

~ The Official Guide to Rescuing and Maintaining Damsels in Distress ~

by K. Alexander

DISCLAIMER

Though the characters in this tale may physically remind you of people that you know, they are in no way affiliated with, or based upon, the characters of Xena and Gabrielle as used in **Xena: Warrior Princess**. It may shock you; nay, disgust you to know that I have watched barely three episodes of your favourite TV series (perhaps four years ago?) and so would not be able to draw upon those characters even if I wanted to. Not my fault, mind you, but that of the broadcasting authorities in my country. However, I am aware of certain physical similarities and therefore invite you to employ your own wild imagination to make the leap.

SEX/VIOLENCE/DRAMA/TRAUMA/SINGING/SWEARING/BAD FASHION/TEMPER TANTRUMS/DISTURBING HABITS WARNING

They were tough times, my friends. Dragons, sword-fighting, spouting blood, ale and poufy dresses. And those were just the theme parties. This is a very light-hearted tale with sharp moments but there is nothing that could offend you, methinks. Only one thing: if you're reading this for the sex, you've just wasted one and a half minutes. Subtext. That's all you're getting. Overt, blatant, unashamed tongue-in-somebody-else's-cheek, but subtext nonetheless.

COMMENTS You are most welcome to share them with me, as long as you adore me madly. No, but really. Constructive criticism will be welcomed with open arms. As will credit card details, money orders, cheques, cheese wheels and Diane Lane. Find me at:

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AND FINALLY I hope that you enjoy reading this every bit as much as I have enjoyed writing it. Updated 19/10/2006

Chapter One:

The dark knight hacked valiantly through the thick brambles surrounding the castle. It might have been a noble sight had it not been for the constant and innovative cursing coming from beneath the visor. It only ceased once the tall figure had reached open space and stood for a moment to catch a much-needed breath. Only then did the giant three-headed dog clear his throat almost politely. The knight froze, head tilted back to take in the sight of the huge beast with the slightly embarrassed grin on all three of his faces. Then, with a resigned oath, the knight slid the handkerchief into a bracer and reached for the sword. "Oh bugger."

It was at the top of the turret - what a surprise - that the knight found the princess asleep on an artfully rumpled bed. Her blonde hair was spread around her face on the pillow, framing her

features beautifully. The knight did not really care. Sheathing the sword the tall character strode across the floor and leaned over the woman. Her lips puckered ever so slightly.

"Hey," the knight said politely. Her eyes remained tightly shut. Scowling, the armoured figure leaned in closer and spoke directly into her ear.

"HEY".

The word was louder this time and a delicate frown line appeared on her forehead, but her eyes stayed shut. With a snort the knight pulled off the helmet, then took hold of her shoulders and shook her rather sharply.

"Rise and shine, princess!"

The loud words echoed in the almost empty room. Her hair tangled around the knight's arms and now the sleeping woman had a definite frown on her face. "Kiss me" she mumbled from the corner of her mouth.

"Huh?"

"Kiss me, you idiot!" she breathed again, then attempted to assemble her facial expression into a less irritated one. With a sigh and a shrug the knight leaned over and planted a smacking kiss on her lips. The princess slowly opened her eyes and smiled dreamily.

"My knight in shining..."

Her eyes focused on the square but decidedly female face above her. "...what the...?" She rose quickly, then fell right back with the knight almost collapsing on top of her.

"Owww!"

"Lie still for a moment - your hair is caught in my bracer..."

"I can FEEL that! Can you just... what in the... ow ow OW!"

The knight managed to untangle herself and straightened up. "Sorry 'bout that". With a scowl the princess sat up again and combed her hair rather irritably with her fingers. "What I have to put up with.... what are you doing here?"

Frowning slightly the knight peered at the princess for a moment. "I came to... rescue you?" she ventured. "Isn't that the point? Chop down the thorny bits, kill the three-headed thing..."

"You KILLED him?"

"Well, no. I gave him my lunch."

