazing what you'll eat when you've been plunked down in the middle of horrid fairy tale after being hoodwinked by a diabolical used-book saleswoman. Can't tell Torvold that, obviously.

"At court, once," I say airily. "It's considered a delicacy by some."

Dex and Tudie exchange a look but say nothing to contradict me.

“Indeed?” Torvold replies, considering it. He smiles broadly. “It is fortunate we have you here then, princess.”

I inherit the pot and the monster meat. I’d go wash my hands, but I think it’s a little late for that.

WHAT IS YOUR QUEST?

I managed to wrestle a semi-palatable meal out of Mr. Stinky. Not something you'd go out of your way to ever eat again, but no one's throwing up. Yet.

"Torvold mentioned you were on a quest, dear?" Tudie asks after she had thoroughly chewed, swallowed, and made certain it stayed down.

"Mmm," I mumble around my stringy mouthful.

I hold an apologetic hand to my mouth as I chew and chew. I'm hoping they'll get bored and move on to another topic of conversation. No such luck. I mentally scramble. What do I know about Princess Pleasant?

"You all know that Asphodel the Evil Sorcerer has demanded my hand in marriage," I say tremulously.

My voice is shaking because I'm nervous, and kind of chilly to be honest, but with my expression partly hidden in the dim firelight, my thin, shaky voice could be construed as distraught. I see Torvold clench his hands into fists across the fire.

"Yes. We've heard," Dex says consolingly. She puts a hand over mine and squeezes.

"No one wants that, dearie," Tudie assures me. Then she laughs. "Whoever you marry would be the next king, wouldn't he?"

"Quite so," I reply. They all look at me expectantly. Where the hell am I going with this? Nowhere. I'm going nowhere.

Why didn't I read the whole book before I signed up for this? Why did I sign up for this in the first place? Sure, my life was a mess. My parents split

up, I had to leave L.A. and move to Fresno with my mom and go to a new school. I basically have no friends now. My old friends kept in touch for a bit, but when your lives are going in separate directions, there really isn't that much to talk about anymore. I just couldn't imagine things getting worse, or that I could possibly get any lonelier by coming here, but I did. I'm surprised to notice that I'm crying.

"There, there, dearie," Tudie says as she wraps me in a squishy hug. "You're going to get through this. I know it seems hard now, but you are going to make it through. I promise you."

"I'm throwing my life away," I blubber into Tudie's shoulder. Of course, I'm talking about my actual life now, not Princess Pleasant's, but I really need to cry on someone's shoulder about it.

After I'm cried out, Tudie sits me up again and looks me in the eye. "You can't marry him," she says.

I wipe my eyes and stare at her. What can you say when you and the person you're talking to are having two different conversations?

"Unless you were planning on killing him on your wedding night," Jackanet says softly-but-not-that-softly from the other side of the fire.

"You're out of line," Torvold says. He doesn't raise his voice, but there's a dangerous edge to it.

Jackanet stands and removes his cap. "Milord, after witnessing her—er—creative *handling* of what has become our dinner, I am merely noting that our beloved princess is quite brave, as well as attractive." Jackanet executes a complicated bow in my direction that includes several twirly hand movements. Then he coughs. His cough sounds suspiciously like "concealed weapons!" but Torvold doesn't seem to understand.

"You think it's all well and good for a young lady to offer up herself to a loathsome man?" She throws a bit of chimera-griff at him. "She's a person, not bait!"

Jackanet catches the meat and holds it up. "If she treats Asphodel like she did this chimera-griff," he says, shaking it at her, "her *self* will be fine, and the next day we can all wake up singing and dancing!"

"Enough!" Torvold yells. Everyone falls silent. "If we sacrifice the best of ourselves so that the rest may live, what's the point of living at all?" Torvold turns to me and his big, brown eyes melt into mine. "I was chosen to protect Virtue. And I will protect yours, my princess."

He strides away from the fire and into the darkness alone.

After a beat, Jackanet sighs. “He’s a good man, my master. Got no common sense, though.”

“Lucky for us,” Dex retorts, giving a watered-down laugh. Jackanet smiles warmly back at her and nods. They turn to me.

“I suppose you’re one of us now,” Jackanet tells me.

I don’t know what that means, but it’s nice to be included. “It’s been a long time since I’ve felt like I’ve had anyone on my side,” I say.

“Whatever happens, whatever you and your father have planned, we’ll sort it out together,” Tudie says, patting my hand. “Cheer up, dearie. We’re not going to let you go through this alone, but you will get through it.”

I smile at all of them, because they really have made me feel better even if they have no idea what’s really going on.

“Thank you for trying to help,” I reply gently. “But I’m the only one who can do this.”



I wake the next morning to the sound of bickering.

“It said go *up* the River of Tears to the other side of the Forest of Woe. That means upstream,” Dex complains loudly.

I open my eyes. Jackanet and the two White Witches stand in a huddle not too far away from my head, bent over a piece of parchment.

“Up means north,” Jackanet disagrees, snatching the parchment from Fortitude’s hands and waving it in Dexterity’s face.

Dexterity snatches it away from him. “You twit. Up means upriver. How many quests have you gone on?”

“I’ve been on many quests!” Jackanet insists. He tries to snatch the parchment out of Dexterity’s hands, but she’s too dexterous, obviously. She holds it away from him and he jumps after it a few times before realizing that his behavior is undignified and gives up.

I sit up.

“Good morning, Princess,” says a deep voice.

I turn and see Sir Torvold crouching down by the fire. He hasn’t put his chainmail on yet. He’s just wearing the leathers and linens that go under it.

The neck of his shirt where the strings lace it up have fallen open and I can see copious amounts of collarbone. You wouldn't think collarbones were super sexy, unless you saw them framed by a linen shirt that was casually unlaced at the neck early in the morning, falling open like it could go down the chest a bit then maybe even show just a hint of the shoulder, and then *whoa*. That is some sexy collarbone.

You know what? I've just figured out why it's so sexy. He's fully dressed, but I know I'm seeing what, in this era, are technically his underthings. He's cooking in medieval lingerie, basically. I blush and look away.

"That depends," I say. "What's for breakfast?"

I couldn't stomach a second round of Mr. Stinky. Later, when I'm starving, sure. Being squeamish is just silly when you're out in the wild, but I'd have to be stupid hungry to attempt it.

Sir Torvold tilts the pot toward me. "Porridge," he says, smiling as if he guessed I was dreading last night's leftovers. He sniffs the steam and scrunches his nose. "But it's missing something."

I reach into my pillow/satchel and pull out a generous sized wallet. "Salt," I say, smiling and shaking it.

"That's *all* salt?" he asks. I grin in answer and kneel down next to him by the fire.

"It's a luxury, I know, but it makes everything better," I say, sprinkling a pinch into the porridge.

He looks back into the pot and stirs. "That's generous of you," he says.

I don't know what to say. Salt is a form of currency here—like gold, only more useful. If he knew I came from a place where we put it on the ground to melt snow in the winter he'd probably freak out. And in fourteen days, I fully intend to be back in that world, throwing salt around like confetti on New Year's Eve, so there's no point in being stingy with what I've got with me. I'm not generous. I'm just leaving. I can't explain that so instead, I sit here awkwardly and listen to Torvold's peanut gallery argue with each other about which way to go while he spoons sticky porridge into five bowls.

"Do you know where you're going?" I ask him quietly.

He nods, grinning. "They love to argue, though. I figured I'll let them have at it for a while."

After a few more moments, Torvold raises his voice pleasantly to cut through the squabbling. "We're going upriver," he announces. "That is where the White Witch Temperance was last seen."

Dex gives Jackanet a smug look. "Shut it," Jackanet grumbles at her, then goes to brush Thunder.

Torvold hands me my bowl. "Your destination lies upriver, then?" he asks, avoiding my eyes. "Then you'll go west?"

I rapidly spoon hot porridge into my mouth rather than answer, but Torvold is waiting for my answer with a strident look on his face.

"We'll all go together for as long as we can," Tudie says briskly. She takes her bowl and sits down next to me.

Dex sits down on my other side. "And who knows? As we travel along things could change. The princess might find that her quest has changed as well."

Torvold seems to brighten with that thought. "Indeed," he says optimistically. He smiles at me, though he's still talking to Dex. "Even now Asphodel the Evil Sorcerer could be gasping his last breath for all we know."

I smile back at him, my cheeks warming, while my breakfast congeals in my bowl. Tudie elbows me. I look away from Torvold and get busy with eating.

After taking care of our personal hygiene issues (which each of us urgently needs after a few spoonfuls of medieval porridge) we head out together upriver. This time I insist that the White Witches ride Thunder. Jackanet leads the horse, as Thunder is bred for battle and impossible to control from the saddle unless you are made of solid muscle and wearing spurs. Torvold and I walk beside them.

"How is it you were chosen for this quest, good sir?" I ask.

"I'm the only one who can protect them, really," he says, frowning down at his feet.

"Why is that?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "Surely there are many knights who are great fighters."

"It's his sword, Calx," Dexterity says. "It's the only thing that can kill Asphodel."

"It's not the sword," Jackanet groans, as if they've had this argument a thousand times. "It's the birthmark."

“He’s not going to kill the sorcerer with a bloody birthmark!” Fortitude hollers, like she’s on her last nerve. Then she puts a shocked hand to her lips. “Excuse me, milady.” Nobody waits to see if I’m offended.

“No, Tudie,” Dex corrects, “Jackanet means it’s *because* of the birthmark Torvold can kill Asphodel with the sword. Sir Torvold has a birthmark shaped like a Puce Pinkerknuckle, which means he’s the chosen one who can wield the sword.”

“There’s no such thing a Puce Pinkerknuckle.” Tudie grumbles.

“It’s not the sword! I’m telling you, the birthmark’s poison,” Jackanet insists. “Asphodel will touch it and die because it’s *not of this world*.”

“He won’t touch—” Tudie breaks off for a moment, like what Jackanet just said was so overwhelmingly stupid she doesn’t know where to begin. “The sword is not of this world, you idiot. The birthmark just means that Torvold can wield it and the sword is the only thing that can kill Asphodel!”

“Made of sky metal, that sword,” Dex adds, winking at me.

“No it isn’t,” Tudie says, pinching her lips together. “It was forged in the belly of a dragon.”

“Nonsense. How would you get a blacksmith in there?”

“I dunno. It’s not of this world.”

Jackanet is shaking his head. “No, it’s the birthmark that’s not from this world—have either of you even *read* the prophecy?”

“How can the Puce Pinkerknuckle be not of this world? It’s on Torvold’s backside!” Fortitude shouts.

Torvold shoots me a horrified look, and I have to cover my mouth to keep from doing one of my hideous snort-laughes.

“Puce Pinkerknuckle,” Jackanet insists.

“That’s not—!” Tudie stops herself again and takes a deep breath.

Torvold holds my elbow and slows his steps. I slow down with him.

“They’ll go on like this for another hour at least,” he whispers in my ear. We drop back even farther, but they don’t notice.

“Is it true?” I ask.

“What? The sword or the birthmark?” he replies, giving me a roguish smile through his blush. And if you’ve never seen that combination of embarrassed and cheeky before in a guy, I just want to let you know that it is absolutely devastating.

I shake my head and look down to hide the fact that it suddenly feels extremely hot in this corset.

“Is it true that you’re the only one who can kill Asphodel?” I ask.

“I have a mark. Don’t know what a Pinkerknuckle is, so I suppose it could be one.”

“And what about the sword?”

“Calx,” he says, like he’s saying the name of a friend. He draws his sword and lays it across his arm to show me the blade.

It does not shine. In fact, it is made of a dark, dirty looking metal, as if it’s just been pulled from a fire, except for the edge. All the way around the cutting edge of the blade sparkles. It looks like diamond. I reach out to feel it, and Torvold pulls Calx away quickly.

“It will burn you if you touch it,” he warns me.

I frown up at him. “Is it hot?”

“Not to me, but to everyone else, it feels like it was just pulled from the fire.” He sheathes his sword. “It’s the only weapon Asphodel fears. That is why I was chosen for this quest. I’m the only one who can protect the Virtues from him.”

“Huh,” I say, remembering something I read once in one of my chemistry books back home. “Calx is the residue left by a burnt mineral.”

Torvold smiles. “I know,” he replies, looking at me strangely. “An alchemist told me that. How did you know?”

Yeah. How would I know that? Not a lot of chemistry classes in Lucitopia.

“There’s not much to do in a tower besides read,” I say.

“You can read?” he asks, surprised.

I nod and shrug at the same time, like it’s no big deal, but it is a big deal. There are probably five people in this whole world who can read, and as a person of the female persuasion, I’m not supposed to be one of them. Unbelievably sexist, but also true.

“I can as well,” he says, like he’s admitting something he’s supposed to keep hidden for manly reasons. “I was not supposed to be a knight.” He looks down and stops himself from continuing.

I tilt my head to the side, so I can see his expression better. “What were you supposed to be?” I ask.

He lifts his head to answer and takes a breath and...wow. We are extremely close together. Like, I'm almost wearing his clothes right now. There's a slight breeze that blows a tress of my shampoo commercial-perfect hair gently across my cheek. Torvold catches it and smooths it back from my face. He leaves his hand there for a moment, barely touching the edge of my jaw.

"A-hem!"

Torvold and I jump apart. The peanut gallery has come back for us. Jackanet is glaring at me, Dex is trying not to giggle, and Tudie looks a little worried, but not surprised.

"I think we should all stay together, don't you, dearie?" Tudie says as she comes back, takes my hand, and walks beside me for the rest of the morning.

That was close. Torvold's the hero of this book. Everybody's rooting for Torvold. Readers aren't going to like me if they think I'm playing him. I have to be more careful.

From now on, no more fraught pauses where I stand there staring at him like he's a pint of ice cream and I'm a warm spoon. Torvold and I are just going to be friends. Cohorts. Co-questers. And that's *it*.

STUFFED UP HER CHIMNEY

We reach the edge of the Forest of Woe by sunset, which is a terrible time to get anywhere in Lucitopia. It's not dark enough to arrive unseen, but it won't be light out long enough to put some real distance between you and whoever decides to start chasing you.

Late afternoon is good. I can work with a late afternoon arrival, but evening? Just terrible.

In Lucitopia, there aren't gradual changes from one kind of scenery to another. When a forest ends, it ends. Just like on a map.

We stay hidden in the line of trees.

"That must be Temperance's cottage," Dex whispers.

Laid out in front of us are the Fields of Plenty. Right on the edge of Woe and Plenty is a small, sturdy looking cottage. The wattle and daub walls are whitewashed, the shutters are a sensible black, and the thatched roof is full, but not overstuffed like in some fairy tales. A squat windmill churns the River of Tears, turning all that sorrow into labor, and around it pools a medium-sized pond with some very ordinary ducks floating on top.

"All of you wait here," Torvold tells us. "I'll go scout for bandits."

He crouches down low and disappears into the waving field of some kind of grain. I'm not a farmer, but the crop definitely waves, so I'm going to guess, rye? Barley?

We see Torvold appear again next to one of the windows. He looks inside. He sneaks around to the front door. He lifts the latch and opens it.

And goes flying through the air.

He's thrown twenty feet away from the cottage and lands flat on his back. He doesn't get up. I know it has to be a spell, which are illusion, but I'm sprinting alongside Jackanet anyway. We both get to him at the same time. Jackanet throws himself down on his knees next to Torvold.

"Master! Are you injured?" he asks pleadingly.

Torvold doesn't move.

"Torvold," I say. Not a twitch. I crouch down next to him and put my hand on his chest. I can feel his heart beating and I don't see any blood. But if he got hit with a spell why isn't he screaming? "Torvold, wake up," I say more sharply.

I see motion by the cottage door out of the corner of my eye, and without thinking, I turn and throw one of the blades from my bodice. I hit my mark perfectly, pinning her to the doorframe by her clothes.

Wait a second.

She's absolutely gorgeous. She has dark skin, long curly black hair, killer bod, maybe in her early-twenties, and *not* a bandit. The woman looks from her pinned sleeve and back to me in surprise. It's a white sleeve. I think I just threw a knife at Temperance. I grimace and get up.

"Excellent throw, Princess!" she says.

"I'm really sorry," I say, approaching her to pull out the blade. Tudie and Dex join us at a jog, and Thunder trails behind them.

"You didn't even nick me," Temperance says, eyes still wide with surprise.

"I think that was more luck than anything else," I say, tugging the blade out of the doorframe. "Sorry about your dress."

"Not at all," she replies cheerily. "I have more inside just like it."

"Are you both done discussing your wardrobes?" Jackanet interrupts. He gestures frantically to Torvold's unconscious body.

I turn back to Temperance with a worried look on my face.

"Oh, he'll be fine," she says with a wave of her hand. "He got hit pretty hard, but he'll sleep it off."

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

"No," she replies, grinning. "It feels wonderful."

She narrows her eyes at me and then nods, as if she just figured something out.

She turns back to Torvold and mutters, “Who’s a big boy? We’re probably going to need that horse to help drag him inside unless we take the chainmail off first. Right! Who wants to undress him?”

Jackanet unbuckles Torvold’s mail and slides it off of him. Jackanet has to put his shoulder under it to lift it and carry it into the cottage. Must weigh forty or fifty pounds.

“That helped, but there is still a lot of fine young man here to carry,” Temperance says, in a very intemperate way, I might add. “Everyone! Choose a body part.”

I end up with a foot. Between the five of us, we manage to wrangle Torvold into the small, neat cottage and dump him on top of Temperance’s bed.

“We should probably take his boots off,” I say after I notice the lovely floral coverlet. I reach for the boot nearest me, but Jackanet shoos me away.

“Off, off,” he mutters. I guess he’s still upset about seeing Torvold fly through the air like that. It *was* really scary. I’m still shaking a little, to be honest.

Temperance touches Jackanet on the shoulder. “He’ll be fine. He’s having wonderful dreams right now, I assure you,” she says.

There’s something about the way she talks that takes the worry and the irritation away. Even Jackanet, who does not warm to newcomers quickly, can’t help but give in and join us by the fire for some tea. She’s got cookies. I haven’t had sugar since I got here, which might explain my crystal-clear complexion, but right now I’m not worried about a breakout.

After we’ve all dug into her butter cookies with jam and gone back for seconds, Temperance settles back, stirring her chamomile tea and looking us over.

“Now may I ask why the young knight was peeking in my window?” she says good-naturedly.

“Oh, we’ve come to save you, dearie,” Tudie says, patting her knee.

Tudie goes on to explain who they are, and about Torvold’s quest. She leaves me mostly out of it, saying only that they encountered me in great need and now we travel together. While Fortitude soldiers on through the backstory, Temperance eyes me over the rim of her teacup, sizing me up. There’s no judgement in her, not in a mean way, but she is measuring me.

Like a doctor checking my height, she just wants to know how much I've grown.

"So, you see, Temperance, it's vitally important you come with Torvold, as he is the only one who can protect you," Tudie finishes soundly.

"You think I'm Temperance?" the White Witch asks. She laughs warmly and shakes her head. "No, I'm not Temperance, although she was here a few weeks ago. She loves to stop in to lecture me every now and again, but she never stays long."

"Who are you, then?" Jackanet blurts out.

The White Witch smiles at him. "You know me," she says in that dulcet voice of hers. Jackanet's face goes soft and he leans back, nodding a little.

"Yes, milady," he whispers.

She stands, and I get a whiff of her perfume. Apples and vanilla, magnolia and spice, and something animal underneath that's kind of gnarly, but I keep trying to get another whiff of it anyway.

"I'll tend the horse," she says. "You should all get some rest."

I suddenly feel like I can't keep my eyes open. I want to ask who she is, but I'm too busy finding a nice spot on the floor to curl up on. I'll ask tomorrow.



I wake to a muffled thump.

A slippery, acid feeling floods my stomach. I listen and hear other ears listening for mine. I know you're wondering how ears can hear other ears listening, but just trust me. When there are no electrical appliances charging, no planes flying overhead, no neighbors of any kind for miles, and you are a hotter commodity than a mature IRA, you get really good at hearing the different kinds of dark. This dark has ears in it, and they are listening to see if mine are listening back.

Which they are. Which those ears probably know at this point.

It's a race now. A stealthy, tiptoeing, sliding your daggers out slowly kind of race. I peel myself off the floor and pad over Dex's sleeping body, then skootch around Tudie. I have to dart from there to get to the darkest shadow in the corner by the window without passing through the moonlight

coming through it. When I get there, I turn and lean my back up against the wall.

I feel something tall and firm behind me, but it's definitely not a wall. A big arm crosses my body and a warm hand cups my mouth. Lips press against my ear.

"Shh," Torvold whispers. Instant shivers go down my spine, which is pressed right up against his chest.

I nod, and he lets go of my mouth, but that hand floats down to my shoulder and holds there, keeping my back flat against him so we both fit inside this shadow. His back is pressed to the wall and he cranes his head to the side to look out the window. I look out with him, sure that he can feel my heart beating in my throat.

He tilts his head down until his lips touch my ear again. "There are four outside and one on the roof," he whispers so softly that if he weren't this close I couldn't hear him.

I nod again and focus on the fireplace. The fire went out hours ago, but I can hear a faint scratching in there.

Tilting my head back so my lips can reach his ear I whisper, "He's coming down the chimney."

I slide one of my sleeve daggers out, point to my chest to indicate myself, and then I point to the fireplace.

Torvold leans slightly to the side so he can look me in the eye. He's surprised for a moment, then he smiles. It's a sly smile. I think I impressed him. It feels pretty good to have a monster-slaying gangster like Torvold think I might be kind of gangster, too.

I'm supposed to be moving right now. I just indicated that the chimney was my post, and that's where I should be headed, but instead I'm still leaning back against Torvold and I'm tilted to the side so I can stare up at him. He is mighty comfortable. And beautiful.

And that's enough of that.

I slink out of our hiding place and dance over the sleeping bodies. I get to the fireplace and stand beside it. Torvold has already made it to the cottage door, and he's looking across the room at me. I signal that I'm ready, and he yanks the door open and runs out with a mighty battle cry.

Total gangster.

Everyone in the cottage wakes, and they all jump up. I wave frantically at everyone, finger to my lips, and then point at the fireplace so they know that someone is coming down it.

“What, ho? It must be bandits!” I yell, belaboring the point. “Come, let’s to the *windows*!” I make a shooping motion with my hand to get them to go.

Jackanet understands what I’m doing. He starts corralling Tудie and Dex toward the other side of the cottage. “What-ho! Torvold the Bold fights for our lives! Let us watch!” he yells like the stiffest high school kid with one line in the show. And I already used “what-ho”. Get your own dialogue.

I grimace. Jackanet grimaces back. We’ll never win any Oscars.

Old Saint Trick stuck up the chimney knows this is his cue to climb down, sneak up behind someone watching the show outside, take a hostage, and then the bandits would have us.

But this ain’t my first rodeo. I ready my dagger in one hand. I grab a copper pan off the mantel and hold it in the other, just to be sure.

I see a foot set down in the grate.

There’s something wrong with it. Actually, make that a couple of somethings. First of all, it doesn’t have a boot on it. Second, it’s got really long toenails. Third, it’s a putrid green-grey color.

A matching putrid hand snakes down and clasps the edge of the fireplace, and then a gaunt face appears. It has two bulbous, lidless eyes and no nose. Or rather, it had a nose once, but that must have rotted off because instead this guy just has those long holes like you see on a skull. Most of his lips are gone, too. But that’s not strange. That’s just another extra on *The Walking Dead*.

He pokes his head and shoulders out, now that he sees everyone looking out the windows with their backs to the fireplace like a bunch of rubes, and I can see the side of his neck has slits on it. Like gills. They open and suck in air. I think he tasted me, because his head snaps around and he looks right at me. I immediately clunk him with the copper pan.

He makes this congested orca call, think *Flipper* but way more phlegm, and he lunges for me. I whack him again. He crawls a little closer to me. I give him another clang upside the head. He twitches, and yep, that does it for me. I whale on him a good six or seven times. Then I take a beat to

readjust my grip. I choke the handle in both hands and I go to town on him like I'm chopping wood.

He doesn't move. The rest of his body slithers down to fall on top of him as if his bones are made of rubber. Really stinky rubber. Should have dubbed him Jingle Smells. I whack him just *one more time* for good measure.

By now the rest of the gang are standing next to me with shocked looks on their faces—except for Jackanet. He knows I've got rage. We get a snoot full of hot garbage stench and pinch our noses closed. We all sound like ducks when we talk.

"This is terrible," Jackanet quacks, gesticulating wildly.

"I know. He'll stink up Temperance's cottage for weeks," I quack, looking for the White Witch who is definitely *not* Temperance. Where is she?

"No, no, you don't understand!" Jackanet stomps a foot. I giggle. He looks and sounds like a big baby. "That's a *drawl*!" he quacks.

"A *drawl*?" I quack back. "What's that?"

"Not a *drawl*," Jackanet lets go of his nose momentarily, "a Thrall!" He pinches his nose closed again.

"Oh, well, I think I got some Thrall on my skirt," I quack, pointing at a little spatter at the hem. I notice that the Thrall is not moving. "Do you think I killed him?" I ask Tudie anxiously. I've never killed anything even remotely human-shaped before.

"I hope so," she quacks. "Put the poor thing out of his misery."

"Don't take your eyes off that one," Jackanet quacks as he hustles to the door. "I've got to help Torvold!"

Jackanet throws himself out the cottage door, and Dex sighs mightily and follows him. "I'd better make sure he doesn't get killed," she quacks.

I know this is all very serious stuff, but it's hard to feel grim when everyone is quacking.

I listen for the sounds of fighting outside, but all I can hear is Jackanet calling for his master. I look at Tudie.

"Should I be worried?" I quack at her.

Tudie shrugs. "Probably," she quacks back.

"Where is our hostess?" I ask, looking around, thinking she might be in danger.

“Hopefully far away from here,” Tudie replies fervently.

“Should we be worried she’s been taken?”

Tudie shakes her head with a knowing smile. “You can’t take her, dearie. She can only be given.”

Weird. I’m about to ask more, but I hear Torvold calling out in the distance and I strain my ears to listen to him. A few moments after that, I hear him run back into the yard. He’s scolding Jackanet.

“You mustn’t let her out here! Get back inside, Dex, please,” he says.

A moment later, Jackanet and Dex are pushed inside by Torvold. There are black splatters on his white linen shirt and his chest is heaving. That’s a lot of chest to heave, by the way. He comes directly to me.

“Are you injured?” he asks. His eyes are big and soft, though his voice is rough. “Did you touch it at all, or did you get it with just the blade of the dagger?”

“No,” I quack. I realize I’m still holding my nose. I am utterly ridiculous. I drop my hand. “I didn’t use my dagger, I used this.” I hold up the copper pan.

Torvold lets out a sigh and clasps my upper arm. For just a moment he drops his forehead to touch mine. Then he jerks away and goes to the rubbery heap of moldering scabs and fishy phlegm on the hearth. He raises Calx.

“I think it’s dead,” I interject, but he cuts its head off without pausing.

The Thrall bursts into flames. There’s a quick, agonized scream as it twitches and shrivels and turns to powdery white-grey ash faster than if it were made of tissue paper.

Torvold sighs with relief. “*Now* it’s dead,” he says, looking back up at me. “I’m so sorry. I never would have left you to face this alone if I knew it was a Thrall. I ran out, thinking they were men.” He combs a hand through his hair. “I should have watched them longer, but I...you woke and I...” he trails off. Looking at me.

Everyone is silent. I shrug. “All is well, Sir Torvold,” I say quietly. “I managed.”

I look down at my pan and notice that the goo from the Thrall that was on it has burnt away as well. And so has the spatter on the hem of my dress. I look at Torvold’s shirt and notice that the black marks on it are actually burn holes. Even the stench is gone. It burned away.

I've lived in Lucitopia for nearly a year and I've never heard mention of a Thrall.

"Someone please explain what a Thrall is," I say. "And tell me why I've never heard of one before."

They share a look, like no one wants to have this conversation.

Dex is the first to speak up. "They are the Thrall of Asphodel," she says. "They were people once, but to avoid death, they gave themselves to Asphodel. In exchange, he changes them. He controls them completely and they cannot die by any agent of this land. Even their touch is poison."

I nod in understanding, but I'm still wary.

"That explains why my pan was ineffectual, but they shriveled when touched by Calx. That also explains why Sir Torvold was so afraid when he realized he'd left me to deal with one on my own, unwarned as I am about their poisonous touch." I try to meet every single one of their gazes, but they all look away from mine. "Yet methinks there is some other foul mischief you have not revealed."

"You've been in your tower for a long time, dearie," Tudie says, shifting from foot to foot. "And then all of a sudden, you set out on this quest." She stops and looks at Dex.

Dex starts over. "You haven't seen your father in a while," she says reasonably. "And there have been a lot of changes."

They pause. "And?" I urge.

"You know he had to leave the palace, don't you?" Tudie says hesitantly.

"And there was that hag who drained him dry," Dex adds.

"What happened to my father?" I demand. I know they're talking about the king, and not my real dad, but they might as well be.

Before I came to Lucitopia a year ago I hadn't seen my father in eight months. He used to be a big player in Hollywood, but he lost his job when the studio "restructured" (a.k.a. lost a boatload of money when a film turned into a billion-dollar flop) and they fired half of the mid-level executives. My dad lost his house. The woman he left my mother for—a little starlet who was gorgeous on the outside and a hag on the inside—took pretty much everything else he owned.

My dad's not perfect. Scratch that. My dad is a horse's behind, but he's still my dad and I am worried about him. The doctors don't measure his

blood pressure in systolic over diastolic anymore, but in how many days away from a heart attack he is.

“If you have word of my father, you must tell me,” I say. I have to stop to swallow the lump in my throat. “I haven’t seen him in so long.” Why is it so hard to say that? I must really miss him. I thought I never wanted to see him again, but I guess I do.

“There’s been rumor that the king has become a Thrall of Asphodel,” Jackanet admits sadly.

“Anything he might have told you,” Dex begins.

“Any quest he might have given you, is most likely the will of Asphodel,” Tudie finishes.

Torvold takes a step toward me, but he stops himself and says, “Don’t marry him.” His voice is husky and low. “Please, princess.”

Jackanet turns to Torvold. “Milord, if she could get *close* to Asphodel by accepting his proposal of marriage, she could be the only one—”

“It’s a trap!” Torvold thunders.

“It most certainly is, but hear me out,” Jackanet pleads. Torvold pivots on his heel and walks out of the cottage toward the stables.

“Did you *see* her with the *pan*?” Jackanet yells after him, but it’s no use. Torvold will not listen.

I have to sit. I meander over to a chair and sink down into it. “I don’t know what to do,” I say quietly.

No one answers me.

WHO, ME? JEALOUS?

I wake to the low, grey light of predawn.

I have thirteen days left. Hopefully less, if I can swing it. I'm sick of pretending to be Princess Pleasant. I'm starting to feel—not like a liar, exactly, because I haven't actually lied.

Okay, yes, I feel like a liar!

But the very nature of my predicament is based on me pretending to be someone I'm not. It's not my fault it's starting to feel real. And it's not my fault that Torvold is so upset I'm supposedly on a dangerous quest that I never specifically spelled out to anyone. He just assumed.

Anyway, whatever quest I could be on would be a dangerous one, given the state of things here in Lucitopia. Just because he's tearing himself up inside, thinking I'm going to sacrifice myself to an evil, undead sorcerer isn't much worse than me...I don't know...fighting a dragon or something.

Right?

I stare up at the ceiling. I'm on the edge of the bed with the pretty floral-patterned bedspread. Dex is next to me, Tudie is next to her, and Jackanet is at our feet. I roll over onto my stomach and face Torvold lying on the floor next to me. He's wide awake. Calx is in his hand as if he spent the night with it unsheathed.

"Did you sleep at all?" I whisper to him.

He shrugs in a non-committal way. "You?" he whispers back.

I shrug back.

"Are you frightened the Thrall will return?" he asks.

I frown, thinking about my sleepless night. "I'm doubting my course of action," I admit honestly.

He smiles up at me. His tired eyes look relieved. "Good."

I take a moment to really look him over. And not in a hormonal way, for a change. This is a guy who just spent the night on the floor, holding a sword that probably weighs about twenty pounds, after crossing a forest and fighting battles, all so he can protect other people. If I want to be the hero of my own story, I'd better start taking my cues from him.

"If you had a chance to strike at someone who had destroyed so much and hurt so many, wouldn't you take the risk?" I ask him.

He swallows hard and looks away. "It matters not what I would do. You are too important to endanger yourself, princess."

"I'm no more important than anyone in this room," I whisper. "And less than some." He looks back at me, eyes burning, ready to argue, but I don't let him. "I'm handy with small blades, but I'll need to be prepared for any misfortune in order to confront Asphodel." My mouth goes dry, because now I'm actually considering this madness. "You could teach me."

He shakes his head, and it hurts me that he won't teach me. I look away from him, and I'm about to turn over but he reaches up to stop me.

"I know you're brave and I know you can fight," he whispers, and again I see that impressed look on his face. "But I'm the only one who can kill Asphodel." He touches Calx beside him to remind me.

"Oh, that's right," I mutter, face falling. "I'm not the bearer of the Puce Pinkerknuckle." I look at him mischievously. "Tudie doesn't believe it exists."

He grins at me and moves as if to roll over and show me his butt. "Do you want to see it?"

"No." I giggle quietly, smacking his chest. He captures my hand and keeps it.

"I don't know if it's really there or not," he jokes, tugging me toward him. "I've never been able to bend that way."

I'm trying not to laugh too hard or fall out of the bed. I don't want to wake the others just yet. I want him to myself for as long I can have him.

Because Torvold won't get close enough to kill Asphodel until about three quarters of the way through the book. It's the one thing I know for

certain. Torvold the Bold heroically challenges Asphodel at the battle of Knob Knoll, and he dies.

Torvold sees my mirth dissolve and he holds my hand tightly against his chest.

“Aid me in my quest and abandon your own.” He stops himself, like he knows what he’s asking is tantamount to treason, but he sticks to his guns and continues. “You could save many lives, but the one thing you cannot do is kill Asphodel. Please, Princess.”

“But Jackanet thinks I could...”

“Jackanet is searching for any way to spare me,” Torvold interrupts gently. “He is the one who suggested to the other knights that I protect the Virtues, rather than ride out and demand single combat against Asphodel.”

I frown. “Why would he do that?”

“He’s worried I’ll lose,” Torvold says. He rubs my fingers in his. “I was sent on this quest as a diversion, but I know there is only one resolution to this war.”

And so do I. I’ve had plenty of reason to dislike the author of this book in the past—the ax in the face spell comes to mind—but never so much as now.

We stay like that for a long time. Me looking down on him from the edge of the bed, and him holding my hand against his chest until the room turns pink with newborn light.



When the others finally wake, we rattle around the cottage looking for food, heating water to freshen up, and generally pulling ourselves together before we head out again.

Torvold goes to the stables to feed Thunder while the rest of us rob the joint.

“Who was our hostess, and where did she go?” I ask as I ransack her kitchen. I look up and notice Tudie, Dex, and Jackanet sharing a look. “What?” I ask, throwing my hands up.

“You didn’t recognize her?” Dex asks.

“Should I have?” I reply.

“Come on now,” Jackanet says, disbelievingly. His eyebrows have practically disappeared into his hairline.

“What?” I repeat, this time feeling put-upon. “I didn’t recognize her! Who is she?”

“Just like a woman,” Jackanet grumbles as he turns away from me. He starts gathering up provisions with a little more force than necessary. “She knocked Torvold halfway to his maker, but you? Didn’t even recognize her.”

I look around. Everyone is suspiciously busy at the moment. “I have no idea what’s going on,” I announce.

“It’s all right, dearie,” Tudie says gently. “You’ll know who she is when you *know*. No one can explain it to you. We’ll have to leave it at that.”

“It’s comforting to know she’s still out there,” Jackanet says quietly, almost reverently. “I wonder if the other two are faring as well.”

“What other two?” I ask, growing testy. “She’s part of a set, I’m assuming?”

“The Big Three,” Dex says, nodding. “Without them, Lucitopia is lost.”



We are back on the road before midday, and though we are following an actual road across the Fields of Plenty, I don’t know where it leads. Or where I’m going. Or what I’m doing with my life in general.

Torvold has fallen back with Jackanet, and the two of them are deep in discussion. I hover for a while but give up when I see that they are not about to break apart.

“Do you know where we’re going?” I ask Dex.

“Our hostess last night—” she says, but I interrupt.

“You’re really not going to tell me who she was?” I ask, flabbergasted.

“I can’t,” Dex complains. “It’s one of those life revelation things. You’ve got to go through it yourself. Now, do you want me to answer your question or not?”

“Yes,” I sigh, rolling my eyes.

“Our *hostess* told Torvold that another of the Big Three is traveling with some minstrels. While our hostess never really dies, which I’ve

unfortunately come to learn, the other two in the Big Three can.”

I frown as I walk. “When did Torvold talk to her?” I ask.

Dex shrugs. “After we fell asleep, I expect. He must have awoken and the two of them shared words.”

I can’t help but think about how pretty she was, and how amazing she smelled. Who wouldn’t fall madly in love with her?

“Huh,” I say, glancing back at Torvold.

Dex squints at me. “Huh, what?” she asks.

I walk casually. Bored, even. “It’s just, he and I spoke before the rest of you woke and he didn’t mention that he’d *shared words* with her.” Okay, that sounded jealous even to me.

Dex suppresses a smile. “Must have slipped his mind.”

I’m stewing. It’s silly to keep thinking about this. There are other ways for me to spend my time, like figuring out what my quest is going to be. I can’t follow Torvold around like a lost little puppy, living off his reflected glory. If I’m going to get out of here—and I am getting out of here—I have to stop going with the flow and be an active character. I can’t let some guy make all the important decisions for me. I hate girls like that. It’s like, get your own quest, sweetie, and stop following Mr. Muscles around.

Tudie comes alongside me. She’s practically jogging to keep up. I realize I must have pulled away from the group.

“We’ve all stopped for lunch,” she says, gesturing back the way we came.

I stop and glance back. I can’t even see anyone. “How far back?” I ask. The Fields of Plenty have turned into rolling hills, scattered with clumps of trees. At some point while I stomped along, the scenery changed.

“Er—far,” she says, grimacing.

“I have food in my pack,” I say, feeling sheepish. “Doesn’t make sense for us to go all the way back now.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she agrees. Tudie takes me by the arm and walks a little with me further up the road. “Let’s find a nice place to sit in the shade and talk over whatever’s bothering you.”

We walk along in silence for a while, heading for a copse of trees just a bit off the road, when I get a funny feeling. It’s the *duck* feeling—not quite as serious as the *run like hell* feeling, but in the same ballpark. I’ve learned to listen to feelings like that, so I duck and pull Tudie down with me.

I shush her before she can yelp or ask a stupid question like *what's going on* when I obviously don't know what's going on because I'm crouching down behind a bush.

We both hear voices coming from the copse of trees. Then we hear a rough voice being raised, followed by splintering and a discordant twanging sound. Something musical just got broken.

"It could be the minstrels we're looking for," Tudie guesses hopefully. She's keeping her voice down, though.

"Possibly," I allow. "But I don't think they'd smash their instruments."

"Bandits, then," Tudie decides. "Do you think they saw us coming up the road?"

I shrug. "If they did, they'll send someone to get us."

"Should we run back for Torvold?"

"They'll *definitely* see us then, and if they have horses, they'll catch us. Our best bet is to stay hidden, get closer, and try to find out if it's safe to approach them or not."

Tudie nods once, ready to go into stealth mode, and she and I creep through the bushes toward the voices until we're close enough to see what's going on.

We find two festively painted carts among the trees. Both have been ransacked, and one is missing a wheel. Sparkly costumes and make-up pots are tossed across the leaf litter. There are a few wigs scattered here and there as well. Tudie and I frown at each other and keep our heads down as we get closer.

We peek into a small clearing among the trees and see seven rough men standing in a strategic circle. They are definitely bandits. They have horses. And they've got a bunch of underfed, pale, and arty-looking people tied up on the ground.

One of the captives is set apart from the rest. She's only about seven years old. She has long, straight, black hair and almond-shaped eyes. And she's wearing a white dress.

IS THAT A HEDGEHOG IN YOUR POCKET?

The biggest, meanest looking bandit is moving about the inside of the circle, soapboxing to the tied-up minstrels. A shattered lute lays next to an unconscious man who is bleeding from the head.

“Look ‘ere,” the biggest bandit says, “The rest of you can go. We just want the White Witch. But first, we need you to tell us where you found her. Is that so hard?”

“We’ll tell you nothing!” shouts a redheaded kid in a bright green tunic.

One of the other bandits gives him a cuff, but he puts a little too much pepper in his swing. The redhead falls to the ground in a heap, unconscious.

“Sorry,” the bandit says sheepishly.

“You can’t keep knocking everyone out,” the big leader says. “Who am I going to question then?”

“Didn’t mean to.” He slinks away from the red and green heap.

The biggest bandit turns back to the remaining minstrels. “Maybe you’d like us to bring you to Asphodel?” he says. “Because if you don’t tell us where you saw this little witch’s friends, we’ll *have* to bring you to him. And nobody wants that, right?”

He spins around, throwing his arms out wide and smiling.

Ew. Asphodel obviously does not include dental in his henchmen plan.

“You tell us where the other White Witches are, we make more money for bringing them to Asphodel, and you get to keep your souls,” Raging Gingivitis is saying in his most reasonable voice. “How ‘bout it?”

I've seen enough. I pull Tudie back until she and I can speak without being heard.

"We can't leave her. She's one of the Big Three," Tudie says. "She's too important—far more important than me. We must save her."

It's not like I was going to leave her. She's just a kid. However, I was going to suggest we hide until dark and then run back to get Torvold. But now that Fortitude itself is telling me to knuckle up, I do. I swing my pack off my back and put it down between us.

"We need a plan. I've got some spells on me."

I pull out a small tie-string bag and place each spell gently on the ground between us. There's a yellow one the size of a baseball, a silver one the size of a soft ball, and a tiny brown one the size of a marble.

"What do they do?"

I point to each in order and name what's in them. "Bees, bear trap, and hedgehog."

"What's so terrible about the hedgehog?"

"I think he's rabid," I say. Tudie makes a doubtful face. "It's the best I could get! Where are *your* spells, by the way?" I say, feeling put-upon.

"All right, all right." Tudie relents. "Put the rodent away. I think we can manage with the bees and the bear trap."

I tuck the tiny hedgehog spell into my skirt pocket so I don't lose it, and offer Tudie a choice between the other two. She takes the bees.

"Okay, so what we have to do is..." I trail off when I see Tudie look over my shoulder and stiffen. "There's a bandit right behind me, isn't there?"

"Two," Tudie says regretfully.

I turn and see two scruffy looking men. I don't recognize them from the circle in the clearing. They must be the look-outs.

"What you have to do, pretty, is stand up and come join the party," drawls the bandit behind me.

"Join the party," the other one parrots, guffawing.

They've got a smarmy way about them. I've had plenty of time to get acquainted with their type in the post-Knob Knoll version of Lucitopia. These are the guys who start carrying off all the women under twenty after the White Witches are dead.

"Bees," I say to Tudie, standing slowly to give her cover.

“Bees?” she repeats dumbly. Then she gets it. “Oh, bees!” She throws the spell and it hits the guffawing bandit right in the face.

“My eyes!” he starts screaming. “I’m not supposed to get bees in them!”

The other bandit tackles me before I can throw the bear trap. I roll with him and clasp my arms tightly around his neck (despite the full-frontal assault of his BO) so I can get at the blade I’ve got tucked up my sleeve. I pull it out and let go of his head. He rears back and sees that I’m about to stab him in the eye. He moves up and to the side just enough that all I do is skewer the fleshy part of his ear. My blade goes right through it and dangles there, like a giant and very goth piercing.

Having a knife in his ear is enough to get him to fall off me, though, and luckily, he lands right on the bear trap. BO starts kicking and flailing and howling like crazy.

“Run!” I yell, jumping up and grabbing Tудie.

She digs in her heels. “We can’t leave.”

I throw my head back and growl, “Virtue is a pain!” I turn her around and give her a little push away from danger. “You run and get Torvold, I’ll get the little girl!”

I double-check my bodice for my blades as I scurry through the underbrush and head back to the clearing. I need a plan. Plan, plan-a-plan-a-plan-plan.

I don’t have a plan, and I’m at the clearing. Instead of seven bandits, there are now four. That’s good in that there are fewer bandits for me to fight here in the clearing, but bad because that means there are three bandits that have been sent to find out what the yelling is about. I hope Tудie is a fast runner.

I hear a man’s blood-curdling scream that ends in a gurgle from the brush behind me. I’m pretty good at identifying screams after my long tenure in Lucitopia, and I think that was Bees in the Eyes dying a bloody death. Spells can’t kill. They’re only illusion. Something else is going on.

Raging Gingivitis sends out one more guy to check on the others. I hide behind the tree while he runs past me and then start psyching myself up.

Gingivitis is having a little conference with his two remaining cohorts. He’s yelling at them, and they’re leaning back. Apparently, Raging Gingivitis’ last name is Halitosis. I edge around the clearing, keeping low,

until I get near to where the White Witch is tied up on the ground. But there isn't enough cover for me to cut her bonds without the bandits seeing me.

It's time to get heroic. I step out, fully exposed.

"Ho there!" I yell.

I unleash the hedgehog.

It lands right in the middle of the bandits' huddle, and straight away I know this spell is different. I can't see the whole hedgehog, but I can see its furry little outline as it leaps and scurries in a frantic tumble of quills and rabies.

It's a group spell. Fancy.

All three of the bandits experience the same thing at the same time, and apparently, it's bad. They start pushing at the faint outline, screaming, "Get it off! Get it off!" in a perfect chorus of terror.

I take my blade and cut the White Witch's bonds.