The princess stopped combing her hair and looked at the knight incredulously. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then shut it again and shook her head. The knight tried another smile and removed a clump of blonde hair from her bracer. She looked at it for a moment and then politely offered it to the princess, who ignored her pointedly.

"So if we can just get going..."

"Look, it's very nice of you to drop by and everything, thanks for the effort and I'll be sure to write you a nice poem or something. You're just not..."

"Not what?"

"Not what I expected."

"What? My hair the wrong colour? Plenty of things rhyme with black."

"No, no, you have very nice hair, it's just... you're not..."

"Is it because I bribed the monster with sandwiches??"

"No, no, that's not the POINT!" The princess exhaled angrily and mentally stamped her feet a few times. "The POINT is that I lie here asleep and serene until a handsome prince wakes me with his gentle kiss, and then we go off on his horse to his kingdom where I rule by his side happily ever after."

The knight lifted an arched eyebrow and looked less than impressed. "You've had way too much free time to think about this."

"Princesses have nothing BUT free time, I'll have you know. Now can you just..."

She made a shooing motion towards the knight, then lay back down and started to arrange her hair across the pillow again. With a glower the knight watched her for a moment and then picked up her helmet.

"Right, so you can just give me the crown and I'll be out of your hair."

"WHAT?"

"I said, just give me..."

"I HEARD what you said, bu... why would I give you my crown?"

Sighing, the knight sat down on the corner of the bed. "It's like this. Either you give me your crown so I can feel like I didn't just waste an entire day, or I take you back to your ever-so-grateful father who reimburses me richly for returning his daughter to him". She scratched

nonchalantly at a mud-spatter on her armor, ignoring the incredulous expression on the other woman's face.

"What if I refuse?"

"I can carry you downstairs and tie you to my saddle."

Muttering evilly the princess sat up and plastered a sickly sweet smile on her face. "Look, we may have gotten off on the wrong foot here. I appreciate you coming all this way, I really do, but this just won't..."

"Tied upside down on a horse. Just imagine."

"But if you just..."

"Crown, horse, crown, horse..."

"But..."

"Horse?"

"FINE."

"Fine."

The knight scowled and rubbed a hand across her throbbing head. Her jaw was aching and she was pretty sure that her molars had all been ground down to stubs by now. The pouting had gone on for longer than she knew any human could maintain it, but then it had turned into a running commentary about the surrounding forest, which in turn had given way to this awful howling that the princess seemed to consider singing. Currently the royalty in question was finishing the fourteenth verse of a song that should have been off-limits to someone of her standing, not to mention vocal abilities.

"So the very tired Innkeeper

looked at the newlywed

with his blush becoming deeper

he cleared his throat and said:

"The walls are thin and i'm a light sleeper..."

She had not spoken to the knight since they left the castle, merely shaken her head indicating that she'd rather walk than ride, and then set off in an arbitrary direction with her nose pointed firmly

at the sky. But somewhere along the way her natural loquaciousness had apparently set in and now the horse was being subjected to random verbal outpourings.

As the princess took a deep breath to prepare for the infamous verse fifteen the knight took advantage of the silence and butted in.

"Princess..."

"Don't call me that"

"But that's what you are... Aren't you?"

"Yes, but the way you say it makes me sound like a disease."

The knight could not remember having sighed as many times in her whole life as she had in the last day.

"Then what?"

"Just call me Helena. Although I'm sure you'll be able to make that sound horrid as well."

Ignoring the impatient sigh Helena turned away imperiously and started walking a little faster. To the knight's great irritation her horse followed placidly.

"Traitor" she mumbled under her breath.

"Did you say something?"

"I was talking to my horse."

"So was I." Helena levelled a narrow-eyed look at the knight and patted the horse's neck in an enthusiastic but thoroughly inept fashion. "So, girl, I bet you could tell me about a lot of interesting adventures".