"That was marvelous!" she says, jumping up. She gestures to my knife. "May I?" she asks.

I hand it to her and she runs over to the other minstrels and starts cutting their bonds. Now that she's at it, I take out another blade and go help her. I guess it would be very un-classy to leave the rest of them here like that, but that hedgehog isn't going to last forever. I paid practically nothing for it.

Unfortunately, I'm right. By the time we get the medieval drama club free, Gingivitis has pushed through the worst of the spell and he stumbles over to grab onto the White Witch. She screams and jabs at him with my knife, but she's not the stabby type. And she's, like, *seven*, so arm strength is an issue.

I make a move to run at them, but Gingivitis holds my stolen blade up to the little White Witch's throat.

And now I'm pissed. It's bad enough that thugs like this are after Dex and Tudie, but she's just a kid.

"Let her go!" I snarl at him.

"Or you'll what?" he says, taunting me. He's still getting gnawed on by the hedgehog, but he's got such a huge wellspring of naturally occurring jerk in him that it can't help but bubble to the surface in the form of banter. He leers at me. "You're an interesting one, aren't you?"

"Let go of that little girl and I'll show you how interesting," I promise.

I'm in a crouch and I'm starting to come around. I'm going to try to flank him while my disease-riddled compadre still has some steam in him. I've palmed another blade from my dress and I'm hiding it in the folds of my skirt, but the other two guys are starting to recover now. I'm going to be in a lot of trouble in a second.

I hear footsteps running up fast behind me. I look just in time to see Torvold, turned into a bolt of pure fury, as he slashes through the two bandits behind me.

"That's far enough!" Gingivitis screams frantically. The little witch gives a girlish shriek as the blade cuts a tiny bit into her skin.

Torvold comes to an abrupt halt next to me. "You all right, Princess?" he asks. His voice is low, and his teeth are bared.

"Fine," I say crisply. "Except I really don't like him."

I might be crazy, but I think half of Torvold's mouth just twitched up into a smile.

"You two a couple, then?" Gingivitis says, wagging his eyebrows at Torvold. "She's a game one. I bet she gives you a run for it, though, doesn't she?"

I can feel Torvold's temper getting away from him. Gingivitis can see it, too.

"I've got a game for you," I say before Gingivitis can push Torvold into making a mistake. "You let go of the girl, and I throw a blade right between your eyes."

"You're just bluffing," Gingivitis says.

"Your men are dead," Torvold says, his temper restored. "You're all alone in this. I've taken your horses, your provisions, and the only weapon you have is a dagger. You will never make it back to Asphodel alive."

What a *gangsta*.

Torvold eases to the left and I edge more toward the right. If we split up, one of us might be able to get behind him. Gingivitis starts backing up, trying to keep the two of us in his sights.

"Stop right there," Gingivitis growls again, and he squeezes the little girl closer to him. She whimpers, and I try a different tactic.

I see a lump just behind Gingivitis. The lump is the unconscious red-headed minstrel in green. He's blended in down there with the leaf litter. I

hold both my hands up and let the blade I've palmed slip to the ground. I take one slow step toward the hostage situation.

"Do you know who I am, sirrah?" I ask the bandit. He frowns, his eyes darting between me and Torvold. He takes a step back. I take another step forward and smile brightly. "I'm Princess Pleasant."

"Pull the other one," he tells me, disbelievingly.

"I am," I insist, taking another step. "And if it's gold you're after, I have coffers full of it."

He takes another step back. "You do look rather like her," he admits.

"Just let me have the child," I say sweetly. I take one last step. "That's all I care about."

He takes that final step back and stumbles over the red-headed boy.

"Torvold!" I yell, but he's already two steps ahead of me.

Torvold catches the White Witch in his arms and rolls away from the bandit, shielding the girl with his body.

Gingivitis pops back up on his feet before I can get a dagger out of my garters (stupid petticoats) and he dashes into the trees. I'm a few hundred yards after him when I hear the distinct sound of horse hooves pounding the ground. A few moments more and I catch a glimpse of him through the brush, and then he breaks the tree line and I can see him riding off the road and across the rolling hills.

I stand there, watching him disappearing toward the setting sun.

"He rides west, toward Asphodel," Torvold says behind me. I turn and his eyes dart down to the dagger in my hand. He blurts out, "How many of those do you have?"

"A few," I hedge. I look down at the little White Witch clutching Torvold's hand. "Are you injured?" I ask her.

She touches the cut on her neck. "It stings," she says. "But I'm already recovered."

"I have bandages in my saddle bag, your Grace," Torvold tells the little girl. "Let us rejoin the others."

As I pass through the clearing I start gathering up all my blades and hiding them in my dress. The White Witch runs to aid her minstrel friends, telling them that they've been rescued.

"Why did you go ahead of us like that?" Torvold asks behind me.

I don't look at him. I retrieve the knife that Gingivitis took from the littlest Witch. "I wanted to enjoy the air," I reply, turning away from Torvold so I can put it in my bodice.

"Enjoy the—" he begins but cuts off when I stride to where I dropped the dagger in the leaf litter. "You must stay with the group, Princess."

I find it, stand, and walk away from him. I head toward the trees. I left a blade in Bear Trap's ear. After a moment Torvold catches up to me. He walks backward facing me for a moment, trying to get me to look at him.

"It was very dangerous. You could have been killed," he says. I brush past him, but he follows me. "You could have gotten Fortitude killed." He's getting angry now.

I go to where I see two bloody heaps and stop. Torvold steps in front of me.

"Princess, you must promise me you won't do something like that again," he demands. He makes a frustrated sound. "I was worried about you. When I heard screaming up the road, and you were gone—" he looks away and swallows, unable to finish. He reaches out to touch my arm.

This, right here. This standing close together in the soft light of sunset with his vulnerable eyes looking down on me as he reaches out with his lips parted like he's just about to kiss me—*this* is exactly what I can't do anymore. This is the kind of malarkey that's going to get me stuck in this rotten book forever. Or worse.

I take a step back and then around him, dodging his hand. "Fear not, good Sir Knight," I say cheerfully. "I was lost in thought and travelled too far ahead. I realized my folly as soon as I encountered danger, yet I knew that a simple band of ruffians would be no match for you. You have proven your valor yet again."

I go to Bear Trap and see that his head is no longer employed by the rest of his body. I seriously consider abandoning my blade but know I shouldn't. I find his head and keep my eyes averted as I yank out the dagger. I clean it hastily on the ground, trying not to barf.

Torvold has been silent. I look up at him and wish I didn't. Though my words have been nothing but praise, he looks as though I've slapped him.

"Is that all you have to say to me, my princess?" Torvold asks.

I straighten. I shift from foot to foot. I can't bear to see him hurt. "I'm sorry I scared you," I reply contritely.

“Why did you go ahead like that?” he asks again. “Did I do something to offend you?” He takes a step closer. “Dex mentioned that you seemed angry I had spoken to our hostess alone and that I wasn’t forthcoming about it. I assure you, princess, all we did was speak.”

Put that way, my behavior seems silly now. Of course all they did was speak. I smile at my own foolishness, my face suddenly hot. He smiles when I do and moves closer to me.

“Was that it?” he asks, not letting it go until I answer him.

“Possibly,” I admit stiffly. His smile broadens until his dimple makes an appearance. He’s standing close to me again. Now he’s touching my arm and drawing me against him. My hands come up to rest on his firm chest. Didn’t I just say that I wasn’t going to do this anymore?

“Are you going to kiss her?” asks a piping voice.

Torvold and I jump apart and see the littlest witch standing not far off with her minstrel friends. They have these half-embarrassed, half-expectant looks on their faces that tell me all of them have been watching us for a while. I practically run away to find Dex and Tudie.

I can’t get jealous again. He’s not mine. I can’t get distracted by his shoulders and the dimple and the deep sweetness of his laugh. This is ridiculous. He’s a *character*. In a *book*. From now on, no more playing footsie with Torvold.

I know I’ve said that a few times before, but this time I mean it.

HE'S PRETTY, BUT HE'S GOT AN ATTITUDE

We have to camp at the clearing because it's too late for us to move down the road unless we want to travel in the dark, which is never a good idea.

It gets really dark at night here. Like, can't see your hand in front of your face dark. Plus, we have to at least try to bury the bodies. The minstrels have shovels (I don't ask why) and the more able-bodied of us take turns digging.

There are ten members of this troupe—seven men and three women. From what I can gather they are all loosely related either by blood or marriage. And in some cases, both. Which is a little disturbing to be honest.

I'm digging alongside the redheaded guy, who's named Vanil. He's in his mid-twenties, but he looks fifteen.

"How fares your cousin?" I ask, referring to the guy who got the lute broken over his head.

"Bashan?" he asks. I shrug and nod, not knowing his name. "Oh, he's not my cousin, he's my uncle." Vanil thinks about it. "Well, I suppose he's also my cousin, but I call him uncle on account of he's married to my aunt, Gertie."

Vanil points out a round woman who is maybe thirty. I begin to wonder how a woman could be the aunt of someone only a few years her junior but stop myself before it gets too upsetting.

"He'll heal up in a trice," Vanil says, winking at me. "And I'm feeling much better, too, by the way."

I think he's flirting. I go back to digging. "I'm so pleased all of your troupe will recover from this dreadful encounter."

A thought suddenly occurs to him. "Oh no," he says, dropping his shovel. "We forgot about Rancor."

I climb out of my hole and follow him. "Is there a member of your party missing?" I ask urgently.

"Bloody hell," Vanil says, looking around at the near darkness. He finds a coil of rope and throws it over his shoulder. "We can't let him run around. It's not safe."

"I'll help you find him," I say.

Vanil looks at me like I'm crazy, then changes his mind. "Yes, you'd make perfect bait," he says, grabbing my hand and dragging me along with him.

"Pardon, but did you say bait?" I ask.

"You have nothing to fear, milady. For you he will be as gentle as a lamb." Vanil thinks about it. "But watch out. He might try to stick you."

"I really don't think," I begin, but Vanil interrupts with a sharp taxi-cab-hailing whistle.

"I'll just tie you to this tree," he says casually.

"What?" I say, jerking my hand out of his.

"It's just pretend," Vanil says. He throws the rope around me and the tree trunk. "I won't even knot it. You just stand there." He makes that sharp whistle again and runs away.

I could just walk away. I'm not actually tied here, but now I'm curious about Rancor. From the way Vanil was speaking of him, I'm picturing Sloth from *Goonies*.

I hear movement. Then heavy breathing. Okay, this was a dumb idea.

"Hello?" I call out into the dark.

Something white flashes off to my left and I turn. I'm looking to make a hasty escape, when a unicorn prances right in front of me and stops. He shakes his head, his nostrils flaring.

Rancor is pure white like Thunder, and he has the same flowing mane and tail, but he's much smaller and more elegantly built. And of course there's a horn sticking out of his head. The spiral horn is swirled with a sparkling crystal, like a two-flavor soft serve ice cream, except instead of

chocolate and vanilla it's made of ivory and diamond. He does a few passes in front of me and then he approaches.

The sharp tip of his horn comes dangerously close to my face while he sniffs me. He whinnies and bares his teeth. For a moment I'm positive this bugger is going to bite me. I can tell he's thinking about it. But instead, he catches the rope between his teeth and pulls it off.

"Thank you," I say. He whinnies again. "Can I touch you, or am I going to get gored if I try?"

He drops his head. I pat it. That goes okay, so I give him a little rub behind the ears, too. He sniffs my palm and licks it.

"You want some salt?" I ask him. He sneezes. "I'll get you some salt." I start to walk away with Rancor trailing behind like a leashed puppy.

Vanil rushes toward me with a scared look on his face. "Are you *uninjured*, princess?" he asks.

"Just fine, thank you," I reply.

The unicorn follows me back to the clearing, where I've left my pack with Tudie. Everyone freezes when they see us. Torvold holds up a hand and rises from the ground slowly.

"Princess, don't make any sudden movements," Torvold says. "When I tell you, dive to the left as fast as you can."

"Why?" I ask, shrugging.

"There's a unicorn behind you."

I laugh. "I know." I turn and gesture for Rancor to keep coming.

He follows me right to where Dex and Tudie are backing away in horror. Everyone is backing away in horror. I pick up my salt pouch, shake a little into the palm of my hand and hold it out. Rancor licks my hand, over and over. When the salt is gone he *thinks* about biting it.

"That's enough of that," I tell him. We look each other in the eye. He sneezes again. I scratch his ears, looking around at everyone. "He's a little nippy, but we'll get past it," I tell them.

"A little nippy?" Vanil pulls the neck of his jerkin aside to show a big white semi-circle of scars over his shoulder. I bet if I were closer I could see the individual tooth marks. "He did that to me once when I was feeding him."

"Never turn your back on a unicorn," Bashan says. He lifts his jerkin to show me what is most likely a gore-hole from a unicorn horn in his side.

“That’s what you get if you do.”

“Why do you keep him?” Jackanet asks, dumbfounded.

The minstrels share a look. “They’re lucky,” Gertie replies, like it’s obvious.

I look at Rancor. “No one understands you, do they?” I coo. Rancor knickers. I pet his soft nose. “Where do you want to sleep tonight?” I ask him.

He turns and clip clops away. I follow him to a nice spot over by one of the wagons.

“I’ll brush you in the morning and bring you some more salt,” I promise. He nudges me, eyes closing, and I go away so he can get some sleep.

I go back to the clearing, get handed a bowl of stew, and seat myself next to the little White Witch.

“I want to ask your name but every time I do that lately I get stonewalled,” I tell her.

She doesn’t give me a hint one way or the other.

“Fine. I’m just going to ask, then. What Virtue are you?”

“Something you have lost,” she tells me, frowning down at her stew.

“Patience?” I guess dryly.

She smiles and shakes her head. “Faith.”

Not going to lie. That stings a little. “How am I supposed to have Faith when I know,” I glance over at Torvold, chatting pleasantly with Vanil, “when I *know* the story doesn’t end well?”

She looks into my eyes, seeming much older than me. In fact, she seems much older than anyone. Ever.

“What is Faith to you?” she asks in return. “Do you think it’s believing something will work out when you already know it does?”

“No,” I reply. “But I don’t think it’s the opposite of that, either.”

She glances over at Torvold. “Jump,” she says. “And the net will appear.”

There’s a unicorn nibbling on my head.

He's not technically biting me, but he is letting me know that if I don't get up and fetch him some salt, toothy things are going to happen.

I have twelve days left.

I rise and stretch. Rancor whickers at me. I pull out some salt and let him lick my hand until it's soggy. I feel gross. Like, full body nasty, and it's about to get nastier. This is another thing no one mentions in epic fantasy books. Right now I've got to find a nice spot to dig a hole, so I can poop in it. That makes me feel super princess-y.

Rancor comes with me. At least I know no one will walk up on me accidentally because everyone stays as far away from Rancor as they can.

When I rejoin the group, there is a discussion in progress about the road ahead. It's not clear yet who is going with whom.

Everyone wants Torvold to go with them. Torvold, however, thinks it would be best if we split up.

"My path is long and treacherous," Torvold is saying.

"Not if you were to come to the city with us," Bashan replies logically. "It's just up the road a pace."

Torvold frowns. "No, you don't understand. I must protect the Virtues," he says.

"What? Everybody's?" Gertie guffaws. "You must be popular at parties."

Torvold is momentarily speechless.

"Sir Torvold the Bold is on a quest," Jackanet announces grandly. "He cannot escort you to the city."

"How do you know his quest doesn't lead to the city?" Vanil asks.

"Lots of virtues in the city," Gertie adds. "Course, most of them are for sale."

Faith tugs on Torvold's arm, and he bends down so she can whisper in his ear. "Really?" he asks doubtfully. Faith nods. "All right then," Torvold says, turning to the minstrels. "I will accompany you to the city."

The minstrels look very relieved.

"Sure, you can tag along with us," Vanil says. Bashan gives him a look. "What?" Vanil says.

"Gather your things, everyone. We're off to Market Town!" Bashan announces.

I go to grab my pack and Rancor follows me. I get my bedroll in order and sort my stuff. I'm stalling, I know, but this time I'm finally going to do something. I'm not just going to let this story happen to me anymore. I'm going to make it my own. I just need a minute. When I've had my minute and can't stall any longer, I shoulder my pack and go to Jackanet where he is readying Thunder. Jackanet jumps and covers his heart when he sees Rancor.

"May I have a look at that map?" I ask Jackanet.

"Of course," he says, eyes still on the unicorn. He digs into the saddle bag and pulls out a piece of parchment.

I find where we are on the map easily. There's a red X marking our spot. (It's an enchanted map.)

I look to the western edge where a large black castle dominates an area that has been made extra mysterious by the artist's liberal use of *sfumato*. I fold up the map and hand it back to Jackanet.

"Thank you. Take care of yourself," I say. I have to look away. "And take care of *him*."

I turn to leave, but Jackanet catches my arm. "Hang on," he says. Rancor paws the ground and snaps his teeth. Jackanet wisely releases me and jerks back. "Come with us to Market Town," he suggests, though reluctantly. "I know you have a quest of your own, and I'm not stopping you, exactly."

"Then what are you doing?"

"I'm asking you to come with us. Market Town is only a day's ride away from—that place you were looking at on the map." He drops his eyes. "Please, Princess. You still have time."

I frown at him suspiciously. "How do you know how much time I've got?"

"Everyone knows." He sees my confusion and explains. "While you were in your tower, Asphodel made a decree that if you weren't his bride by Midsummer, he would gather his army at Knob Knoll, ride across the land, and burn everything."

I drop my face into my hand and rub my brow. Knob Knoll. Where many of the Virtues ...and Torvold ... die.

"When is Midsummer?" I ask, looking back up at Jackanet.

"Four days from now," he answers.

HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?

There are plenty of places to sit in the carriages, and now that nine mounts have found themselves bandit-less, there are also plenty of horses to ride.

But I have to walk.

Rancor won't let me or my salt get more than a few paces away from him and no one will get more than ten paces within Rancor. The other horses are terrified of him, too.

Torvold has been busying himself all morning making sure that the White Witches are no longer wearing white but are disguised in costumes supplied by the minstrels. I don't want to ask Tudie or Dex and insult them, but I'm wondering why when Asphodel put out his *fatwa* on White Witches, not one of them thought it might be a good day to try, say, yellow.

Once we're on our way, Torvold rides to the end of our merry little parade (where I am) with a stormy look on his face.

"Why are you on foot, princess?" he asks me.

I point my thumb back at Rancor, my face stiff with annoyance.

Torvold chuckles. "Why aren't you riding him then?"

Rancor and I share a look, and I shake my head. "We're not ready for that."

I cough. It's hard to breathe, what with all the hooves and wagons wheels kicking up dust in front of me. I blow a pebble from between my lips. Torvold's shoulders are shaking with quiet laughter.

“I wish I could ride,” I say, hoping to make the unicorn feel guilty. “It’s very gritty back here.”

Torvold wheels Thunder around and reaches his hand down. “Climb up,” he tells me. Rancor paws the ground and tosses his head, but Thunder is not afraid of him.

I know I shouldn’t. I should just trudge along back here with my antisocial mythical beast, eating road dirt and getting blisters. But instead, I take Torvold’s hand and he pulls me up. I sit semi-sidesaddle in front of him, with one leg cocked around the pommel. Rancor trots up and tries to bite Torvold, but Thunder won’t have any of that. He faces Rancor and goes right at him. Rancor backs off, but not that far. He looks at me and sneezes.

“I’m right here, you big baby,” I tell Rancor. He whickers at me and settles in next to Thunder, acting docile, but probably plotting his revenge.

I forgot how comfortable it was to lean back against Torvold. Even with the chainmail on. I’m not getting all hot and bothered, I’m just noticing basic bodily topography. It just so happens that where I dip, he swells.

That didn’t come out right.

“You are quiet, my princess,” Torvold says. The side of his face brushes against mine as he tries to curve around me and see my expression.

As a conversation starter, that one stinks. What is anyone supposed to do with that? If I had something that I thought I could say out loud, I would. The problem is, in my head, where the commentary is usually PG, all my thoughts are starting to sound R rated. And this isn’t that kind of book.

“Have you been to the city before?” I ask, figuring my best bet is to change the subject.

“Many times,” Torvold replies. “I was born in a city.”

“Me too,” I answer honestly. “But I’ve been away from people for a while.”

“Did your handmaidens accompany you to the tower?”

I think about my friends back in Los Angeles and how I had to leave them when I moved. I didn’t even bother to try and make friends in Fresno, or even raise my eyes from the floor long enough to see other faces in halls, for that matter. I knew I’d be graduating and leaving them soon, too. I gave up on even trying to be happy, I guess.

“No. I’ve been alone this whole time.”

He’s silent for a while. “That must have been difficult.”

“I could have made it easier on myself. I could have had companions, but I was angry,” I admit. I drop my head. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes.”

“It seems to me, princess, that many things have occurred that have been out of your hands.” He curves around me again to see my expression. “I, too, would be angry if I had to leave my home and go to a place that is much like a prison, all because of other people’s desires.”

I meet his eyes—and I know he’s talking about Princess Pleasant. I haven’t totally lost my mind yet. But everything he’s saying fits me. Like he fits me. I look away, trying not to cry. This is not a crying moment. He’s a great guy who thinks I’m someone I’m not. Also, a little perspective is in order. I moved to Fresno, I did not get locked in a tower. Well, not until I locked myself in one, that is.

“Thank you,” I say, when my voice is steady again.

“Why do you thank me?”

“For your compassion. It’s been a long time since anyone has tried to understand me.”

He brushes his cheek against my hair. “I want to understand everything about you,” he says softly.

Why did I get on his horse? Could I get any dumber?

Jackanet rides back to join us, but he keeps Thunder in between himself and Rancor. “Milord, Market Town is on the horizon,” he reports. “We should be there before sundown.”

“Thank you, good Squire,” Torvold replies.

Jackanet looks me over, and he doesn’t seem too happy. “Might I suggest something, princess?”

“Please do,” I reply warily.

“It’s just, what with Asphodel saying he’s going to kill everyone if you don’t marry him, there are a lot of people who think you should just, well, you know, *do* it so they can live.” Torvold shoots him a look and Jackanet holds up a placating hand. “I’m only pointing out that it would be a good idea if she didn’t announce the fact that she was the princess whilst in town in case some pitchfork-carrying mob gets it into their heads that they should drag her off to Asphodel.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised. Now I want to retract my former snarky thoughts about the White Witches and their wardrobe choices.

“Not that Sir Torvold the Bold couldn’t protect you from a pitchfork-carrying mob,” Jackanet interjects hastily.

“But it would be better for all if he didn’t have to,” I reply, nodding. I take off the circlet around my head. “Would you keep this for me, Sir Torvold?” I turn to hand it to him, and immediately know I’ve done something wrong.

Torvold is overwhelmed for a moment. “Your-your maiden’s circlet,” he stammers, blushing furiously.

Whoops. I think I just symbolically offered him my virginity.

I’m trying to work out a way to walk that back, when he takes it and puts it under his chainmail. I see the outline of his hand tucking it into some fold of his clothing, right over his heart.