"Yep," the knight replied as she shot Helena an innocent smile. "Perhaps the most exciting day in her life was when she turned into a boy horse."

A brilliantly evil look was tossed in her direction.

"I wasn't talking to you."

"Yeah. I know. You were talking to Toby."

It was nearing dusk when the knight started looking around for an appropriate spot to make camp. Momentarily diverted, it was only when she heard a rustle that she turned around to be greeted with the sight of Helena marching as valiantly as ever into a random direction, and also

directly through a small tough shrub. However pleasurable it might have been for the knight to let her struggle through similarly aggressive vegetation for a little longer, the princess had already wandered off a good distance and it was getting dark. Motioning Toby into a slow trot she pulled up next to the flushing blonde and cleared her throat.

"Oh **what?**"

"I'm making camp in that direction. When you're finished molesting that plant I'd suggest that you join me by the fire."

"I'd rather dance the two-step with a bald peg-legged beggar with fleas, but thanks ever so much anyway."

Placidly the knight contemplated this comment while Helena tried without luck to rid herself of the thorny vines by stomping her feet. Gradually her stomping grew slower and finally she stood still, glaring at the knight much as usual.

"So?"

A furrow creased the square brow.

"So what?"

"Where's the clever little comment? You'd never let that one go." Helena looked almost insulted. The knight thoughtfully rolled her jaw around a bit, more to taunt the princess than anything else. There was a potent moment of silence. Then:

"I reckon not."

Chapter Two:

There was a slight breeze blowing amongst the trees, which only served to numb the princess's jutting bottom lip further. She was attempting to maintain a perfect sulky pout, but to her great consternation - and indignation - this did not appear to have the slightest effect on the knight. Peering from under her long lashes (surreptitiously, of course) the pouting princess found that the knight was in fact meticulously cleaning her nails with a sharp stick and a great degree of concentration. When the dark woman felt the green eyes on her she intensified her attack, poking her tongue from one side of her mouth for greater effect.

Helena pondered for a moment the mind that would find such a mundane task so intensely riveting. It did not bode well for her forthcoming journey - or for anything much, in fact. Deciding to abandon her pout forthwith, the princess tucked her lip into her mouth and chewed on it thoughtfully to encourage the bloodflow. A quick glance at the knight confirmed that she was still folded double with her brow furrowed, poking carefully at the same dirty nail.

With a sigh Helena studied the gleaming black hair for a moment. There was nothing for it; she was going to *have to* have a conversation, even if only with this ... well. Clearing her throat pointedly she waited for the other woman's response. What would have been polite would *of course* have been for the knight to immediately lay down her sharp stick and say "Yes, m'lady" attentively. As it was the woman in question merely gave a very unladylike sniff (more of a snort, perhaps) and wiped furiously at her itchy nose for a moment before she returned to her task. Gritting her teeth resolutely Helena cleared her throat once more, staring at the knight with the greatest intensity she could muster. The dark woman just continued to clean her nails, pausing only once to wave away an insistent gnat.

"Knight!" Helena's voice was very startling and strident in the silence.

The knight cleaned the last nail and discarded the stick neatly in the fire, then glanced up. "Indeed."

At the irate look on Helena's face she gave a small smile.

"It crept up on us."

Helena folded her arms rather aggrievedly. "That's not what I meant and you know it! I do not find you amusing in the slightest!"

Grinning, the knight pulled a green apple from her saddlebag and rubbed it against her shift a few times. Then she took a great bite from it, speaking through her methodical chewing.

"That's a pity, for sure."

Helena was about to start stamping her foot petulantly when she realised that the knight's lusty chewing would probably take precedence over any kind of satisfactory reaction. Gritting her teeth she decided to take the horse by the reins, so to speak. Subtlety was obviously wasted on this person.

"What is your name, knight?"

The knight chewed happily for a moment and then - thankfully - swallowed before she answered.

"Crispin."

"Excuse me?"

This time the knight spoke through the obstacle in her mouth.

"Wha? I thed Cwispin."

The princess wrinkled her nose distastefully at the sight of mangled apple.

"Close your mouth. Crispin is a boy's name."

"I can't answer your silly questions if I close my mouth. And do I *look* like a boy?" Crispin raised one eyebrow over her apple. To her extreme indignation the princess actually pondered the question, studying first her simple clothing, and then her rough dirty boots. Then, with an almost imperceptible glance at her chest, Helena frowned.

"I suppose not."

Snorting, Crispin took another bite from her apple and chewed loudly before she spoke. "So? If I'm not a boy and my name is Crispin, then Crispin is not a boy's name."

"Ha!" Helena gave a rude bark of laughter which was so loud it startled even her. "Your logic is terrible."

Crispin shrugged rather noncommittally. "I'm a knight, not a scientist. Ask me about dragons or horses or swords or something."

Chewing the inside of her lip pensively Helena tried - and failed - to conjure up an acceptable question. She just wasn't interested in dragons or horses or armour, darn it. She decided to try the next best option.

"What do you do... when you're not doing this, I mean?"

The knight furrowed her brow for a moment before she answered.

"Oh. I'm a ladies' bloomer merchant."

Helena's eyes widened in amazement. "Really??"

"Yes. But not at night. Then I'm a hired mercenary for carnival folk."

Helen gave a squeal of fury and jumped up, stalking off to a shadowy corner. From the darkness her voice came floating out, pouty and petulant.

"Why do you have to be such a pain in the backside?!"

Crispin seemed to consider the question briefly, her long finger tapping her chin. Then, shrugging, she rolled back and sat cross-legged on her bedroll.

"It's not me. It's you." She waited patiently for the unintelligible profanities to subside (noting again just how inappropriate the princess's vocabulary was) before she continued. "Princess. If it looks like a knight. And it rides like a knight. And it rescues your lily-white pantaloons from a beast much like a knight would ... then the chances are great that it is, ipso facto, a knight."

Helena was quiet for quite a while, and Crispin was just getting comfortable with the silence, when the slightly less sullen voice came drifting out again.

"Are you a knight **all** of the time?" Crispin gave an exasperated sigh, and Helena continued quickly. "It's just no profession for a lady!"

"Oh? Would you call me a lady?"

"Not to your face." There was a snigger from the trees. "Erm. Right. But what about a young man? And children and a family?"

Crispin shrugged and looked up at the stars.

"I am actually much fonder of dragons than I am of young men."

She cast a glance over her shoulder, appearing to pinpoint Helena's location with her blue eyes. "Come closer to the fire."

"No." Helena folded her arms touchily, fully aware that she was in the darkness, but hoping that Crispin's eyes would miraculously pick up her very pointed signal of displeasure.

"All right." Crispin shrugged again in that careless way that was becoming increasingly irritating to the princess. "If the wild boars kill you, I'm keeping the crown. Just so you know."

A ruffle of skirts preceded Helena's hurried appearance next to the fire. Hem grasped delicately in both hands, the princess attempted to disguise her dash for safety with a haughty tilt of the head.

"You are **not** taking my crown. That is final." She promptly sat down where she stood, her lack of composure and grace causing the skirt to billow around her ears. Valiantly, and miraculously, Crispin managed to maintain her serious expression at the sight of Helena viciously fighting the voluminous material down to the ground. When the princess finally regained her self-control and poise sufficiently, she cleared her throat again, pointedly.

"I've heard that bit, princess. Just talk now." With a smack of her lips Crispin threw the apple core over her shoulder in the general direction of Toby, who caught it in mid-air and disposed of it cleanly.

Helena sat quietly for a moment, her brows furrowed, then turned towards Crispin. "Crispin *is* a boy's name."

"Is it?" Crispin's casual tone made Helena want to stamp her feet.

"Yes! You know it is!"

"Could be."