“I will guard it with my life,” he vows.

Jackanet is doing that thing again where his eyebrows practically disappear into his hairline. He clears his throat and says, “If you would accompany me, princess, to the second cart. There are dresses inside it for you to choose from.”

Torvold brings Thunder to a stop and dismounts. Then he takes my waist and lifts me out of the saddle and places me gently on the ground between him and Thunder. He looks down at me. I lean against him because I’m getting a little weak in the knees. With my hand on his chest, I can feel my maiden’s circlet under his clothes.

I know it’s silly for both of us to get this worked up about a symbolic piece of head bling, but I can’t help it. Symbolism can be pretty dang hot.

“Ah-hem.”

Torvold and I jump apart.

I keep my eyes on my feet as I hurry to follow Jackanet. Rancor trots behind me. He nudges me with his nose. I stop to give him a rub behind the ears before I go into the cart.

Gertie is in there with Dex and Tudie. They’re sitting on poofs and their heads are bent together in conspiracy. Dex shoves something out of sight and they all look at me like there’s nothing going on. There’s definitely something going on. Gertie glances up at my brow where my maiden circlet rested until just a few moments ago.

“Lose something, princess?” she asks. Dex and Tudie burst out laughing.

“If you must know,” I say, raising my voice to talk over the hoots, “after discussing it, we decided it best that I go into town disguised, and so I gave it to Sir Torvold.”

Dex laughs so hard she falls off her poof. Hang on. Dexterity is looking uncharacteristically clumsy all of a sudden.

“Have you all been drinking *spirits*?” I ask, shocked.

Tudie and Gertie laugh so hard *they* fall off their poofs. Already down there, Dex gurgles on the floor. I tap my foot and wait for them to have their laugh. I probably shouldn’t have said *gave it to him*.

Gertie recovers first. She pulls out the bottle of whatever it is, takes a swig, grimaces, and says, “We mean no offence, your highness. In fact, it’s been quite nice for us to watch you and your young man falling in love.”

“He’s not my young man, and we’re not in love,” I snap.

Gertie trains a bleary eye on me. “I know plenty of girls in the city who’ll be overjoyed to hear it.” She nudges Tudie. “Ten years ago, I’d have taken a swipe at him.”

“Who wouldn’t,” Tudie chortles, grabbing the bottle. “He’ll have girls lined up around the block!”

They all start laughing again. I go over to where the costumes are hanging and start going through them, but really, I’m just hiding my face because—I’m not bawling or anything—but I’m starting to cry. And it’s one of those cries that the more you try to *not* do it, the worse it gets.

“Oh, hey. Wait,” Dex says, getting up and coming over to me. She touches my arm, but I shrug her off.

“No, he should,” I say, sniffing. “He should meet those girls and enjoy himself and be happy.” I can hear Rancor kicking the side of the cart and whinnying.

They all stare at me.

“You’re going to do it then,” Tudie says sadly. “Jackanet told us about how you looked at the map to find the Ebon Spire.”

I pause. The Ebon Spire? Is that really...I mean, that’s the Dark Tower. What a *rip off*.

“Are you really going to marry Asphodel?” Dex asks.

I nod and step back, refusing to let anyone touch my arm or try to comfort me.

“I can’t let everyone die in the battle at Knob Knoll. I can’t let *him* die.” Even the thought of it makes me cry harder. I wipe the tears off my cheeks. They are really streaming now. Rancor starts ramming his horn into the side of the cart, and it’s getting to the point where we can’t ignore him anymore. “He wants the salt,” I say. I go to the door, stick my tear-soaked hand outside, and let Rancor lick away. I roll my eyes. “Stupid unicorn.”

“It’s not the salt, it’s your tears he wants. For a unicorn, the tears of a broken heart are used—” Gertie stops herself. “Never mind. Listen carefully, child. Even if you go to Asphodel, he’ll just kill you and say you never came. The battle at Knob Knoll is going to happen no matter what you do.”

I sit down in a heap next to the threadbare silks, sequins, and low-cut bodices. “I know it’s a trap. Everyone knows it’s a trap.” I shake my head. “But I can’t do nothing. I’ve done that already, and it doesn’t work.”

They don’t have anything to say. Because, really, there is nothing *to* say. In these types of stories, the men who wrote them always forgot that the princess wasn’t a symbol. She was a person who could get up and walk all the way to the Ebon Spire and call the bad guy’s bluff.

And that’s exactly what I must do in three days. Well, at least I now have a quest. It feels good to finally start making some choices about my future. Short though it may be.

“What should I wear?” I ask brightly.

Gertie narrows her eyes and shakes a finger at me. “You, my lady, should wear the pink dress.” She gets up and finds it on the rack.

There are no sequins on this one, and it isn’t as threadbare as the others, but it is decidedly the lowest cut, most tightly fitting bodice I have ever seen in Lucitopia.

“It doesn’t leave much to the imagination,” I say, balking.

“Torvold will imagine *plenty* when he sees you in this,” Gertie promises.

“Pink is so pretty,” Dex enthuses. “And it will look amazing with your auburn hair.”

I laugh, unlacing the much higher neckline of my dark blue dress. “Pretty in pink,” I say.

“Exactly!” all three ladies say at once, not getting it.

LIGHTS! CAMERA! KNIVES!

I step out of the carriage.

Every girl has that dream of walking down the stairs and making the jaws drop and the music stop. Her skin glows, and her hair is a shining mass of gorgeousness and the dress—oh, honey. The *dress*. The dress is the icing on the cake, and who eats the cake, right?

I've had that dream of being that girl. Let's be honest—that's why most girls want a big wedding. They want that door to open and for everyone to fall over in awe.

Spoiler alert, it doesn't happen for me in the pink dress.

Sure, jaws drop. I get a whistle from a few of the minstrels, and then Torvold gallops over on Thunder and says, "That dress is entirely inappropriate."

He dismounts, grabs my arm, turns me around, and starts pushing me back up the steps of the cart.

"What?" I say, nearly choking on my indignation. "I will wear whatever I want, thank you very much!"

"A woman's person is her own, and she may display it as she sees fit. But I made an oath when you gave me your maiden's circlet, and since I would rather not have to kill half the men in Market Town defending your virtue, you will find something else to wear or you will stay inside the cart for the rest of the trip!" he growls at me. Then he shoves me inside and shuts the door.

I hear Rancor knicker outside, like he's laughing at me. I stand there staring at Tudie, Dex, and Gertie for a moment. To be honest, I'm relieved. While I firmly believe that any woman has the right to wear whatever she likes, I don't really *like* this dress. I'm not comfortable walking around worrying that one of my boobs is going to come flying out if I take too deep of a breath. And I like to be able to take deep breaths, which the pink dress does not allow me to do. Also, I'd rather avoid senseless bloodshed if I can.

"I think it best we find something else," I state.

"Well, there's this green velvet one," Tudie suggests cheerfully. She holds it up, and it's perfect.

Simple, elegant, old-fashioned maybe, but well-cut and made of high-quality material.

I put it on and it fits, although in keeping with the style of the minstrels, it is a little snug around the bosom. I'm high and tight, but I'm not tumbling out of anything.

The delicately puffed cap sleeves drape over the outermost portion of my shoulders, leaving a lot of skin. But it's only neck, shoulder, and upper-chest skin, and not flagrant cleavage or side-boob. The dress isn't perfect. I don't like that I don't have sleeves for my blades, and that the bodice is too tight for anything sharp. I'll have to get by with just two daggers in my garters. Luckily, this skirt is easy to pull up. I'm not going to spend too much time thinking about why.

I decide to put my hair half up. I make a small braid with a single golden strand woven through it and twist the braid around my head. I can't wear my maiden's circlet, but I'll wear something like it.

This time, when I step out of the carriage, I get the response I'm looking for. Not from the minstrels. They turn away bored. But I get the reaction I've always dreamed of from Torvold.

His frowning face lifts and catches light. I see him draw in a breath that he holds as if it might be his last. He steps forward and offers me his hand. I place my fingertips on his and he draws them to his heart, pressing the backs of my fingers against the place where my maiden's circlet hides.

"You look beautiful, prin—," Torvold stops and laughs. "I almost called you by your title, which I must not do. What shall I call you while we are in Market Town?" he asks quietly.

I almost give him my real name because I want to hear him say it, but I reconsider at the last moment. This dress is making me feel a little sassy.

“I think, Sir Torvold, that you would be too high above my station as a simple minstrel to call me anything but girl,” I say tartly. Might as well get into the part.

I pull my hand from his and glide over to where Gertie, Tudie, and Dex are watching from the steps of the cart. Torvold marks me with a slit-eyed smile, his lips cocked to one side.

“*My* girl,” he corrects, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Thunder must have read the script, because at this exact moment he rears up; wheels; trots past Torvold at just the right pace for his master to swing up into the saddle; turns again; and churns up an impressive amount of sod as he gallops to the front of the caravan. Basically, Torvold just did the Camelot equivalent of burning a donut in my driveway.

Rancor whickers at me like he’s laughing again.

“Well, how am I supposed to best something like that if you won’t help me?” I ask him. “Did you see what Thunder did?”

Rancor nibbles one of my cap sleeves.

“Oh, *now* you’re sorry.” I rub his soft nose. “Come on. I’ll find you some fresh tears to drink.”

Rancor blows air out of his nose, but he doesn’t sneeze like he normally would, which strikes me as odd. He sounds congested. I wonder if unicorns can catch colds.

We enter Market Town a good hour before sunset. I’m about ten steps in, when I realize this is *my* market—the one I’ve been going to for the past nine months. Although now, before the Battle of Knob Knoll, it is a different place altogether.

The people are healthier and better fed. The produce is fresher. The illusions aren’t there to cover up dereliction, but to add splendor to what is already scrubbed and tidy. The performers are genuinely merry, the hawkers are humorous rather than ominous, and even the foot and armpit smells are dialed way down. I hardly get a whiff of them at all in between the scent of candy apples and grilled sausage.

But the thing that make the most difference is the children. Children are everywhere. There are babies, even. My feet slow as I wonder where they all went. Or, are going to go. Seeing this place so alive and full of normal people going about their day without the slightest hint at the hopelessness that awaits them breaks my heart. How could one evil sorcerer take so much in so little time?

Rancor gives me a shove from behind to keep me moving. Not that anyone trailing us is going to complain with him taking snaps at everyone who gets too close to him. He's such a jerk.

"I don't know if bringing the unicorn was wise," Dex says, looking at him warily.

"I don't bring Rancor anywhere," I reply, grimacing. "He goes where he pleases."

Up ahead of us, Torvold is getting a hero's welcome. Flowers are being thrown in front of him, people are cheering his name, and lots of young women have suddenly materialized out of the crowd to bat their eyes at him. He's a rock star.

"Don't let it get to you, dearie," Tudie says. She links arms with me and pats the back of my hand. "Sir Torvold is not the kind to get his head turned."

As she's saying that, Torvold's head turns. He's looking down from Thunder at a buxom girl in a striped dress that would make the pink one I wore turn red with embarrassment. What was all that malarky he gave me about not wanting to kill anyone to defend my honor?

"Go bite her," I tell Rancor. I look over my shoulder at him and see that he's chewing on a candy apple. "Where did you get that?" I ask him. He finishes it and sniffs. Then he shakes his head. He still can't sneeze.

The town elders surround Sir Torvold as he dismounts.

"A feast!" one of the elders cries. "A feast tonight in honor of Sir Torvold the Bold!"

A cheer goes up. Before Torvold can be ushered away, he turns and looks over the crowd, as if searching. Lot of girls lift their chins hopefully, but he keeps looking until he finds me. He smiles as if sheepish about all the attention he's being given. I roll my eyes at his humblebrag, and his smile opens into a laugh as he goes with the elders.

The good news is that the minstrels have been hired to entertain at the feast. The bad news is I'm pretending to be a minstrel, so I have to perform. Dex has done some moonlighting as a contortionist, and has a whole routine already worked out. Tudie has asked for a chance to address the crowd directly in order to give them a rousing speech about having courage in these uncertain times. I have no doubt her "Saint Crispin's Day" monologue will be a huge success.

"What can you do?" Gertie asks me with a squint.

"She's handy with knives," Jackanet says.

"Oh," Gertie coos eagerly. "Could you hit a bunch of targets? Maybe get one through an apple resting on someone's head?"

I look around, suddenly seized with panic. "On-on stage?" I stammer. "I thought I was supposed to be hiding."

"No place better than in plain sight. We'll put a wig on you," Gertie replies, a little too happy about this. "'Ere! We've got a knife thrower!" she yells to Bashan.

Bashan looks me over. "All right then," he says. "Show me what you've got."

"I never said I—"

"Go on, then!" Jackanet says, giving me an encouraging nudge. Rancor paws the ground in warning, and Jackanet takes a step away from me. "She's a veritable terror with a blade," he continues, still eyeing the unicorn.

The whole troupe of minstrels is staring at me expectantly. I sigh and reach under my skirt.

"This is getting interesting," Vanil says, waggling his eyebrows.

I give him a look and throw my blade right from the sheath. It goes through his hat and sticks it into the wood of the cart behind him.

The minstrels share a look.

"You two can go on after Dex," Faith says with a nod. Faith, it seems, has become the stage manager in her short tenure with this troupe. Makes perfect sense.

“Hang on,” Vanil says, feeling the top of his head. “My hat,” he laments, as he pulls the knife out of it and sticks his finger through the hole. “What do you mean *we*?”

Faith shrugs. “She needs someone to throw her knives at, doesn’t she? I think you could give her a good reason. The crowd will love it. Write some banter.”

Vanil thinks over Faith’s suggestion with a “not bad” look on his face.

“All right, but she’s got to get me a new hat,” he says, pointing a finger at me. Rancor paws the ground and throws his head in warning. “And that bloody unicorn can’t come onstage.”

I look at Rancor. “Do you think you could wait backstage with Faith? Just for the show?”

He nibbles on my sleeve. I take that as a yes.

Vanil and I barely have enough time to hammer out some banter for our knife act before the show starts.

The carts are pulled up in a line and backed against each other. The canvas tops are taken off first, then metal bracers are unlatched. One long wall on each cart remains upright, but the other long wall and the two end walls hinge down to the ground, making a long, raised stage with ramps on either end and a background behind it. Curtains are strung up to hide the props and the performers, torches are lit, and in moments, the minstrels are ready to perform.

They each take an instrument and fan out in the audience. Though they are down a lute since the run-in with the bandits, even those without instruments do a fine bit of singing to gather the crowd.

I can’t sing a note to save my life, so I follow Faith’s example and start skipping up to people, taking them by the hand and pulling them to the open area in front of our carts. Rancor trots happily behind me. He still won’t let anyone touch him, but everyone wants to. The adults he snaps at, but for the children he tosses his pretty head and plays coy.

The children scream and chase after him with sticky fingers. Rancor leads them to the front of the audience. When they sit he licks all of the children who are either salty from crying or sweet with candy—so, all of them. The littlest ones squeal with delight.

“He’s not as heinous as I thought he was,” Torvold says in my ear.

He's standing right behind me. He's not touching me, but he's so close that I feel him in the halo around me.

"Yes, he is," I say. I turn my head to the side and glance up at Torvold. "Rancor is just tasting each child to decide which sauce to pair with them."

Torvold's head tips towards mine as he laughs. "And what does it say about you that you are so fond of him?"

I turn back to watch my devil-spawn licking his future chew toys. "What does it say about you that you are so fond of me?" I ask in return.

I feel his hands encircling my bare arms. "That you are as rare, as magical, and as hard to impress as a unicorn," he whispers.

That was a good answer.

I feel Torvold's hands drop from my arms to my hips. He draws me back against him, his lips brushing against my temple. Rancor trots up to us, throwing his head angrily. He takes a snap at Torvold.

"All right, you silly thing, I'm coming," I say, breaking away from Torvold's hold.

I chase after Rancor, following him behind the minstrel carts. I don't look back at Torvold or I know I will run straight to him and do things to him that young ladies are not supposed to do in public.

UNICORN SNOT

Dexterity *kills* it with her contortionist's routine.

She gives the crowd the full Circe du Soleil, and considering the level of entertainment available to the people in this completely fictional but vaguely British middle-ages feudal-system type world, that means she blew their minds.

Not an easy act to follow.

I hear my cue, but I do *not* want to go out there.

Faith shoves me up the steps.

I recover my footing and mount the stage. Vanil gets right to the sexual harassment, and I do the tittering behind my hand baloney, just as we'd planned. I happen to look out into the audience.

Torvold is not happy. Vanil stares very pointedly at my cleavage. Torvold is crushing something in his hand. Vanil touches my arm. Torvold is on his feet and coming towards the stage. The audience is staring at him.

"I think we've heard about enough out of this, er—man, haven't we, ladies?" I say broadly to the crowd. The ladies cheer. I turn away from the sight of Torvold rushing the stage like a bull and pull out a knife. "It's time for me to teach him some manners."

I throw my first knife, which pins Vanil to the scenery. I hear a few *oohs* from the crowd and turn back. Torvold has stopped, thankfully, but I can't leave him there to be embarrassed.

"Our Good Sir Torvold would never allow a lady to be so insulted, even in jest. He is as gallant as he is brave," I say, dropping my character for a

moment and starting a round of applause for him. The crowd loves it and they cheer for Torvold as he returns to his seat with a bow and a blush.

“Now, what shall I do with this one?” I jerk my thumb back at Vanil. The crowd starts offering suggestions. Some of them are little graphic, to be honest. Sheesh. There are kids here. “Shall I see if I can cut an apple in half?” I ask, producing the apple.

The crowd doesn’t quite get it until I place the apple on Vanil’s head. Then they’re into it.

I turn my back to the audience, preparing to throw my dagger at Vanil, who is making a big show of pleading for his life, when I see something in the darkness behind the carts coming toward us. Fast.

I hear it *thunk* against the back wall of the cart. Then I hear a scrabbling sound as something climbs up it. Vanil gives me a worried look.

I throw my blade at it as soon as whatever it is pokes its head over. It tumbles back down behind the stage immediately, but not before I see that it’s a Thrall. I whirl to the audience and find Torvold’s eyes.

“They’re here!” I shout. “Everyone run!”

Torvold is up on his feet with his sword drawn. He looks, sees a target, and runs into the darkness even as people flee past him in the other direction. Rancor is making some kind of god-awful whinnying noise behind the stage.

I look down at the children sitting in the front row. None of them are with their parents.

“Rancor!” I call. I’m thinking I can put a few of them on his back and get them out of here.

I jump down and start gathering the children into a bunch. Before I can even get them all into a cluster, Rancor comes ripping through the curtains. A cloud of cinders and soot puffs up behind him.

I smell something like fishy garbage and turn in time to see a Thrall about to jump on top of me. I throw a blade at it and hit it right between the eyes. The Thrall absorbs the impact, but that barely slows it down.

The only thing I’ve seen kill a Thrall was Calx. But Torvold is nowhere close. I throw my arms out wide to stop it from getting to the children when Rancor charges forward and impales it on his horn.

The Thrall bursts into flames and disintegrates into soot.

Apparently, unicorn horns are in the same “not of this world” category as Calx’s sky metal, which is an enormous relief, considering I nearly died.

“We have to protect the children!” I tell Rancor.

He tosses his head and starts trotting around us in a circle. The children are terrified, so I pull them together and get down on a knee.

“Do you see that cranky unicorn?” I ask them. They’re too frozen with fear to answer. “Well, he’s been looking for someone to fight all day. He’s so excited that he’s got all those nasty things to stick with his horn.”

I get a few of them to perk up, and that’s the best I can hope for, really. A team of Thralls are coming toward us.

I stand up and pull out a blade, even though I now know blades are more like speedbumps than weapons to these things. The copper pan worked a bit better, as I remember. I need something more bludgeon-y and less slice-y. I stow my blade and pick up a plank of wood from the shattered scenery. I wield it like a bat. I didn’t go out for softball in high school, but I remember playing T-ball at some point in my childhood. My dad is a huge baseball...

I must be going crazy. As soon as I think about going to a Dodgers game with my dad it’s like I’m seeing him.

No. That can’t be. The grey-green creature—with slits on its neck and the oozing body that looks like it’s turning into slime—can’t be my dad.

“Princess! Get down!” Torvold bellows as he slashes through two Thralls at once, turning them to ash.

The Thrall that looks like my dad makes a phlegmy orca sound and lunges for me. The children behind me scream and I homerun the Thrall with my plank of wood. He goes down for the count.

I look at him lying on the ground. This is impossible. My dad can’t be in Lucitopia. He lives in Santa Monica.

Rancor rears up next to me about to slash the Thrall with his hooves, but I turn in front of him and wave my arms.

“No, Rancor, get back! That’s my father!” I scream.

Rancor wheels his hooves at the last moment and throws his head in confusion as he lands next to my dad, but not on top of him. I hear the wails of the rest of the Thralls as Torvold makes short work of them with Calx. Ash from their burnt bodies starts swirling and blowing in the breeze.

My dad writhes on the ground. He’s in pain. I bend down.

Torvold runs to me “No, my princess! Don’t touch him,” he says as he catches my waist in the crook of his arm.

“Torvold, let me go! You don’t understand—that’s my father!” I scream.

Torvold wraps me up in his arms, holding me back even though I’m trying to throw myself down next to my dad to help him.

“The king has been turned,” Torvold is saying desperately in my ear.

I’m fighting against Torvold, but he manages to spin me around to face him anyway. He’s wrapped both arms around me and he looks at me like something in him hurts.

“We told you, princess,” he says. “The king is a Thrall of Asphodel.”

“No, you don’t understand,” I wail. “He’s my *father*.”

Torvold pulls me against him in a hug. “I know,” he’s whispering in my ear. “I know.”

I’m sobbing. I’m past help. Because it isn’t the king of Lucitopia on the ground. It’s my real father. He’s a crappy father, but he is the only one I’ve got, and somehow, I’ve dragged him into this.

“What have I done?” I cry into Torvold’s shoulder. “He shouldn’t be here. If I’d been braver. If I’d climbed down from my tower sooner—”

“No,” Torvold says in my ear. “It’s not your fault. Asphodel is to blame.”

Rancor approaches my dad. I pull away from Torvold, scared that Rancor will gore him, but instead Rancor sneezes.

A giant gob of glittery snot sprays my dad.

Torvold and I are too stunned to do anything for a moment. Dex, Jackanet, Tudie, and Gertie come running up while we stare down at my dad, who is covered in unicorn snot. The snot starts to glow.

“Is that normal?” I ask Rancor. He tosses his head.

Under the glowing mucus, my dad starts to lose his fishy aspect. His bones seem to stiffen under his skin and the slits in his neck seal up. After one more bright flash of boogers, my father looks like himself again. Except he’s wearing a brocade doublet, tons of thick jeweled rings, and a big fat crown.

I step away from Torvold and kneel down next to him. I reach out my hand and touch his face gingerly.

“Father?” I say. He doesn’t move. I look up at everyone. “What’s wrong with him?”

Tudie and Gertie exchange a look.