The pout began by itself and spread over the princess's face, creating various interesting effects on its journey. "It IS!" At the knight's slight smile Helena clenched her jaw tightly and balled her fists momentarily. She knew, she *knew* this woman was purposely trying to infuriate her! Fine. Fine fine fine. She would not be drawn into this childish game that knights apparently played as a pastime. Arranging her face into a sweet (if quite sickly) smile, Helena took a deep breath and levelled her voice.

"Crispin is a boy's name, you know. Is there any reason why your parents would have given you a boy's name?" Her eyes suddenly narrowed at a new thought. "Or are you not using your real name? You could be a criminal!" She gazed at the dark woman's face suspiciously.

Crispin gave a faint grin. "I am not a criminal. Just because I liberate an item here and there... Look," she stretched her long legs ahead of her and leaned back on her elbows, looking up at the stars peeking through the trees, "there's no story. My grandmother's name was also Crispin."

"Your grandmother had a boy's name??"

The knight sighed and rolled her neck a little to get rid of some of the tension building in her muscles. "She was a *woman*, I guarantee you. Apparently when she was born her father mistook her for a boy and named her before he could be informed otherwise."

Helena's brow creased. "Why would they mistake her for a boy? Was she... did she..."

"Was she did she what?"

"Did she have a..." Helena leaned forward, spellbound, her eyes as large as saucers. "Was she like that little boy at the carnival who..."

"NO!" Crispin sat bolt upright indignantly. "Nobody in my family is *anything* like *anybody* in *any* carnival!" Huffily she rearranged her pillow and flung herself back down again.

"Go to sleep."

"But..."

"Tied upside down on a horse."

"But why would your ..."

"Crown, horse, horse, horse ..."

"Fine."

"Good night."

"Hmph."

"Sire, I admit that I did sneeze in your drink

Lo, behold, your mustachios are burning...."

The princess was no music hall runaway, of that much Crispin was sure. Her singing was, if possible, even more atrocious than it had been the day before, and her terminology continually served to amaze the knight. Whether the princess was forgetful enough for the previous evening's topic to have slipped her mind, or whether she was tactful enough not to bring it up again (naturally Crispin voted wholeheartedly for the first option), the knight was completely and utterly thankful. She was actually beginning to enjoy the moustachioed tale of woe when a faint sound caught her attention.

"Shush..."

The princess had just arrived at a particularly dramatic verse and hurled her arms flamboyantly into the air, adding a little howl to the end of the last word for effect.

"Princess..."

Crispin's cautious voice was lost in Helena's enthusiastic rendering of the penultimate verse, complete with a dance that remarkably resembled the movements of a chicken scratching for worms. As much as Crispin wanted to see this to the end, she had to exercise the necessary caution. Riding up behind Helena she leaned sideways in her saddle and unceremoniously hefted the smaller body onto the horse with one hand, her other firmly covering the princess's mouth. For a second, surprised, Helena did not resist. Then the indignation rushed in and she managed to kick Crispin in the shin twice before the knight irritably wrapped an arm around her and restrained her movements. There was only one option available to the princess - she sank her teeth into Crispin's hand with all the enthusiasm she could muster. The knight yanked her hand away with an agonised roar, only to be reprimanded quickly by Helena.

"Shush! I think I hear something..."

Shaking her throbbing hand wildly to relieve some of the pain, Crispin glared murderously at the woman seated in front of her.

"You don't **SAY**?"

Ignoring the icy sarcasm, Helena tilted her head and attempted to identify the ruckus. There was some gnashing of teeth, some roaring, some howling and some stomping of feet too. Twisting in the saddle, and almost falling off in the process, Helena caught Crispin's still furious eyes.

"You know what we have to do."

The knight nodded. "Let's go." She prodded Toby with her heels, and the horse quite happily wandered away from the noise.

"Wait! Where are we going?!" Helena turned around so forcefully that she almost fell off again. "We have to investigate!"