“If a unicorn drinks the tears of a broken heart, he can heal any *physical* injury,” Gertie says, shrugging.

“Your father’s sickness isn’t in his body anymore, dearie,” Tudie explains kindly. “Asphodel still owns his soul. Without his soul, the king will not wake.”

“How do I get his soul back?” I ask.

“When I face Asphodel at Knob Knoll and kill him, all of the Thralls will be freed,” Torvold says. His eyes burn into mine. “I swear to you, princess, I will save your father.”

I can’t look at Torvold. I can’t look at anyone. I drop my head over my father and cry for him, and for Torvold, and for all the stupid things I’ve done.

MORNING GLORY

The minstrels take my father into one of their carts and close it up to hide him from the returning crowds.

While it had been whispered for some time around Lucitopia that the king had become a Thrall, it had never been confirmed. Seeing the king in an enchanted sleep right after an attack by the Thrall could push some of the more trigger-happy folk into a riot.

Faith watches over my dad because I have to stay with Rancor. Stupid unicorn is taking his guard duty a little too seriously and won't even let the parents come and take their kids home. I tell Rancor repeatedly that it's okay, and please, to not impale the panicking mom who is only trying to kiss and hug her child.

There's always one kid whose parents are late. If it was my dad who was supposed to pick me up, I was that kid. I'd be sitting there with a teacher who wanted to go home, and my dad would drive up with his phone on speaker, still talking to whomever was more important to him than I was. He'd blame Mom, or his assistant, saying that they gave him the wrong time. I'd tell him it was the same time every day. Sometimes he'd say he was sorry, but usually he'd change the subject.

My dad's a deadbeat and he'll never be a good father. But Princess Pleasant's father locked her in a *tower*. On the neglect-o-meter, my dad barely registers. Plus, he loves me, and I love him, so I guess I'll take my deadbeat of a father any day. If I'm lucky I'll get to take him home. If I haven't ruined his life along with mine, that is.

The last kid goes, but I stay there in the grass. The sun is setting. I must be crying again because Rancor comes over and licks my face. I hear Torvold approaching. I know it's him because of the soft clinking of Calx against his chainmail.

He drops a bag of apples in front of Rancor. Rancor waits for Torvold to walk away before approaching the bag, but then he digs in.

Torvold sits down next to me. I don't say anything for a while. When he opens his mouth to start talking, I interrupt him.

"Don't tell me I'm being uncharacteristically quiet," I say.

"I won't," he replies, smiling to himself because he probably was going to say that.

"Don't tell me I have nothing to fear."

"I won't," he says, like it's obvious we both have a lot to fear.

"And don't tell me you're going to fix everything."

He doesn't say anything for a moment. "I won't."

He puts an arm around me and I tip my head to the side until it rests on his shoulder.

At some point I must have fallen asleep because I wake at dawn. I'm lying on my side with Torvold curled up behind me.

I have never awoken with a guy pressed up against me before and it's kind of freaking me out. Not that I don't like it. I do. Too much, actually. I try to edge away from Torvold without him noticing, so of course he startles awake. His hand goes to Calx.

"Are you all right, Princess?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, embarrassed. He looks amazing horizontal. "We must have fallen asleep."

He sits up and smiles. "I was going to carry you into the cart, but I...I was comfortable."

I narrow my eyes at him. "With me asleep on your arm?" I ask, not buying it.

"Quite comfortable," he insists.

"I'm sure."

“Oh, it’s lovely. I’ll do it to you tonight so you can see,” he jokes, and then he suddenly isn’t joking anymore. He’s actually grown quite serious. He touches his heart, where he’s hidden my maiden’s circlet. “Princess, I ___”

I bolt to my feet. “We must part, Sir Torvold. It would be unseemly for anyone to find us like this,” I say. Then I start charging toward the minstrel cart.

“Wait,” Torvold says, getting up and chasing me. “I meant no offense by lying next to you!” He catches up to me and takes my arm to stop me. “I would never do anything to besmirch your name, and yet... I couldn’t seem to bid you goodnight when I should have.”

“Please, good Sir Knight,” I say, shrugging my arm from his grasp, but he continues.

“I find I am at war with myself. I have sworn to protect your virtue, when in truth, I may be the greatest danger to it.” The look he gives me is pure longing. It’s so frigging steamy I almost faint. I actually have to put a hand against his chest so I don’t fall over. He smiles when I touch him, and his voice lowers to a whisper. “We are, as yet, unwed. That is why I must ask you—”

Holy jalapenos. Is he going to ask me to marry him?

“I think it would be best if I went to my father now,” I say, stepping away abruptly. “Good morrow, Sir Torvold.”

And I run away from him. Like a wuss.

I burst into the cart where my father is stretched out in his enchanted sleep and I see someone I was not expecting.

“What are *you* doing here?” I ask breathlessly.

“You look flushed,” Mother Maybe replies. “Is the story swoony enough for you yet?”

Torvold enters the cart after me. “Princess, please allow me to finish,” he’s pleading. He stops when he sees Mother Maybe sitting next to Faith.

“Yes, do finish, Sir Torvold,” Mother Maybe says pleasantly. “Or is this a private conversation?”

“Your Grace,” Sir Torvold replies, bowing to Mother Maybe. “Your sister Faith said that you would make yourself known to me at your discretion.”

I can’t *even* stand it.

“You’re a White Witch?” I ask Mother Maybe. “I didn’t know Deception was a Virtue.”

“Princess!” Sir Torvold gasps. “Forgive her, Your Grace. I’ve put her in an ill humor.” He looks down, ashamed. “I fear I have offered her insult.”

Mother Maybe smiles at Torvold like she wants to pinch his cheeks and cook him dinner. “I find that hard to believe.” She waves a hand, dismissing it. “Your princess and I have had dealings before, and I’m afraid she hasn’t fared well where I’m concerned.”

Torvold looks startled as he glances over at me. I cross my arms, refusing to address it.

“I didn’t come here for the princess,” Mother Maybe continues. “I came here to aid you in the days to come. The Battle at Knob Knoll approaches. Faith and I shall be by your side.”

Torvold kneels. “And I shall strive to be worthy of your aid.”

Mother Maybe shoots me a look over Torvold’s bent head. We both know how this turns out for him. Unless there is no battle.

“Rise, Sir Torvold. The White Witches have chosen you as our champion. We will help you draw an army to your banner.”

Torvold rises with an uncertain look on his face. “My quest was not to rally an army, but to find as many White Witches as I could.”

“You have found all of us that are left,” Faith replies.

The silence that follows is deafening.

“Then we must depart as soon as we can,” Torvold says resolutely. He turns to me. “I take my leave, Princess, but I beg an audience with you at a later time to finish our conversation.”

I tip my head down in reluctant assent. Again, he takes my hand and touches the tips of my fingers to the outline of my maiden’s circlet over his heart before quitting the cart.

I plunk down next to my unconscious dad.

“So, what are you going to do, Princess?” Mother Maybe asks.

“Don’t you worry,” I tell her numbly. I can still smell Torvold in my hair, on my dress, in my skin. “It’ll be heroic.”

IF YOU'RE GOING TO HELL, GO IN STYLE

I leave the cart and go to find Gertie to ask a favor. It's kind of a big one.

She's busy haggling with the town elders about the minstrels' payment. The elders don't want to pay anything, considering the attack, but Gertie isn't having that. I step back when I realize that this is going to be a lengthy exchange. Maybe Bashan can grant me the favor. Jackanet finds me on my way to locate Bashan.

"May I have word, Princess?" Jackanet asks.

I stop with a frown. Jackanet and I have never really seen eye to eye on things. "Depends on the word," I reply.

He smiles and nods. "You and I have been at cross purposes, haven't we?"

"I'm not exactly sure what your purpose is," I reply honestly.

"I suspect you are not entirely sure what *your* purpose is, either," he rebuts, smirking.

He's got me there, and he knows it. "What do you wish to say?" I ask bluntly.

"I wish to ask if you go now to the Ebon Spire."

I cross my arms. "Why do you want to know?"

"For I must find something to distract Torvold so that by the time he learns you have gone, it will be too late for him to chase after you."

Unbelievable. He's so eager for me to go to my doom. He doesn't even look sorry for me.

“What did I ever do to you?” I ask him. “Why do you hate me so much?”

He looks stunned. “Princess, I don’t hate you,” he says.

“But you are awfully eager for me to go to Asphodel.”

“Not because I wish you dead.”

“Then why?”

Jackanet throws his hat on the ground and kicks it. His frustration can’t simply be from me misunderstanding him. It must be from everyone misunderstanding him, including Torvold.

“Because you are more suited to facing Asphodel than Torvold!” he yells, totally losing it. “Torvold is honorable, and Asphodel has not fought a clean fight in his life. He fights dirty! And that’s why Asphodel will win if Torvold faces him! But *you* know how to fight dirty. You could kill Asphodel.”

“No, I can’t! I don’t have a Puce Pinkerknuckle! I don’t have Calx!” I yell back.

“You’ve got a bloody unicorn!” Jackanet hollers, throwing his hands around. “Did you see what that miserable animal did to the Thralls?”

I come to a full stop.

“Right,” I say. Come to think of it, that crystal swirl in Rancor’s horn looks an awful lot like the sparkly edge on Calx. “Do you think Rancor’s horn will work on Asphodel?”

“I don’t know, but if there’s one thing I am sure of, it’s that *you* will find a way. No matter what the situation is—whether it’s with a unicorn, a copper pan, or a monster’s unmentionables, it doesn’t matter. You will do what you have to do to stay alive...” Jackanet laughs sadly. “Rather than keep to the rules of chivalry and die a heroic death like Torvold would.”

I look away and try to *not* picture Torvold dying. Again. It seems to be the only thing I can think of lately.

“I don’t want that,” I whisper.

“I know you don’t.” He smiles, considering something. “Maybe we haven’t been at cross purposes after all.”

Something in his voice has changed. I look Jackanet over carefully. He’s sloppy. He pays no deference to anyone, and he doesn’t really squire all that much, either. It hits me.

“You’re a White Witch.”

He straightens his shoulders and tips his chin up. Jackanet suddenly looks younger and cleaner, and I realize that underneath all that dirt his clothes could possibly have been white once.

"I am Loyalty, though Torvold doesn't know it," he says, his voice taking on a deeper timbre. "I chose him because he is all the Virtues in one, and if he lives, we *all* do. Please, Princess."

"Princess," I repeat. "Do you know what I really am?" I ask. "Do Tудie and Dex know, too?"

"We all know you're a hero," he replies, avoiding a direct answer. "And we believe you were sent here to save Torvold—not the other way around."

I have to die so all Virtue can live? That's frigging fantastic. But even as I think it, I know it's not about me. I had already decided to go, even before Jackanet and I had this conversation, because there's one thing I know about this stupid book.

Torvold can't die.

I roll my eyes. "Help me find Bashan," I tell Jackanet.

"Why?" he asks.

"Because I need him and his minstrels to watch over my dad and keep him hidden and moving around while I go to the blasted Ebon Spire and find some way to get wretched Asphodel to impale himself on Rancor's face," I say testily. "I'll figure it out when I get there."

Loyalty chuckles quietly. "There is one thing about this entire situation that I don't wonder about."

I give him some side-eye. He and I aren't square yet. "Pray, what could that be?"

"I don't wonder why Torvold loves you," he says. "I can see why."

Okay. I guess that makes us square, though I don't quite know what to do with that statement.

"What-what do you mean, he loves me?" I stammer.

"You could be a bit smarter, though," he says briskly. "When are you off?"

He had to ruin it. "I leave post haste."

"Right." He nods sharply. "Bashan's there." He points to Bashan over my shoulder, who is loading up trunks onto one of the carts. "You deal with him and I'll go tell Torvold that a village half a day's ride up the road is on fire. You let out as soon as Torvold rides, and you'll be at the Ebon Spire by

night fall. Even if Torvold were to gallop after you as soon as he got back to Market Town, he wouldn't get there in time."

I nod, take a breath, and march over to Bashan. He agrees to take care of my father. I agree to reward him. Right on cue, Torvold comes riding up on Thunder in a tizzy.

"I must depart, Princess. There are people who need my aid," he says, wheeling Thunder under him in a shower of hooves and sod. "I will return before daybreak tomorrow," he promises.

"Godspeed, good Sir Knight," I say, pushing my voice past the catch in my throat. "And have a care with yourself while I am not there to care for you."

He looks down at me while Thunder prances under him. He touches his heart, his eyes reaching into mine. Then he tears away.

I don't say goodbye to Tudie and Dex. I don't know why I don't. I never really said goodbye to my friends in L.A. either. I sort of crept out of town, too embarrassed that my family was such a mess that I had to leave.

I shoulder my pack and start walking. Rancor trots up behind me, which I expected since he follows me everywhere. He nudges my shoulder. I look at him. He nudges me again, but harder, like he's trying to knock me over.

"What is your problem?" I ask him.

Rancor trots in front of me. Then he lowers himself down on his front knees. It's not a natural or comfortable position for an equine. He lays his head down deferentially over one leg, and I realize he's inviting me to ride him.

I get a little emotional. First of all, because Rancor is stunningly beautiful when he isn't trying to bite, and second, because I really need some help right now.

"Thank you," I whisper as I climb up onto his back.

I've ridden a few horses. It's terribly uncomfortable and a lot of work, even with a saddle. But I am not uncomfortable astride Rancor. You'd think that the whole bareback thing would be absolutely intolerable, considering a woman's anatomy and a horse's backbone, but apparently riding a unicorn is nothing like riding a horse. As soon as I am settled, and my hands are resting on either side of his neck, Rancor launches into a even run. I float on top of him effortlessly.

It's the smoothest ride into hell you could imagine.

TOLKEIN COULD SUE

Rancor and I gallop past bucolic fields and rolling hills, until we suddenly enter the *sfumato* zone.

It's hard to describe what it's like; apart from saying it's probably exactly like being in a place that has been liberally shaded with a charcoal pencil. The sky darkens as if I've entered a dense forest, but there are no trees overhead. I've seen my fair share of smog living in LA. I've also even seen what it's like when wildfires throw so much ash into the air it makes midday looks like sunset, but there is no smoke or ash in the atmosphere here. It's just darker air.

Nothing grows here. The ground is covered in dead weeds that are noticeably absent of the usual insect life. Not even the wind stirs. Rancor and I seem to be the only things moving across this landscape. We crest a hill and gaze down into a bowl-shaped valley that stretches as far as the eye can see. In the center of the valley is a tall, black tower that jabs into the murky sky. I'm guessing this is the Ebon Spire. It's really big. Methinks *someone* is overcompensating.

There is no sneaking up on Asphodel. The valley surrounding the Ebon Spire is so wide in all directions that someone inside the tower would only have to glance out a window, say, twice a day, to spot an intruder approaching from very far away. I guess my only option is to gallop up to the front gate on my gleaming white unicorn and hope someone lets me in.

I allow myself a moment of hysterical laughter as I picture wandering around the outside of the Ebon Spire calling, "Hello? Evil Sorcerer? Still

want to marry me? Totally okay if you've changed your mind!"

But I know my laughter is just pent-up nerves, and it's either laugh or scream. I should have taken a moment to come up with a plan first, but I never do that. In fact, I think I spend more time wondering why I don't stop to plan, than I do actually stopping and thinking of a plan. I just toss myself into situations. That's how I ended up in Lucitopia in the first place. I'm going to have to start taking control of my life instead of just reacting to it.

As I get closer, I can't laugh because nothing is funny anymore. The ground becomes very uneven and Rancor has to slow to a walk.

What I think at first are rocks sticking up out of the dirt on closer inspection are revealed to be bits and pieces of armor. Bent swords and broken spears are strewn about, and among the rusting weapons and rotting leathers are bones. This is the sight of an enormous battle. One fought long ago. Either everyone died, and no one was left to bury the dead, or the living were too afraid to come back to get the bodies.

They were left here to rot. Which isn't just unsanitary, it's the ultimate scumbucket move. From the look of things, it seems to have happened so long ago I can't imagine Asphodel could be to blame. Unless he is crazy old. Which he could be. He *is* a sorcerer. Best just assume he did it. I can't imagine anyone moving into a high-value property like this and opting to keep the dead army in the yard.

This guy is really starting to tick me off. Mr. Abracadirtbag up there turned my dad into an undead Swamp Thing, he leaves fallen soldiers to rot rather than give them an honorable burial, *and* he's supposed to kill Torvold in two days. Unless I kill him first. Which I will.

I'm working myself up into a decent-sized murderous rage when I see a cloud rise from the top of the Ebon Spire. As it nears, I think it's a flock of birds. The flock billows and flashes, and then tightens and heads right for me.

But it's not birds. It's bats.

I hate to buy into stereotypes, but bats are creepy. The squeaking, the shivering, the way they crawl around on their knuckles—all of it gives me the heebie-jeebies. If mammals were supposed to fly, more of us would do it, but it's just bats and one squirrel. (Who doesn't even really fly. It just glides.) All I'm saying is, evolution has spoken on the whole flying mammal thing. Bats are weird.

They swarm around us. Rancor tries to slash them with his horn, but only manages in turning a few of them into puffs of smoke. They flap at me with their wings and I have to throw my arms up to protect my eyes. They land on Rancor and start to claw and bite.

It's been way too long since my last booster shot. I start tearing the nasty little things off us. Rancor rears up and accidentally throws me to the ground. I see bats crawling all over his flanks and jump up to get them off him.

As soon as I take a step toward Rancor, I feel something cold and hard wrap around my ankle, stopping me. That better not be what I think it is.

I look down. A skeleton grins up at me. In a fully instinctual *ick* response, I punt his skull with my free foot. It goes flying, but the rest of him hangs onto my ankle. More skeletons are rising from the sod between me and Rancor. The bats are all over Rancor now, and I can see blood streaking his white hide. They're pushing him farther and farther away from me.

"Rancor!" I shout to him over his frenzied whinnies. "Get out of here! Run back to Torvold!"

He fights more furiously, stabbing at both skeletons and bats alike. Puffs of ash and smoke blaze all around Rancor as he hits his stride, but even more skeletons rise from below and more bats join the swarm from above. I know which way this is going to go.

"There's nothing you can do for me! Asphodel won't let you anywhere near him, but you can still help Sir Torvold! Rancor, you must go!"

Rancor resists for a few moments more, then finally gives in and runs back the way we came. As his white tail disappears over the crest of the bowl, the skeletons start to push me toward the huge iron gates of the Ebon Spire.

"I know the way," I snap, throwing their boney fingers off me. *So* nasty. I flap my hands around my head to keep them from touching me and hotfoot it toward the gate, so I don't step on one of them. They see me go, and the skeletons sink back into the ground.

I tilt my head back and look up at the impressive architecture. It's actually quite lovely, if you go for the black-on-black evil monolith with very few windows look.

"Asphodel! Let me in!" I yell, and my voice only wobbles a little.

The gate glows with a ghoulish green light and swings open by itself.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't shaking all the way down to the ground at this point. Anger and adrenaline got me this far, but I'm running out of both. It just occurred to me that I could become one of those skeletons decorating the lawn, and I can't make my feet take another step.

I hear the echo of laughter, coming from deep inside the tower. Asphodel is mocking me.

I'm a teenager, I came here alone and sort of unarmed, and he's mocking me for being scared? What a tool.

I stomp through the gates, under the giant arching entryway, across a black marble audience chamber the size of a football field, right up to the onyx dais with the smoked quartz throne on top of it, and look at the (okay, this throws me, but I'm furious so I roll with it) blazing hot *snack* on the throne and say,

“Does your offer of marriage still stand?”

PARDON ME, BUT YOUR DRESS IS HAUNTED

“Princess Pleasant,” Asphodel says in a purring voice, “I can’t tell you how pleased I am that you decided to accept my offer.”

He stands and comes toward me. I shift my weight, but then decide that I’m not going to give this guy any ground, and I plant my feet. He gets uncomfortably close to me, and I’m expecting him to stink—a hint of corpse, maybe, considering the whole necromancer vibe—but no. He’s got a spicy, incense smell that’s a little churchy, but thoroughly attractive.

Let me reiterate. Asphodel is gorgeous. He’s like a puma, with black hair and pale skin and interestingly-shaped hazel eyes. I know he’s probably about a thousand years old, but he doesn’t look older than mid-twenties at most. He’s elegantly built, and although he’s not much taller than me, I can tell from the way his doublet fits snugly across his chest and shoulders, and tapers into a sharp V down to his hips, that he is fully shredded under there. I have no doubt this guy can swing a sword and I don’t want him swinging it anywhere near Torvold.

“Sorry for the delay,” I reply. “I was detained.”

He narrows his eyes at me, and I force myself to hold his gaze. I’m shaking, and he knows it, but I’ve already decided that I am not going to back up and I am not going to look away. He gives me a slow, feline smile and glances down at my dress, which is torn and dirty after the scuffle with the skeletons in his front yard.

“I see you must have encountered many difficulties, and I do so wish to hear about all of them, my betrothed.” He spins away from me and walks

down the dais as he speaks. “There’s a room prepared for you. We’ll dine together when you have had a chance to refresh yourself.”

As soon as he leaves the audience chamber and disappears through an arched doorway behind the throne, my knees give out and I sink down into a chair. This seat is not comfortable. I realize that’s because I’m sitting on smoked quartz. Which is what Asphodel’s throne is made from. I’m sitting in his throne. I jump up, but no one is here to see my faux pas. Which is disturbing.

I come down off the dais. I go to the back wall, where Asphodel disappeared, and peek my head under the archway. I find green-glowing sconces barely lighting a long hallway. There’s a suit walking towards me, and I don’t mean a businessman.

A man’s doublet and breeches—but just the doublet and breeches with no body in them—are walking down the hallway. He, and I’m just picking the most obvious pronoun here because I’m assuming that if one were gender fluid *and* bodiless, one would dress according to one’s sexual identity.

Anyway, he “sees” me and beckons with a sleeve for me to follow him. He turns and starts walking back the way he came, so I follow. The sconces flare on as we pass and dim behind us, as if conserving energy.

“Very green,” I mumble. I chuckle at my lame joke. I may as well take the laughs while I can get them.

The hallway ends at the base of a stone staircase that spirals into uncertain space at improbable angles, like an M.C. Escher drawing. I can’t see the top. I hike up my skirts and get to climbing. I’m ready for a grueling ascent up Mount Dirtbag, but instead, after what feels like only a floor or two, Ghost Suit breaks to the right and goes down another hallway, sconces flaring with green light as he passes.

I look down the way we came and wish I hadn’t. The M.C. Escher effect is much more disturbing when you add in vertigo. I back away from the edge and reach for a wall.

“Note to self. Never look down,” I mumble as I follow Ghost Suit.

We pass a lone window. It’s just a slit in the wall, more suited for shooting arrows out than letting light in. I look out of it eagerly anyway, only to see that I am twenty stories high and surrounded by bats in the air and skeletons on the ground. “Or out. Don’t look down or out. Got it.”

Ghost Suit glances back at me? Not sure about that because he doesn't have a head, but I think I notice a tilting of the shape of his shoulders under the doublet as if he were glancing back.

"Oh, do keep going," I say. "I'm just admiring the splendor of my new abode."

Ghost Suit pauses momentarily, as if noting my sarcasm, and then stiffly leads me into a dead end. There are no doors anywhere. Either Ghost Suit is going to kill me, or this is my room.

"I did hope for more furniture, " I say, gesturing to the bare stone surrounding me, "but I'm sure I'll make do." I grin at him winningly.

Ghost Suit pauses for a moment. I see his doublet swell as if he is taking a breath to answer me, but then he lets the breath out in defeat and turns back to the wall. He raises an empty sleeve and rests it on the stone wall.

The highly polished black stone moves and folds and turns into an arched entry above an ebony door. Ghost Suit pushes it open for me and bows, gesturing with one sweeping motion of an empty sleeve for me to enter my rooms.

The entire suite is made from white stone, not black. The ceiling is vaulted and there are two enormous windows on the far wall. One of them even has a window seat with lots of fluffy pillows and cushions. The sky outside is still dark, but I think I can make out a hint of sunset light coming in through the glass.

The four-poster bed is draped with airy white linen and covered with white and pale pink bedding. The thick rug on the floor is mostly off-white, dappled with washed-out red. I notice an artfully faded rose pattern. Across from the bed there is a vanity covered in crystal bottles that are filled with perfumes and cosmetics. The drawer of the vanity is pulled open to reveal a stunning ruby necklace and matching ruby earrings. Next to the vanity is a changing screen. Draped over the side of the screen is a pink and red kirtle and a white silk smock to wear under it.

A grey dress comes out of the corner—just a dress, mind you. There's no portly woman who's about two inches shorter than me inside the dress. Ghost Dress curtsies to me and then starts fluttering about, trying to shoo me into a small room off the main room, which turns out to be a decent-sized water closet. And, yes, there is running water in here, although I don't

think it's a closet. Water flows down two opposite walls. One side is cold water, and the other side is hot.

On the cold side there are two basins on stands with holes in the center of them. One is about sink height, and the other is about toilet height. Water flows into them constantly and goes down the respective drains.

On the hot side of the room, a large pool has been sunk into the floor. Since the water in it neither drops in level nor overflows while I'm watching it, I assume it must drain slowly from the bottom somewhere. There are rose petals strewn in the water, and the air is full of their perfume.

Ghost Dress starts unlacing my much-abused green dress, which would be hard to do with just sleeves. I guess she has invisible fingers. While I can't *hear* Ghost Dress giving me a lecture about what I've done to my dress, and how shocking it is for a young lady like myself to be riding unicorns up to the strongholds of evil sorcerers, I get the gist of the lecture anyway. Body language can be very communicative. Even if one doesn't have a body.

We both hear a clanking sound as the dress drops to the white marble floor, and I cringe. Those were the blades I managed to stow in the skirt. She turns abruptly away, busying herself with nothing as far as I can tell, and I take the hint and fish the knives out while she pretends not to notice anything. Then she gathers up my dress and leaves, to burn it, probably.

I go to the edge of the pool and find steps. I walk down them into the most incredible bath I have ever taken in my entire life. It's been a year since I've had a hot bath that didn't require me to first chop the firewood, then haul bucket after bucket of water up a *tower* to then light a fire, heat the water and finally take a hot bath. I'd given up on the concept completely about eight months ago and since then I've settled for standing in a single bucket of lukewarm water and splashing the worst of the gunk of Lucitopia off me.

Now, though, I submerge. I wash my hair. I rub out the knots in my neck and the soreness in my calves. I lean back with my head resting on the lip of the pool and listen to the sound of the water running down the walls. I want to live in this room for the rest of my life.

My eyes snap open. I'm sure that's exactly what Asphodel intended when he *prepared* this room for me. None of this is real. It's magic, and therefore just an illusion. I might be standing in a bucket of lukewarm

water, pouring water over my head with a ladle, thinking I'm floating in a luxurious pool of hot, scented water for all I know.

I stand up and get out of the tub. I towel off, wrap myself in a bath sheet, and go to the vanity. I comb the tangles out of my wet hair, then smell the perfumes. They are all rose scents, but each of them has a different secondary note. One is candy, one is powder, one is spice. I spray myself with the spicy one because I already know what he likes.

I put on my makeup while my hair dries. When I stand, Ghost Dress is waiting with the white underdress across her sleeves. She pops it over my head and goes for the kirtle.

There's a difference between a dress and what I'm getting into now. A dress, even one with a corset like the kind I've been wearing, is not the complicated situation that this contraption is. A kirtle is laced up the front to squeeze your boobs and waist, but this kirtle also has one cuff that ties around the upper arm and another that ties around the forearm. The silk of the underdress (called a smock) puffs out between the ties on the arms, and everything has to be arranged just so, or you look like a couch with the stuffing coming out.

Then there's the skirt. There's enough fabric in mine to make a three-person tent. Wearing a skirt that sleeps three requires more balance than you'd think. So many places to hide knives.

Once we have the kirtle tied off right, it's time for the jewels. Rubies do look lovely with my coloring, and I have to admit, the overall effect of the dress, the makeup, the heady scent of the perfume, and the jewels makes me look and feel like the princess I wished so desperately to be when I saw that print of Princess Pleasant in this stupid book.

All of this for a dress. I look into the vanity mirror at Ghost Dress standing anxiously behind me. She seems to want to say something to me, but of course, she can't because she's just a dress. I flounce my skirt one last time, making sure none of my knives poke anything vital if I move around.

"I probably shouldn't keep him waiting any longer," I announce.

Ghost Dress turns and walks to the wall where the door should be. She raises her sleeve as if to touch the wall, but then she stops and faces me. I think she's trying to warn me.

“I know he’s going to try to trick me,” I say, smiling. “You probably came here with a plan and you wound up a dress. You and your counterpart out there—the Ghost Suit. You two are a couple, right?”

Ghost Dress’ shoulders bounce as if she’s laughing or shaking her head or maybe both. She throws up her sleeves as if to say *you guessed right*.

“Well, I don’t have a plan. I don’t know what I’m doing, and I never have. But this,” I gesture to the princess costume, “is not what I want anymore.”

She shrugs at me as if to ask, *then, what do you want?*

A few days ago I would have shouted that I wanted to get out of here, and I still do; but of all the things I’ve grown to want over the past few days, leaving Lucitopia has fallen way down on my list.

“I don’t know,” I admit.

GIRLS NEVER EAT ON DATES

I would describe the dinner table—the gold flatware, the linen napkins, and the crystal glasses.

I would tell you about the heavenly smell—the bowls heaped with lush fruits of every hue, whole fish with salt crusting their scales, and the steaming, saucy platters of meats and vegetable.

But you already know all of this is probably illusion, and the only purpose a detailed description could serve would be to entice you to put this book down and go get a snack.

Go get a snack.

There are mince meat pies and roasted ducks, glazed with something sticky and sweet. There are creamed potatoes and spears of asparagus. There are loaves of crusty bread and bricks of hard cheeses.

And cake. Lots of cake, some frosted and dusted with powdered sugar, and some topped with whipped cream and cinnamon. There are puff pastries and cookies and candied fruits.

Even from across the room the food has enveloped my attention to the exclusion of all else. It isn't until I'm just a few steps away from the table that I notice I'm not alone.

Asphodel gets up and stands behind his seat at the head of the table. My stride hitches with surprise and I stop. He bows to me.

"Is something amiss, Princess?" Asphodel inquires.

"I didn't expect you to be here," I reply honestly. "I thought you would —"

“Make you wait?” he guesses, grinning. I nod, and he continues. “There was a time when I would have played a game like that.”

“And now you have no need to prove yourself,” I say, my face the picture of innocence.

He smiles, amused. “Please. Do sit.”

Instead of putting me at the other end of the table, my setting is close to Asphodel’s right. The table is lit with candelabras, and the soft glow warms a small sphere around our seats. Despite the cavernous room and the oversized furniture and the heavy rugs on the floor, the use of candlelight rather than those eerie green sconces makes our place at the table look intimate.

I take my seat and fold my hands in my lap.

“Whatever you wish to eat will appear on your plate, Princess,” he tells me.

I look at my plate. Though I see the air over it shifting and darkening, nothing appears. I laugh when my plate goes as blank as my mind. I don’t know what I want—indecision is sort of my thing right now. Plus, I’m rather turned off by the food porn, to tell you the truth. I don’t want any of it, and I don’t know why. It looks incredible, but I would no more eat the food on this table than I would eat the picture of a pie.

“Is something wrong?” Asphodel asks. “If there is a delicacy you’d rather have that isn’t on the table—”

“No,” I say, sitting back in my chair.

Asphodel’s face is frozen. “Please, don’t be shy, my betrothed. You must be famished after your travels.”

“I’m quite content,” I say, shrugging a shoulder. “If I am to eat, I want it to be real food. Illusion cannot nourish me.”

It’s like I ripped the rug out from under him. He leans back and considers me for a long time.

“You were warned?” he asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

“About what?” I ask in return. “That you are evil, and I shouldn’t trust you?”

“I am no more evil than you are,” he tells me in his purring voice. “And I, too, long for what is real. One could even say it has become my defining purpose.”

I have no idea what he means by that. “Yet you live in an illusion,” I say, gesturing to the cavernous hall around us.

“And you don’t?” he asks.

He waves a hand and the food disappears. The table is empty except for the candelabras and our place settings. Asphodel leans around his high-backed chair and snaps his fingers. Ghost Suit hurries forward out of the shadows.

“Bring us *real* food,” Asphodel orders.

Ghost Suit leaves us, and Asphodel and I stare at each other. Ever since I got out of the tub, there’s something that’s been bothering me. I have to ask.

“Am I naked and dirty right now?” I blurt out.

I’ve managed to stump him. “I don’t understand—”

“The bath. The dress. Are they real or am I sitting here naked and covered in filth?”

Asphodel the Evil Sorcerer chuckles. When he isn’t mocking me, his laugh is infectious. “Your room and everything in it is real, although the view is not.”

“Oh, good,” I sigh.

He tips his head to the side, considering me. “You came down here, sat at the table, and have engaged in this discourse, knowing full well that there was a chance you did so while naked?”

“I figured you’ve seen worse things.”

He shakes his head with a bemused smile on his face. “You surprise me, Princess.”

I think of the knives I’ve got stowed in this boat of a dress. “May I continue to do so,” I reply, smiling back.

Maybe he catches the edge of malice in my tone because I think I see his eyes flash, and whatever warmth had been in his smile vanishes.

“So, Princess. Tell me about your travels. From the state of you when you arrived, I would say they were arduous.”

“Indeed. I encountered ruffians,” I say.

His eyes widen, playing his part. “And yet you made it here? Unmolested?”

“I had a champion.”

Asphodel leans forward. “Do tell me his name, so I may reward him.”

“I also encountered Thralls,” I continue, ignoring his request. “Which reminds me, what do you plan on giving me as a wedding present?”

He frowns, not able to follow my train of thought. “Tell me what you desire, and I shall do my best to make it yours.”

“I desire for you to release my father’s soul, and the souls of all those you have enslaved.”

He laughs in my face. It’s not his nice laugh, but I was expecting as much.

“You have no need to make vassals of the dead,” I counter cheerily. “For when we are wed the whole kingdom will be yours.”

Asphodel leans an elbow on the table and props his chin on his fist as he looks at me, fascinated. “You’re assuming what I want is to be king.”

Hang on. “Has that not been your demand?”

“Well, yes, but it was meant to be an impossible one.” He makes a pouty face—a really good-looking pouty face, but still one I want to punch. “Poor girl. You came here thinking you had something I wanted, but I don’t want to rule this land. I want to destroy it.”

I stare at him for a while. In books, every evil sorcerer wants to destroy the world, but when you get down to brass tacks, that makes no sense.

“Why?” I ask. I’m still trying to get my head around it. “Why would anyone want that? You *live* here, don’t you?”

Asphodel stands. “My reasons are my own. And you, child, could scarce understand them.”

As he walks away, I call after him. “Then I may leave?”

He stops and turns. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“You have no need of me,” I say, standing, resisting the urge to beg. “May I go?”

“Oh, no,” he says, amused. “Sir Torvold the Bold is the best knight I’ve encountered in a hundred years. I wouldn’t dream of facing him without some kind of edge. My informant tells me he’s quite taken with you. Imagine how distraught he’ll be when he sees you by my side at Knob Knoll.” He saunters out of the room and calls over his shoulder, “Enjoy your real food, Princess.”

SUCKER PUNCH

I end up eating in the kitchen with Ghost Suit and Ghost Dress.

Their dinner, which they share with me, is a hearty vegetable stew, black bread smothered with a thick slab of butter, and a glass of milk. It's quite interesting to watch them eat. Food rises to the place where their faces would be and then disappears into what I'm assuming is their mouths. I would be fascinated if I weren't a hot mess right now.

While my hosts don't talk at all, they move around in a comfortable way, like two dance partners who know the steps to every song. Even the song that goes *we have a crying teenaged girl at our table. Let's feed her and tell her everything will be better in the morning*. It's a complicated song, but they're pros, apparently, because they don't miss a beat.

"I'm such an idiot," I say, blubbering into my stew. "You didn't see Torvold at the minstrel show, so you don't know, but even though Torvold knew it was an act, he practically killed Vanil when Vanil looked at my boobs. It's like Torvold can't keep a cool head where I'm concerned. And Asphodel is going to use that to kill him."

Ghost Dress nudges my forearm with her invisible fingers, guiding the forgotten spoon I'm holding to my lips. I take a sip of my stew. I have a few more sips because it's delicious, and then I remember another point.

"And he totally took the bait when that bandit—" I gasp and drop my spoon. Both Ghost Suit and Dress jump. "It was Gingivitis!" I proclaim, pointing a finger skyward, like I'm Sherlock cracking the case. "*He's* the informant who told Asphodel how irrational Torvold is about me!" I lean

back in my chair. “If I ever see that guy again, I’m going to punch him right in his gangrenous stink hole.”

Ghost Suit and Ghost Dress both pause and share what I’m assuming is a look. I go back to my dinner. I eat a few more bites before another wave of *how could I have been such an idiot* washes over me.

“And I thought my coming here would save him, even though I know how this ends,” I say, fresh tears stinging my eyes. “But—worse. It turns out I’m the thing that’s gets him killed. I should have read the beginning of the book. I would have found out that I’m in it!” I laugh-cry hysterically. “Is *Irony* a frigging *Virtue*?” I shovel some bread in my mouth. Damn, that’s good. “I mean,” I mumble incoherently as I shove more buttered bread in my mouth, “coo I ger mo stoopid?”

Ghost Dress stands and comes around the back of my chair to give me an invisible hug. I cry and chew and cry some more before I swallow and wipe my face.

“I was supposed to be the hero, and I’m crying all the time. I hate it when the girl cries all the time. What a terrible story.” This strikes me as funny, so I have a laugh. My laugh falls into a sigh, and I’m finally past the worst of it. “Now that I’ve completely lost my readers, I think it’s time for bed.”

Ghost Suit leads while Ghost Dress walks beside me, carrying the glass of milk. We go down a flight of steps rather than up. At a random wall with no dead end, Ghost Suit stops and puts his hand against the stones. They slide over each other and fold back to reveal my ebony door. Ghost Suit opens it and lets me into my room. He bows to me in lieu of saying goodnight.

I stop and put a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you,” I tell him. I look between him and Ghost Dress. “Do you two have kids?”

They shuffle and twist their sleeves, and tip toward each other and then away again. Ghost Suit must be shaking his head because his cravat is wiggling back and forth.

“Well, that’s too bad. You would have been great parents. You listen really well.” I take the milk from Ghost Dress. “I can get myself undressed. I want to be alone right now.”

It turns out, I couldn't get myself undressed. Not entirely.

I get the arm bands off the voluminous sleeves of my smock, and I remove the overskirt leaving just the silk slip, but the bodice of the kirtle is pretty much padlocked to my ribcage. I drink my milk, clean the makeup off my face, and I must lie down at some point because I wake up in the middle of the night sprawled across my bed like I'd just flopped down there.

The door to my room is open.

I listen for any sound. I check the shadows for Ghost Dress or some other article of haunted clothing. When I'm satisfied that no one is going to jump out at me I feel for the dagger I put in my bodice before dinner, note that it's still there, and tiptoe out the door.

Maybe Ghost Suit and Ghost Dress are letting me go? While I worry for them, if I can get away from Asphodel he won't be able to use me against Torvold, and maybe Torvold can kill Asphodel and set them free. Or avenge their brutal deaths is more likely. Asphodel is definitely the vindictive type.

Just because the door is open doesn't mean I'm not still locked in a cage. I need breadcrumbs or some string. There's neither of those things, unless I want to start ripping up my sheets, and that would take too much time. Instead, I grab one of my cosmetics. The huge pot of bright red lipstick/blush should work.

I go out into the hallway, and mark the stone to the right of my doorway with a red X. Then I paint an arrow on the stone in the direction I'm going. Every time I change direction, I'll put an arrow, so I can at least get back to my room.

I have a plan.

Down the hallway until there's a turn. Put an arrow. Run down the next hallway. Find a staircase. Put an arrow and go up. Run down that hallway. Go along a steeply curved hallway. Put an arrow just to be safe. See another flight of stairs. Go up them, put another arrow. Take the only hallway available. Leave another red arrow. Find a doorway. It has a big red X next to it. I'm back at my room. Thump head against door. Maybe I can climb out the windows in my room?

I go back inside. My room has changed. Instead of window seats on the far wall, there are French doors and a balcony. The doors are open. I can

smell the blooming night jasmine coming in on a summer breeze. I go out on the balcony and see Asphodel standing there, looking out at the stars.

I'm not afraid. I don't feel any kind of threat from him, even though I'm only partially dressed and he's barefoot and bare chested and only wearing a pair of breeches. I was right about his body. He isn't bulky, but what he's got is shredded. I go and stand next to him and look up.

"They're not real," he tells me. The stars are too big and too close. Galaxies swirl. The astrological ocean above us shimmers, bathing both of our upturned faces with opalescent light.

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" I ask. I feel for my knife.

"We both are," he replies. "We're trapped in a dream." He looks at me, and his eyes are full of so much hurt and yearning it makes my breath catch. "I want to wake up."

"I'll help you," I say. I pull out my knife and dive forward, aiming for his throat.

I'm fast. He's just a little bit faster. He lifts his left hand and deflects my blade. I graze the back of his hand, and though I've drawn blood, it's hardly fatal.

He pulls me close with one arm and catches my wrist with the other. He squeezes my captured hand, spreading the base of my thumb until he opens my palm and I drop my knife. It's not comfortable, but it doesn't hurt. He's not trying to hurt me. His eyes are wide with vulnerability, not anger. It's almost as if he's a real person and not a cookie-cutter evil sorcerer.

"You almost caught me," he whispers.

Still holding me against him with one arm, he lets go of my hand, so he can reach up and stroke my cheek. For a dream, this feels pretty authentic. And, not going to lie (and why should I because it's just a dream and people do the craziest things in their dreams) but it feels really *good*.

"I can't die this way," he tells me.

"Of course you can't," I say. I want to reach up and wrap my arms around his neck, so I do. I press myself against him. "It's just a dream."

He inhales a shaky breath, then he lowers his head to kiss me.

I bolt up in bed, I look around. It's dawn. I'm alone and lying on top of the covers.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and notice I'm still wearing my shoes. I go to the vanity. The red cosmetics pot is there. It's full.

"Just a dream," I sigh deeply. And nothing pokes me in the ribs.

I feel inside the bodice of my dress for my knife. It's not there. I look for my other knives, hidden about the room. They're all gone. I run to where the door should be and start hitting the white stone with my hands.

"Open this door, Asphodel!" I scream. "I said, open it, you little," I struggle inarticulately here for a bit, "sneaky...dream...invading... *monster!*" Is that a succubus? No—what's the other one? "Incubus! You're an incubus!"

The rocks shift and fold, revealing the door which bursts open, knocking me back. Ghost Dress hurries into the room, her empty sleeves flapping wildly. She reaches to help me off the floor, but I stand up and charge right past her.

"Asphodel!" I yell as I storm down the hallway. I have no idea which way to go, but I don't care. "Where are you?!" I scream. Ghost Dress flaps her sleeves in front of me trying to get me to stop, but I keep barreling onward. I see doors up ahead.

"You show yourself, you coward!" I say, going to the first door I come to and pushing it open. "You conniving...!"

I've found him. Asphodel is standing at the back of the room, clad in black leather. A suit of black armor hangs on a rack next to him, and Ghost Suit stands behind him, just about to lay the chainmail over Asphodel's shoulders.

"Bloody hell," says a voice just off to my left on the entrance side of the room. It's Gingivitis. I march over to him. "What are you doing, running around in your under..."

I sucker punch him before he can say another word. His head snaps back and he clutches his face with a yelp. Blood gushes from behind his hands.

"You knocked out my tooth!" he groans.

"I saved it from a slow death."

"You brazen doxy!"

That does it. I stride forward to hit him again, but I feel a leather glove wrap around my wrist.

“That’s quite enough, Princess,” Asphodel says as he hauls me back against him. I turn in his arms and push against his chest.

“Let go of me you...dream--” I’m still not sold on incubus. I blather for a moment and then blurt out, “*molester!*”

He releases me immediately. “What are you talking about?” he asks, eyes flashing.

“You forced yourself into my dream last night. You kissed me while I was dream-addled!” I accuse. “You took liberties!”

“I did nothing of the sort!” Asphodel yells back. His chest is swelling with incensed breaths. I glare up into his face. He’s not accustomed to getting this angry, and it’s tipped him off balance. He’s searching for words that won’t come. He spins away from me, but I follow close on his heels as he strides back to his armor.

“Then where are my knives?” I pester. “How did you know about them, unless you invaded my dream last night?”

“I’ve always known about them.” He turns to face me, calm and cool again. “After your first encounter with my associate here,” he waves a desultory hand at Gingivitis, “he made me well aware of your...” he glances down at my torso. “...Hidden armory. I had your knives removed.”

“But my dream,” I insist.

“Was your own,” he snaps, almost losing his cool again. “I cannot force myself into your dreams.”

“Oh,” I say, rocking back on my heels. “Well, that’s a relief.”

Actually, it’s not a relief. Why did I have a sexy dream about Asphodel, and not Torvold? I search his eyes for a lie, but he looks down to straighten his gloves.

“Now if you please, I must get dressed for battle,” he says, dismissing me.

I’d forgotten—how could I have forgotten that? Today is the battle of Knob Knoll, and I haven’t even come close to killing Asphodel. I don’t think I could manage it now, unarmed, while he stands inches away from his gleaming broadsword.

I glance back at him and realize he saw me looking at his sword. For just a moment he looks hurt. Then his eyes narrow and his lips press

together in a sneering smile.

“Even if you were strong enough to lift it, you’d never get to it before I would,” he says, his voice low and dangerous. He’s a puma again, and I’m something in the bunny-slash-deer category. But I’m a *proud* bunny-slash-deer.

“I prefer daggers anyway,” I retort.

His eyes flash as he takes a breath, but I twirl away from him before he can say something pithier. I feel the ends of my ridiculously long hair flinging out and brushing against his chest as I do so. I march to the door. I marched in here and I am going to march out again, even though I don’t really have a reason to march anymore. It’s the principle of the thing.

Unfortunately, I have to pass Gingivitis on my way out. He’s leering at my legs through the clingy silk slip that (I realize a bit too late) is just shy of see-through.

“You should get dressed, too, Princess,” Gingivitis says lasciviously, quietly enough that Asphodel can’t hear.

“Oh, you think I should get dressed?” I ask in a patronizing sing-song as I saunter flirtatiously toward him. Then I sucker punch him again.

While he howls on the floor I step over him and say, “Don’t ever call me a doxy.”

TOTAL GANGSTA'

I sit on a white canopy bed, the bed of every girl's dream, staring at a gorgeous red dress, the dress of every girl's dream, wondering how the hell I wound up in such a nightmare.

I have no time left. I've spent a year trapped in Lucitopia. A year doing the silliest things, like individually clipping every split end off every single hair on my head or digging through apothecary books looking for the medieval equivalent of a tampon. I threw knives at a wall for eight hours straight every day for five months. I made my own toothbrush. Those last two were good choices, actually, but there were so many moments of my life here in Lucitopia that I wasted, and now I'm out of time.

I stand, wearing just a light slip, and let Ghost Dress lace me into the heaps of silk and bone that are my skirts and kirtle. If Asphodel thinks his sword is heavy, he should try wearing this dress for twelve hours. Men always measure strength in brute force but make any one of them carry around a skirt like this while wearing a suffocating corset and I guarantee he'll faint before lunch.

I could try to fight him. I could make Asphodel drag me to the battle, but that would only strengthen his position. Torvold would lose his mind if he saw me kicking and screaming. The more distraught I am, the more distraught Torvold will be.

Rather than try the blunt-force approach, I'm selecting the wait and watch option. If I stay close to Asphodel, which is where he needs me in

order to inflame Torvold, I just might find some way to kill Asphodel before he kills Torvold.

I hope. I don't know why I'm still hoping. I *know* how this ends. But still. I hope with all my heart.

Ghost Dress leads me outside the Ebon Spire to the open area between it and the iron gates. As soon as I pass through the arch, I freeze.

A sea of Thralls stands packed like kernels of corn on a cob in front of me. Asphodel sits atop his black warhorse. The evil sorcerer is gleaming darkly in his black armor. His helm rests on the pommel in front of him, leaving his head bare, so I can see his gorgeous face. Next to him is another mount with no rider. She is an elegant white mare who wishes she was as beautiful as Rancor, but no equine will ever be as lovely to me as that fancy jerk.

Asphodel waves a hand and the sea of rotting flesh parts in front of me, making a corridor to my mount. There is no stench, no smell at all, and I don't know if that's real or if Asphodel has created some kind of illusion in order to be able to stand being among his creations. I take a deep breath and walk toward my horse, and as I do I see a familiar face appear among the Thralls. It's Gingivitis.

I don't know why it hurts me to see him as a Thrall, but it does. Not an hour ago, that blank eyed fish-zombie was a person. I never knew his name. I never bothered to ask, but he was still a person. Granted, he was a loathsome person who leered at me, held a knife to child's throat, and had probably done way worse things in his malodourous existence, but that doesn't matter. No soul deserves to be a Thrall. Not even the ones I don't like.

I walk through the sea of damnation that Asphodel created, my heart chilling with every tortured orca-call that barks from their melting bodies. I mount my elegant white horse. She doesn't even *try* to bite me, which is just sad. I miss Rancor. When I'm settled, I look over at Asphodel.

"Did you like my gift?" he asks.

I pause, thinking carefully. "What gift is that, seeing as how you've given me so many."

He smirks, detecting my bitterness. He cocks one finger at the crowd, beckoning. Thrall Gingivitis lurches forward and stands in front of me.

"*This* gift. He offered you insult, did he not?"

“Yes,” I whisper, staring at him. His two front teeth are gone. I guess I knocked out the second when I hit him on my way out the door.

“I punished him for you. Not the wedding present you asked for, but exemplary of my affection for you.”

“Yes. I understand that now.” I feel cold seeping into my heart.

“Shall we wed before or after the battle, my betrothed?” Asphodel asks in an offhand way while I stare at the tortured thing before me.

I hate Asphodel. I’ve never hated anything before. Not even Lucitopia. I think of dreaming about kissing him, and I want to throw up. I can’t believe I thought he was anything other than evil. It’s *right there* in his name—Asphodel the *Evil* Sorcerer. They don’t give out names like that by accident, but I allowed myself to get reeled in by the pretty package, thinking that there had to be some buried hurt inside of him that could explain or even excuse his actions just because he’s got bedroom eyes and great abs. I am a giant fool. On the inside, Asphodel is as gruesome as his Thralls.

I look over at him, plastering a bright yet brittle smile on my face.

“I don’t fancy myself old enough to be a widow, so let’s set the date for after you confront Sir Torvold the Bold, shall we?” I bat my eyelashes at him in a mockery of flirtation.

He kicks his mount into movement. If he’s smiling, it’s not because he’s thinking happy thoughts.

Remember those rolling hills Rancor and I rode past on our way to the Ebon Spire? Well, it turns out, one of them is Knob Knoll.

There’s nothing remarkable about it. You can’t tell the difference between Knob Knoll and the scores of other hills around it. I don’t even see any knobs. Unless you count the giant one in black armor sitting on the horse next to me.

“You look amused, Princess,” Asphodel comments. “May I ask why?”

I look out from the top of the hill, my bottom lip quivering with a smothered laugh, but I manage to hold my tongue. I’ve already learned that Asphodel leaves no slight unpunished.

“Ah. Here’s your paramour now.”

At first, I don't know what he's talking about. All I see is a smudge on the horizon. That smudge turns into an ant swarm, which becomes an army marching over the hills.

There are many banners. Some are checked, some striped, some have the image of an animal like a chimera-griff. Beneath each banner is a man riding a horse, and behind him march all the men who fight for that knight. I count over a dozen different banners with scores of men following them.

"All the good men left in the world," Asphodel says.

In the middle front rides a huge knight in golden armor astride a white stallion. On either side of him ride five women, one girl, and one man all dressed in white. The banner above the knight's head is a golden angel on a white field.

"He's late," Asphodel mumbles. "Not as eager to win you back as I'd thought."

"You needn't keep speaking on my account, my betrothed," I say in honied tones. "If ever you grow tired of your own voice, rest assured, I stopped listening to you hours ago."

Asphodel laughs in spite of himself. "Maybe I will marry you after the battle, for I find you continually amusing. And I like to keep those I've conquered close. Speaking of which." He turns in his saddle and snaps.

Ghost Suit and Ghost Dress ride up on pair of old dun-colored nags. Their defining clothes are slouched down in attitudes of defeat. Neither of their collars are turned in my direction, which means they can't look at me.

"Tell me, Princess. Have you ever heard of a cautionary tale?" Asphodel asks.

"I've read every kind of tale you can imagine," I reply tightly. "And you should know, that in nearly every story, the evil sorcerer dies."

He nods and looks out at the massing army and the bright crush of banners, armor, and shining young faces in every hue. At the forefront is Sir Torvold the Bold, flanked by Virtue.

"Let your heart flutter for Sir Torvold while it may, Princess," Asphodel says, sneering. "He won't look this good for much longer."

Asphodel is right about one thing. My heart is fluttering. It's Midsummer's Day and the air is warm, so like Asphodel, Torvold has his helm hooked to the pommel of his saddle rather than sweating underneath it before the battle has begun. His dark hair and tanned skin show up sharply

against his golden armor. He is twice as broad and an entire head taller than any other man on the field, but he is no brute. His shoulders are enormous because he's carrying all of Lucitopia on top of them.

Now that they are closer, I can see the Virtues flanking him. Loyalty rides close, but a little behind and to the left with Fortitude and Dexterity. With them is the Great Griselda, minus her sparkly shawl. No idea which Virtue she is, but I should have guessed she was one of them.

In line with Torvold, and to his right, is Faith, Mother Maybe, and our mysterious hostess. I know who she is, and now that I can make out her face I can't believe I didn't recognize her at first sight. She is Love.

Love rides closest to Torvold, just to his right. Next to her is Mother Maybe, but now that I see Faith on her other side, I know Mother Maybe's true name. Hope. Faith, Hope, and Love ride with Torvold.

"My heart doesn't flutter because Torvold looks good," I say quietly. "It flutters because he is good."

"He is the flower of all virtue," Asphodel says mockingly. Then, in the silence that follows, he truly hears his words and the truth in them shines through.

"He is the flower of all Virtue," Asphodel repeats slowly, and this time we both hear the capital letter on Virtue. "He is their Champion."

I shake my head. "No," I say, but Asphodel already knows he's figured it out.

"Thank you, Princess. They say Love never dies, though I've tried." Asphodel drops his head, shaking it while he smiles ruefully. "But I don't have to kill Love. I just have to kill Torvold, and Love will die."

"You're wrong," I say.

"Am I?" Asphodel growls. "I've searched for this for far too long."

The two armies face off against each other over a flat bit of ground between the hills. On one side are the Thralls. On the other are humans. There are more Thralls than humans. Asphodel stays on top of Knob Knoll, but Torvold rides Thunder up to the front line.

Torvold dons his helmet and draws Calx. I can't hear his battle cry, but I see Thunder rear up on his hind legs, and I hear the answering shout from his army. Then they charge.

Yup. Total gangsta'.

JUMP AND THE NET WILL APPEAR

Right from the start, it's clear which way this battle is going to go.

It's not just a question of numbers (Asphodel has more), it's that the touch of the Thralls is poisonous to normal people, and only Torvold can kill them with Calx.

The regular foot soldiers only have the power to hold back the Thralls temporarily. They can bludgeon them into immobility, as I did with my pan, but bludgeoning takes time. They bludgeon away, and it saves some of their lives, but it's not a way to win.

Torvold needs to be everywhere at once, and he nearly is. Great plumes of smoke and ash fly up and around him as he makes wide sweeping motions with Calx. He scythes through the ranks of Thralls with as much economy of motion as can be, but no one could keep that up forever.

While Asphodel sits on his horse, waving a hand to conduct his gory orchestra, not even breaking a sweat.

"Aren't you going to fight?" I ask when I can no longer hold back the tightness in my chest.

"If Torvold manages to get through my army and challenge me, I will fight him." He leans over in his saddle and smiles at me. "Don't want to tire myself out beforehand, now do I?"

I glance down at his sword. I can't help it. I want to grab it and kill him right now. He sees my eyes drop down and laughs his cruel laugh.

"Still wondering if you could snatch up my sword before I can? Any time you want to find out, try it."

I look away. I need to find something I can use against him. I have to come up with a plan. You know...that thing I've never had? Yeah, one of those.

"You're not going to use magic?" I ask tightly.

"Why waste my energy creating an illusion?" he replies.

I look out at the battle, and I can see Torvold halfway through the sea of Thralls. Though he fights on, even from here it's obvious that his strength is flagging. I take a deep breath, trying not to scream or cry or do something really dumb like hurl myself at Asphodel's head, when I see it:

A bright flash of white, thrashing hooves, and rainbow light refracting off a spiral horn of bone and crystal. Rancor comes charging up from behind Torvold, impaling Thralls and bucking like a bronco.

Whatever magical crystal is in his horn must be in his hooves, too, for every time he kicks a Thrall it bursts into ash. Rancor twists out oddly, and screams (very unnerving to hear an equine scream) and I *think* he's foaming at the mouth. He tears through Thralls like a kid through wrapping paper on Christmas.

Rancor has gone utterly bananas.

And it isn't pretty. It's like watching a beauty queen completely lose her marbles, tear out her hair extensions, and make one of those drama-tragedy-mask faces with mascara running down her face. It's not easy to watch, is all I'm saying.

Rancor runs out in front of Torvold and starts blazing a path for him, giving Torvold a much-needed break. Even if Torvold wanted to raise his sword at a Thrall, Rancor wouldn't let him. It's as if that insane unicorn had decided that every single one of the Thralls was his to kill.

The men hurrah Rancor, fanning the flames of Rancor's insane charge. Torvold is very good at killing Thralls. Rancor is exceptional. It's as if he were made for it. At one point it looks like Rancor just can't help himself anymore and he starts running over Thralls, galloping over them and gleefully turning them into ash.

"That blasted unicorn," Asphodel says, grinding his teeth.

"He is a perfect menace," I say lovingly, like that ball of murderous crazy was my special little man.

I just hope that Asphodel doesn't summon the bats since they seemed to be more effective at deterring Rancor than Thralls. But as Rancor mows

down row after row of Thralls, and bats don't appear, I suspect that Asphodel can't call for them. I approached the Ebon Spire at sunset, when bats usually come out, and though it feels like the battle has gone on for hours, it is still mid-day here on Knob Knoll.

Asphodel kicks his mount forward. Torvold has made it through the Thralls with his bannerman, Jackanet the Loyal, holding his colors high.

Fortitude stands beside Loyalty. She strips off a white glove and throws it to the ground. Asphodel the Evil Sorcerer has been officially challenged by Torvold the Bold, Champion of Virtue, and he has no choice but to face him in single combat.

The Thralls stop fighting and pull back. The armies of men disengage as well. One of the Thralls limps forward and picks up the white glove thrown by Fortitude and carries it to Asphodel. Asphodel takes the glove and removes one of his own, finger by finger. Then he throws it to the ground.

The armies part. Rancor patrols the ground between them, snorting, but he does not attack. The two knights dismount, remove their helmets, unsheathe their swords, and walk to the cleared, flat ground atop Knob Knoll.

Asphodel is smiling.

This is exactly what he's been waiting for. For all my worry about Torvold tiring himself to the point of exhaustion, or flying into an unbalanced rage over me, the truth is that Asphodel might be a good enough fighter to beat him even without any tricks.

He did say that Torvold was the best knight he'd encountered in a hundred years, but I don't think you can know something like that without first being able to kill a hundred years' worth of darn good knights.

If Torvold fights, he will lose. If he loses, Lucitopia dies. Torvold can't fight. It goes against everything he is, but the only sure way to save Virtue is for him to turn around and walk away. I watch him mount Knob Knoll in his golden armor, the picture of heroism, and I realize that he's the one who should've hid in the tower.

Asphodel is waiting on one side of the clearing. Torvold positions himself across from his foe. I must stop this. I see Faith, Hope, and Love standing on a far hill, watching.

Jump. And the net will appear.

I jump off my horse. I run between the two knights. I hold up my scarlet-clad arms and shout,

“If we sacrifice the best of ourselves so that the rest may live, what’s the point of living at all?”

Torvold stops, recognizing his own words. I turn to him.

“*You* are the best of us Torvold, not me,” I say. “Asphodel doesn’t want to be king, he wants to kill you, because if he kills you...”

And then I feel a hot throbbing hole open in my middle. I look down and see the tip of a broadsword sticking out of my bellybutton.

How’d that get there?

I should have come up with a plan.

That whole notion of jumping and the net appearing? Utter garbage. Just a bad idea all around.

Of all the ways I could have died protecting Torvold, I can think of about a dozen that would have been more effective than this. Jumping in front of Asphodel’s killing blow, for instance, or pulling a Rancor and going berserk on Asphodel would have been much more useful ways to get myself impaled. But this is just embarrassing.

“I’m so sorry,” I say to Torvold.

I see his face crumble. Then Asphodel pulls the blade back out—way more painful than going in, by the way—and I topple to the side. Asphodel steps over me to strike at Torvold, and Torvold parries.

Then a sound comes out of Torvold. It’s not really a battle cry, it’s much more personal and painful to listen to. A storm unleashes on Asphodel. Torvold is hitting Asphodel so hard I hear the clanging of their swords through the *ground*. The blows are fast and punishing, and I have no idea if this is great swordsmanship or not, but I don’t see how anything could handle being pounded on that way for very long.

I feel something soft and hairy nibbling on my head. Then Rancor’s warm tongue slops across my face. He’s trying to drink my tears. The only problem is, I’m not crying. I’m in a universe of pain, but I’m not heartbroken. I’m too cheesed off by the idiotic way I’ve thrown away my one shot at a heroic death to cry over the fact that I’m dying.

Torvold strikes Asphodel so hard on the breastplate that his black armor comes off on one shoulder. The loose armor disrupts Asphodel's ability to swing and he has to back up and unhook the straps on the other shoulder, abandoning the chest and back plate altogether. Without the armor, Asphodel is more exposed, but he is also faster and lighter.

Oh no. Asphodel just disarmed Torvold. Calx comes flying in my direction and nearly kills me a second time. Asphodel brings his sword down on Torvold, but Torvold grabs his wrist with both hands and then pulls Asphodel into his knee.

Asphodel lets out a giant *oof* sound and then Torvold opens up on him. He knees Asphodel in the gut over and over, every time jamming his knee harder into Asphodel's solar plexus. Finally, Asphodel drops his sword, and then it becomes a fist fight.

Calx is just a foot away from me. This sucks worse than any period cramp I have ever had in my entire life, but I roll over onto my hands and knees. When I don't black out from the pain, I do a little baby crawl to Calx.

I know if I touch Calx it will burn, but maybe the burning will distract me from the giant hole in my colon.

The brawl has come to the ground. Torvold is doing something to Asphodel's arm that look like an MMA move. Not that I'm an expert in mixed martial arts, or anything. And I'm pretty sure they didn't have jujitsu in these types of stories, but I guess if it works it works.

I reach out and grab Calx, thinking I'll just get it over with, but when I touch the metal it doesn't burn at all. In fact, as soon as my hand is all the way around the hilt, I feel a jolt of energy and the pain from my wound isn't that bad anymore.

I stand up. I walk over to the struggling knights. Asphodel has gotten on top Torvold. Calx pulls me forward until I am holding the blade to Asphodel's chest.

Both knights look up at me and freeze.

"Impossible," Asphodel says through swollen lips and broken teeth. "No one from this world can wield that sword!"

"Then it's a good thing I'm from Fresno," I say.

Asphodel makes a move to dive for his sword, and I stab him right through the heart.

And that's all I got.

I see the ground rushing up and then it stops and I'm lying next to Asphodel. His left hand, bare from throwing down his glove to accept Torvold's challenge, is right in front of my face. Across the back of it is the cut I gave him in my dream. Huh. He *was* there, in my dream. Maybe it wasn't even a dream?

That lying sack of—

“Princess!” Torvold sobs, lifting me into his arms.

He holds me to him and cries. At least I'm not the one crying this time. I'd love to wipe his tears away, but Rancor's gone and shoved his fat head in between us and I can't even see Torvold. I can't see anything, actually. I'm definitely dying. Maybe I'm already dead. My vision fades to black, just like in a movie.

Ew.

I feel gooey. Like I just got slimed. Or sneezed on.

I open my eyes and see Torvold's expectant face. I see all their faces hovering over me—Dex, Tudie, and Jackanet, Thunder and Rancor, Faith, Hope and Love. Even Griselda is here. Still don't know who she really is, but I'm just happy to be able to see anybody right now. I feel inside the hole in my dress and am delighted to find that there is no hole in my belly anymore.

I sit up and laugh. Torvold laughs and hugs me. Somewhere in there he took off his breastplate and I can feel his chest against mine. I'm laughing and crying and Rancor is sneaking a lick even though these are definitely tears of joy and not heartbreak.

I pull back and look around. All the Thralls are gone. A middle-aged man and woman are standing behind the Virtues, smiling at me. She's wearing a grey dress. I smile back and wave at them.

“That's it?” I ask Hope. “It's over?”

“It's over,” she says. “All of the souls Asphodel captured are free, including your father's. You're a hero.”

I look at Torvold and he hugs me again. “I thought you were dead,” he whispers.

“Me too,” I whisper back. We stay like that for a long time.

“Why don't we see to the wounded?” Love says. I open my eyes and see her shooing everyone away from Torvold and I. “You, too,

Temperance,” she says to Griselda, dragging her away.

“That’s who she is,” I mumble. “Temperance.”

“Glad *she’s* gone, then,” Torvold says. He’s doing that cheeky-yet-blushing thing that I find absolutely devastating.

He pushes my hair behind my shoulder. I know I’m covered in glittery unicorn snot, and he’s covered in sweat and dirt and lots of other nasty things from fighting a battle and grappling with an evil sorcerer to the death, but neither of us care.

And then... he kisses me. It feels like falling and floating and flying and...like something else. Something I’ve felt before. A barfy butterfly. We both pull back and look at each other, like we’re waiting for the other shoe to drop. Oh no. Torvold narrows his eyes at me.

“Wait. Did you say you were from Fresno?” he asks. He doesn’t have a British accent anymore.

“Oh, da—” we both say.

And I’m out of Lucitopia.



EPILOGUE

One afternoon.

That's how long I was mentally gone from the "real world." Physically, I never left. I find myself in a hospital. My father has had a heart attack. He survived but I haven't been allowed to see him yet.

I've been here all day and part of the night, apparently, although I don't remember getting the phone call while I was at the flea market on the corner of Melrose and Fairfax. I was killing time before I was supposed to meet my dad for lunch, looking through a pile of used books. I don't remember driving to Cedars Sinai and sitting for hours in a chair in a hallway. My mom says I slept through most of it, and I do have a horrible kink in my neck, so it must be true.

But here's how I know Lucitopia was not an illusion.

One: my hair is about a foot longer. I can't sit on it, but it's thick, shiny, and nearly to my waist. A year without hot tools and it's like I've got a new head of hair. Two: my complexion is crystal clear. No sugar or preservatives has given me super-model skin. I'll miss candy and Doritos, but I already know I can live without them. Three: I can still throw a blade. I went down to the hospital cafeteria, boosted a knife, waited until a hallway was clear and I sunk that bopper right into the hole of the A in the "Must Wash Hands" sign. That is not the sort of thing I could have learned in a few hours.

And last: My heart is breaking. I don't know when—or if—I'll ever see Torvold again. I know he's a real boy from this world or I would still be in

Lucitopia. The one condition of my leaving was that I had to get a *real* boy to kiss me so Torvold must in fact be real, and not from the world of the book. He knows I'm from Fresno, but apart from that he knows nothing about me. And Fresno is huge. Over half a million people live in Fresno. How is he going to find me in all that, even if he *is* back in this world? I have no idea what his condition for leaving Lucitopia was, but it probably wasn't the same as mine. A year in there was one day out here. Who knows how long he'll spend in there? When he does get out, I could be ancient history to him.

I'm going to have to leave L.A. and go home tonight, so I can shower and make it to school. Mom said I don't have to go to school tomorrow, but I really want to. I want to try to make friends. I've spent too much time locked in a tower.

"Here's the doctor," my mom says, relieved. She stands to greet him.

My father's surgeon looks suspiciously like Bashan. For a second, I can't figure out if this character callback is the author trying to be clever or if I incorporated people from what was really happening last night into my version of the story. I stand and narrow my eyes at him as if to ask, *do you know me?* He ignores my look and gives a quick run-down of my dad's health.

"We put in two stents, and the surgery went well," Bashan-as-a-surgeon says. "He'll still groggy, but you can go in and see him now if you want."

"Thank you, Doctor," my mom says, and we both go into the recovery room.

My dad is hooked up to a dozen machines. He looks papery and hollow. Vanil and Gertie are there as nurses. They had promised to look after my dad for me, and they have. I thank them as they adjust the curtains around my dad's recovery bed, but they don't seem to recognize me either.

And that brings up another horrendous possibility. I could run into Torvold, like I am currently running into some of the other cast members from my ultimate cosplay in Lucitopia, and he might not know me.

"There are my girls," my dad says, still goofy from the drugs. My mom frowns, but she doesn't correct him. We sit on either side of him and take his hands.

"I missed you so much," he tells me. "I had the strangest dream. You were in a tower. You were painting red arrows on the walls with lipstick."

I smile at my dad. "I missed you too, Dad," I say.

"We should spend more time together," he says, his eyes shutting.

My mom and I share a look. She raises an eyebrow as if to ask me if that's what I want. I nod.

"We will," I promise.

My mom has to stay at the hospital to fill out paperwork, and since we both came in different cars anyway, I decide now is as good a time as any to drive myself home. Four hours back to Fresno from Hollywood, even at 3 a.m. with no traffic, but I don't mind because I am going to make it to school. I can't wait even one more day to start living my life.

I get home and there's a white horse standing in my front yard.

Rancor, minus the sparkly horn, is waiting impatiently for me. He's already eaten all my mom's roses and he's pulled up half the grass in the yard. What a jerk. I couldn't love any animal more. He sees me and whickers.

"You miss me?" I ask as I rub his soft nose. He lets me put my arms around his neck and rest there for a little while. "Want some salt?"

Rancor sneezes.

"Come on. I'll get you some salt."

He follows me into the house. I don't even try to get him to stay outside because I know he won't. He stands in my kitchen as I pour salt on my palm and let him lick it. I do a quick Internet search for a local barn where I can stable him.

There are a ton of stables around Fresno, and lucky for me horse people wake up early. I find a stable that specializes in "difficult or abused" animals, and they even do pick-ups. I give them a call and they promise to be over in half an hour.

"Want some candy?" I ask Rancor. He tosses his head. I go get my mom's gummy bear stash out of the cabinet over the refrigerator. "I'm going to shower for school while you eat these," I tell him. "Don't chew on anything else."

I take the most amazing shower of my life, except that Rancor comes into the bathroom while I'm in there and drinks a tub-full of water. I condition my luxurious hair, but I don't blow dry it.

When the horse people come with their trailer, I walk out of the house with Rancor following me. They give both of us strange looks, but I just

smile like nothing weird is going on and lead Rancor to the back of the trailer.

He balks.

“You’ve got to get in there,” I tell him. He stamps a foot. “No, I’m serious. You can’t live in my room. My mom will freak out. But I’ll come visit you every day after school.”

Rancor nibbles on my sleeve and gets into the trailer. I go to the driver. “Don’t try to touch him,” I warn her while I sign some papers. “Just open the trailer doors and tell him where you want him to go. He might listen to you, he might not. I’ll be by later to feed him.”

She takes my money warily and drives off.

I can barely remember where my classes are or what the heck is going on in any of them. It has been a year for me since I sat here. I smile at people. I nod at familiar faces. I chat with a nice girl as we go from one class to another.

I’m going to make friends. I’m going to join clubs, try out for the school play, run for class president and...whatever else it is that outgoing people do. I’m not spending one more second of my life in a tower, and even if I never see Torvold again, I’m going to start living like I’m the hero of this story. I might even start making *plans*.

And it’s like I must have conjured him by thinking about him so hard because then I see him.

He’s hard to miss. Torvold the Bold is coming down the hallway toward me. He is head and shoulders above everyone else. He’s wearing jeans and a t-shirt and he’s chatting with other athletic-looking boys who are probably the popular portion of some treasured sports team here in Fresno.

I stop dead, terrified he won’t recognize me. He seems to belong here, and I never did. He’s also definitely a senior, while I am a junior, and from the way everyone watches his every move, it looks like he’s the jewel of the school while I am practically a ghost, or at least, was. I guess I was too miserable before to ever notice him or anyone else for that matter, which seems impossible to me now. He’s like a god. What am I going to do? Walk up to him and ask, “Slay any evil sorcerers lately?”

But he sees me, and he stops. He walks away from all his friends. He comes straight to me. He halts right in front of me.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“Holly,” I say. “What’s yours?”

“Jake.”

“Jake,” I repeat. It’s perfect. He’s such a Jake.

“Holly,” he says, and the way he says it makes a glitter bomb go off in my chest.

We crash into each other.

He lifts me up, hugging me and laughing. I’m laughing and trying not to cry. Hoots and hollers erupt from everyone, especially his friends. He ignores everyone but me.

“I’ve been looking for you since I got back yesterday,” he whispers in my ear. “I went online, but I didn’t know your real name.” He pulls back so he can look at me, but he doesn’t put me down. “Do you have *any* idea how many high schools there are in Fresno?”

I smile into his eyes. “I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again,” I say. “And here you are.” Our faces are so close our noses are nearly touching.

“A-hem,” says a disapproving adult voice. “Mr. Lopez, please release that young lady.”

We both turn our heads to see Temperance (I guess she’s a teacher) watching us with her arms crossed. Jake puts me down, but I don’t want to step away from him.

“Meet me in the senior parking lot after school,” Jake says as the bell rings and our audience breaks up. “I have something that belongs to you.”

“Okay,” I say warily. What could he possibly have of mine?

For the rest of the day I find I have a lot of people who are interested in talking to me. It appears Jake Lopez is kind of a big deal in our little pocket of this world. He’s almost as famous and beloved here as Torvold the Bold was in Lucitopia. He’s the captain of pretty much everything athletic and academic, and though heavily chased by every girl in the school, from what I gather our familiarity in the hallways was heretofore unheard of. Jake Lopez, it seems, has been saving himself for the right girl.

He is the flower of Virtue.

By the time the day is over and I make it out to the senior parking lot, I’m spinning. Seeing him leaning against a silver motorcycle does nothing but add to my dizziness.

“Oh good,” he says, grinning as I walk toward him. “You made it through the metal detectors. I thought I’d be waiting forever while security

kept finding blades hidden in your clothes.”

I jokingly frisk myself as I walk toward him. “You can only really hide daggers in either a corset or garters. Jeans and a blouse just don’t have the structure to pull it off.” I’m standing next to him now and I really want to be closer. I gesture to his bike. “Is this Thunder?”

He smiles and shakes his head. A bit sad. “No. Nothing can ever replace him.”

“I know,” I say quietly. We stand there forever, just looking at each other. A million questions, but all I can do is stare.

He holds out his helmet. “Put this on.”

I put on his helmet as he straddles the bike. “What about you? Do you have another helmet?” I ask.

“I’ve done much more dangerous things without armor,” he jokes. “And we’re not going far.”

I climb on behind him. I can’t see a thing back here. Jake is just too big. “I think I prefer riding in front of you,” I say. Then I wrap my arms and legs around him and give what I just said a second thought.

He brushes his hands along the outside of my thighs and turns his head to the side toward me. “I’ll take either,” he says, a little breathless, and then he puts both hands on the handles, flips a foot, and we’re off.

Jake brings me back to his house. It’s a modest suburban home with a two-car garage and a pool out back. Inside, the walls are covered with pictures of Jake and his family.

There’s one wall with framed ribbons and American flags. Lots of medals from war, and then pictures of a particular brand of firemen out here in the West called the Smokejumpers. They literally jump into raging fires to save lives.

“I was wrong,” I admit. “I guess there are a lot of heroes in Fresno.”

“I’m looking at one,” Jake says, looking at me.

I blush and go back to the pictures. A guy with the name Manuel Lopez stitched into his uniform is in a lot of them. I’m assuming that’s Jake’s dad because he looks like Jake did after fighting the Thralls. In one picture, Manuel is covered in ash and smiling with an arm thrown over a buddy. The buddy’s birth and death date are stamped in gold under the picture. A lot of Smokejumpers die.

“Is this your dad?” I ask, pointing to Manuel.

Jake nods, smiling. “He’s sleeping right now,” he says quietly. “He had a three-day shift.”

I squint at the picture. “You are so much taller than him,” I say, keeping my voice down.

Jake laughs under his breath. “My mom.”

He brings me to a picture of his parents together, and it’s easy to see Jake in them. His parents are holding each other and smiling at the camera. You can feel how much they love each other, though they are a bit of an odd couple. They are both incredibly fit, and war veterans, but she is much taller than his dad.

“She looks like a Viking,” I say admiringly.

“She probably is one,” he replies ruefully. “Anyway, enough pictures. I have something for you.” He sounds excited. He takes my hand and leads me past the kitchen and the dining room and up a flight of stairs.

He brings me to his bedroom. On his bedside table is huge leather-bound book with the words THE CHRONICLES OF LUCITOPIA embossed on the bejeweled front cover.

“Have you read the whole book?” I ask him, reaching for it.

“Of course,” he says, confused. “You haven’t?”

“No,” I admit sheepishly. I touch the cover with my hands. “Wait,” I say, stepping back. “You knew how our story would end?”

“Almost?” he says, like he’s trying to remember a dream. “There are so many stories. And they’re always changing.” He frowns as he thinks about it. “I knew parts of it.”

“Me too!” I say. “But I never knew all the details.”

He smiles, nodding. “It was the same for me.”

I look at the book. “Are we in there now?”

“No,” he says. “Our story is locked. I think other people might be able to read it, but I couldn’t find us in there anymore.”

I look at him, and I can’t seem to stop. This could become a habit.

He shakes himself and reaches under his pillow. He pulls something out and holds it behind his back.

“Is that for me?” I ask, grinning. I move closer to him.

“It’s yours. I promised I would guard it, though I *thought* about taking it a few times,” he admits.

He pulls his hand out from behind his back and holds out my maiden's circlet.

I can't breathe. I touch my forehead where it used to rest. I wore it for a year. I don't know what to say.

"Here," Jake whispers, and he puts it back on my brow.

His hands run down either side of my face, then my throat, then he's pulling me to him and he's kissing me.

The falling, floating, flying feeling has nothing to do with an interdimensional shift this time. It's all Jake.

"A-hem."

We jump apart. Jake's dad is standing in the doorway. I don't know how we woke him, seeing as how we were whispering. He must have a chastity detector in his brain. I hastily take off my maiden's circlet and hide it behind my back.

"Jake. No girls in your bedroom," his dad says gently, and a little disappointed, actually.

Jake holds my hand tightly in his as he brings me to the door. He glances back at me. "I was just giving something back to her. For now."

Embarrassed but cheeky. Absolutely devastating.

"Will you stay for dinner?" Jake asks as we go down the stairs.

I frown. "I want to, but I can't."

He stops even though we're not all the way down yet. I'm one stair over him which puts us almost eye to eye. "Why not?" He's serious and a little worried. Like maybe things are different between us now that we're back here. He's frigging adorable.

"I have a very important quest," I reply, breaking into a smile.

"Tell me your quest, Princess, and I will aid you in it," he says. His smile is so close to mine our lips are nearly touching.

"Okay," I say, shrugging. "But he bites."



***Enjoy the following excerpt from **THE TINKER'S DAUGHTER**, book
two in **THE CHRONICLES OF LUCITOPIA**.***

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Cover

CHAPTER ONE

“**Y**ou don’t have to do this, you know,” I say.

“Now, now, Jonara,” sighs Grieves, the butcher. “My hands are just as tied as yours.” We both glance at the iron shackles scraping at my wrists, and at his clearly free ones. I raise a doubtful eyebrow at him. “You know what I mean,” he says, soldiering on. “You lost the lottery fair and square.”

“Fair and square?” I repeat, just short of shrieking. “My name was the only one in it!”

“It’s not our fault you were the only virgin over the asking age of sixteen,” Tabbal the tailor rebukes in his smarmy way.

I’ve always liked Grieves—*always* being the handful of days I’ve known any of the people in this town—but Tabbal has never been my favorite. Especially since he has tried to relieve me of my virginity on more than one occasion. Unfortunately for him. Being a tinker’s adopted daughter and spending my life traveling from town to town has made me quite good at defending my virginity. Unfortunately for me, I’m now finding.

“We told you about the dragon when you came to town,” Grieves says apologetically.

“But you never told me you were going to *feed* me to it!” I holler back.

Grieves looks over at Ramel, the fat mayor, as if to say that I have a point. Ramel rolls his eyes.

“Look, it’s bad luck all around, but we need to give that dragon a sacrifice before he flies down the mountain and burns our village to the

ground, yeah? You're the only virgin left in town over the age of sixteen," Ramel says sensibly.

"I thought the lottery was to win a pig!" I say, dumbfounded. "You didn't even bother to tell me I was going to get eaten until *after* we'd been climbing for three hours!"

Ramel ignores me and calls over his shoulder to address the torch-bearing mob that has escorted me up this mountain. "Do these shackles attach to the chains on the stake?" he asks anyone at random. He looks at me. "Been almost nine months of this virgin-stringing-up-business, once a month at the full moon like clockwork, and I still don't have the hang of things," he tells me, bouncing on his toes and smiling abashedly at this personal foible of his.

"You don't say," I comment. Unfortunately, my dry wit is lost on him.

Lakonius, the blacksmith, comes forward out of the mob, ducking his head between his hunkering shoulders in shame.

"You do it up like this," he mumbles as he threads a chain dangling from the top of the stake to a big ring on my shackles. I squint meaningfully at Lakonius as he hoists my arms up over my head.

"How many times have I helped you fix something at the forge?" I ask him.

"Sorry, Jonara," he says quietly. "Can fix anything, you can. It's a shame to lose you, but some of us have daughters."

"And I've got a father," I retort. A thought occurs to me. "Where is he, anyway?"

Lakonius and Grieves share a look. "Well, your father's getting on in years," Grieves replies haltingly.

"He'd never make the climb with that bad back of his," Lakonius adds. "Too much strain for an old man like him."

I look between the two of them. "You didn't tell him, did you? He still thinks I'm getting that pig, doesn't he?" They share a sheepish look. "Unbelievable," I say, turning up my hands. Which is awkward because they are shackled and chained over my head. "This is murder, you know!"

"Now, now," Ramel the mayor interjects nervously. He doesn't want any legal entanglements, that's for sure. "The lottery is unbiased."

"It's not a lottery if only one name is in it! You say you've done this nine times already?" I ask, noticing the rig they've got all set up here.

“Were all the other victims from out of town as well?”

The mob moves away, leaving me hanging from my shackles. They all take cover behind the giant rocks strewn about the mouth of the enormous cave, before which I am staked. Nothing happens. Time passes and still, nothing happens. My arms have gone numb.

“How do you know he even likes virgins!?” I yell.

“What do you mean? Everyone likes virgins,” Ramel the fat mayor replies.

“Why?” I press.

“Well, you know. They just do.” I hear mumbling as he confers with others. “They taste better?”

“You honestly think that I, lean as I am, taste better than you do?” I ask. “And why only girls? Why not male virgins?”

“Because girls aren’t as useful as men.” I hear Ramel yelp as his wife hits him.

“What would the son of a tinker do that I don’t?” I ask.

“He’d fix stuff,” Tabbal the tailor says.

“She’s better at fixing stuff than her father,” Lakonius informs him.

I hear more mumbling.

“A son would carry his father’s pack. Right heavy those are,” someone—I don’t know who—yells out from the darkness.

“I always carry the pack, and it *is* quite heavy,” I say. “You’ve seen my father, haven’t you? If he could stand up straight, he’d still be half of me.”

“A boy would, you know...” the voice trails off, trying to think what else a boy would do.

My temper slips. I’ll admit it: staring into the black mouth of that cave, imagining a dragon coming out of it, is starting to work on my mind. I am not useless, and I deserve to be more than a dragon’s dinner.

“Would he keep the house, too!?” I shout into the darkness. “Would a boy get up before his father to prepare breakfast and then spend just as many hours doing just as much if not more work as his father, only to come home, fetch water, chop wood, cook dinner, clean the laundry, do the dishes, sweep the floors, and finally go to bed four hours after his father’s been sleeping, only to get up an hour before him to do it all over again!? Hmm? Would a boy do that!? Come to think of it, why am I even fighting this whole getting eaten by a dragon business?”

“Exactly! Why are you fighting it? The other girls had stopped crying by now.”

“I’m not crying!” I snap. “I’m pointing out that there are grave injustices in both the distribution of labor and the expectations that society places on women!”

There’s a pause. “Well, *stop* it. You’ll give the other women funny ideas.”

I sigh deeply, and we all wait some more. Some of the townspeople have started back down the mountain, grumbling about an early start in the morning. Nice to know my death is so boring they can’t be bothered to wait for the climax. My arms are all pins and needles. If it was going to take this long, they could’ve made it more comfortable. They could have tied me to a chair, or something. The stake is pure theatrics at this point.

A thought occurs to me. “Why haven’t any of you tried *killing* the dragon?” I ask.

“Why would we do *that*?” the unknown voice responds. “The dragon’s the only thing keeping the bandits away.”

There have been an awful lot of bandits about since the old king died with no heir and some upstart sorcerer started challenging all the peacekeeping knights to single combat. Asphodel is the sorcerer’s name and blast it if he doesn’t keep winning. There are practically no knights left.

“Why don’t you hire the bandits to kill the dragon, then?” I suggest. “Times are tough, you know. Most of the bandits I’ve encountered on the roads are only dabbling in banditry because they are in need of gainful employment.”

And a lot of them are starting to join up with Asphodel. He’s building a bloody army. Won’t be safe on the roads anymore for Da and me. Not that I am going to be doing much walking about, presently, as it seems I am to become some dragon’s dinner. Unbelievable.

I hear more whispering. I believe someone says that virgins are cheaper. I’m working myself up to a decent-sized rage when I hear something coming from the cave.

There is a great rumble and a gust of dry, burnt air belches out around me, blowing my white dress and my unbound hair back in such a forceful gust that my eyes water. I hear the hidden townsfolk scream and the sounds of them scrambling to get farther away.

From the darkness there is a scraping sound and a giant *sniff*. I feel the air around me getting sucked toward the mouth of the cave. There's another scraping sound and a scaly claw, each talon longer than my body, comes into view. Then, the tip of an enormous golden snout appears over the claw and two green eyes glow in the darkness. The rest of the dragon's face still hidden in the gloom.

Bollox.

My whole life I did everything right. I kept my head down, did my work, and now I'm going to die because of it. I know that at twenty I'm quite old for marriage and that any halfway decent village girl is usually betrothed by the time she's fifteen, but there were plenty of boys (okay, maybe just one) who had shown interest in marrying me. I'm no great beauty, but neither was he, and I've got skills, hang it all.

But I didn't even let him court me because that would have meant that I'd have to leave my poor father—who, honestly?—is a terrible tinker. Couldn't fix a nail to a board with a hammer, that one. Actually, I never trusted him with the hammers. Mostly, I just let him drink tea with the customers and keep them entertained while I got down to the business of fixing things. Very entertaining, my da. Stories are his life. He's got a story about everything, and he's fantastic at telling them.

Storytelling isn't very lucrative. But I stuck with my adopted father because he took me in as a babe and taught me everything he knew. Then I figured out the rest on my own when I realized that he didn't really know very much. He did teach me to read and do arithmetic, which has been quite useful, though I've had to explain to him on many occasions that zero coins equals zero food. He hasn't quite understood that subtlety in mathematics just yet.

Still, I love my da. But that's not the only reason I've stuck by him. It's the principle of the thing. You don't leave a kind old man who took you in as a child, just because an enterprising young man says he likes the look of your ankles. Which wasn't even a very good compliment, come to think of it. No, if I'm going to abandon my aged benefactor and earn a living for some other man, it's going to be for one who can come up with something better to talk about than the first body part he happens to look down and see.

Maybe it's just the hot breath of doom stirring my blood, but I've suddenly decided that I want poetry, dammit. Love. As hard as I've worked, I deserve some of that romance my father is always spinning yarns about. Failing that, I definitely *don't* deserve to get eaten by a bloody dragon—but apparently that's what's going to happen because that's what I get for being a good girl. Ruddy bastards, the lot of them. Especially that blasted dragon.

“Well, what are you waiting for, you big lummoX!?” I shout at the green eyes hovering over the golden snout. “Go ahead and eat me, and may you choke on my bones!”

I hear the few remaining townspeople gasp from behind their rocks.

The great head of the dragon finally emerges from the mouth of the cave. His scales twinkle like oiled gold. His big, liquid eyes are pools of pure emerald with a dot of inky black in the center. The sharp teeth showing along the edge of his lower lip are ivory white, except for the left canine. That tooth is a spike of diamond, longer than my leg. I gasp. I can't help it. He's more gorgeous than the dawn.

“You're... beautiful,” I say, mesmerized.

He snorts smoke and rumbles, breaking my momentary reverie. My legs start to shake in panic. Until now I was too angry about being duped to feel much of anything, but it occurs to me that I could quite possibly be *eaten*. What a horrible way to die.

One of his claws reaches out for me and I scream. I scramble around to the other side of the pole, barely evading him. He snatches at me again and I use the chains to hoist myself up over his scaly grasp. Carrying that tinker's pack from town to town has made me heartier than most girls.

“Ha!” I yell, emboldened by my small victory, though my voice quavers with a healthy dose of terror. “I can do this all night!”

Dragon jerks back and puffs hot air through his nostrils, as if surprised. He leans down again, one of his emerald eyes peering closely at me. His eye is as big as I am. I scurry behind the stake, keeping low and feinting left and right in an asinine attempt to keep him guessing. My options for concealment are ... limited. He peers at me curiously, not like a ravening beast at all. Though I may be a fool for it, I can't feel as frightened of him as I probably should be. If he smelled like carrion, or if there were rent carcasses strewn about, I'd certainly be able to muster up the requisite shock and horror, but this lair of his is quite tidy. Nary a skull in sight.

“I promise, I’m not worth the effort, Dragon,” I call out, offering a truce. “You’ll work up a bigger hunger trying to catch me than eating me could ever slake.”

Dragon reaches again, and though I dodge him he’s too fast for me. He catches me by my leg and pulls. But of course, I’m chained to the stake. I stop short and scream with the pain of being nearly torn in two. Dragon drops me at the sound of my distress, and I slam against the stake. My head explodes and my vision blurs. I blink my eyes, trying to remain conscious, and see him reaching for me again. This time he grasps me around the waist, dare I say... carefully? He tugs on me a few times in an exploratory way. He’s not trying to hurt me, but it still feels like my arms are getting yanked out of the sockets.

“I’m *attached* to it, you glittering oaf!” I holler, pointing to the stake.

He makes a rumbling sound deep in his throat, and maybe it’s just the knock I took to the head, but it sounds like he’s laughing. Dragon easily plucks the stake out of the ground and gathers me and the stake into one of his front claws. As his talons close to form a cage around me, I capitulate to the swirling feeling in my head and everything goes black.



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