The black eyebrows arched almost into Crispin's hairline and stayed there for good measure. "Investigate? People as inquisitive as you end up investigating their guts on a sharp stick soon enough. Did I say inquisitive? Sorry, I meant nosy. That's the word I was going for."

Helena folded her arms petulantly and glared.

"I want to investigate. Why don't we ever do what I want to do?"

With a grimace Crispin inspected her wounded hand, flexing her fingers a few times. "Number one, we've only been travelling together for two days now, though it feels like a lifetime..."

Toby, rather unimpressed with the conversation, yawned and shook his head to test the hands on the reins. At that point they were in fact waving around in the air rather wildly trying to make a point.

"It's hardly travelling - you're abducting me against my will."

"I would not call rescuing you from a three-headed beast abducting you, your royal Hell."

"You just fed Boris some sandwiches! Such a hero!"

"Boris?? Look. Never mind. I don't care. Number two, you've spent how many years lying around on a bed waiting for a prince to kiss you awake - when you weren't even asleep! - so your ideas are all bound to be *extremely* bad."

Toby lowered his head and ate some juicy green grass and one or two pretty flowers.

"At least I *have* some ideas in my head!"

"You've read too many books, girl, that's your problem..."

"And you're an insensitive loutish pig, that's your problem. Bet you *can't* even read!"

"I can too."

"I don't believe you."

"Now why in all of the world would I lie about something like that?"

"I don't know. You're strange."

"Me? *I'm* strange??"

"Oh, and ha bloody ha for the royal Hell bit."

Toby chewed happily for a moment before accidentally getting a small rock in his mouth. Spitting out the offending object with a disgusted look he wandered into the direction he felt was best suited for a horse.

"I should never have saved you from that turret. Ever. Pity you look so deceptively peaceful in your semi-sleep. Did they describe that look in one of your books? Because it's not actually inherently you, princess."

"It's not too late to take me back, you know. I'll keep quiet all the way?"

Giving a bark of laughter Crispin shook her head. "Terrible plan. Here's a better idea. You can walk back."

"Fine. I have legs. Good ones."

"Minus the crown, princess."

"Stop calling me princess!"

"So it's a deal?"

"NO."

They glared at each other. Helena was only beginning with her best glare when Crispin looked away into the trees, her dark face thoughtful.

"Hey! We're arguing here! Pay attention." Helena snapped her fingers inches from the knight's nose, only to have her wrist caught and held immobile in mid air. She was about to start slapping with her other hand when Crispin's eyes met and held hers.

"Shh."

They listened quietly for a moment, the princess's brow furrowed. "I don't hear any..."

"That's the point. Where's the noise?"

"Ohh."

Chapter Three:

"This is a bad bad bad idea."

"Shush. You're just being a big baby in armor."

"Am not. It's a knight's natural instinct to run away from potentially life-threatening situations rather than towards them."

"I thought knights were valiant and ... what's that word? Courageous."

"They're the same word. And knights aren't valiant or courageous, they're acquisitive. That means..."

"I *know* what that means, thank you. I read. And not all of them are like you, you know. I am very sure there's a handsome knight out there who would have swooped in and rescued me bravely had *you* not decided to interfere."

"I've rescued him bravely from you, I think. Besides, your selfless knight would have had a rather nice fortune from you father to console him once he realised that his princess is quite disagreeable."

"You're a prime example of rat droppings."

"Thank you."

They despised each other amicably for a few minutes. Crispin was wondering what had possessed her to capitulate to Helena's demands and go in search of the nasty noise. The knight's reasoning was that the sound was rather more problematic when it wasn't there to be avoided, and she was trying at all costs to believe that this was her only reasoning. It had absolutely positively completely nothing to do with Helena's infectious curiosity.

The terrain underfoot had been changing gradually from foliage to granite, and as they neared the edge of a clearing the scenery that unfolded in front of them had Helena gasping in awe. The road split into two sections - one led to the left into a small granite hill from which a ledge protruded near the top, and the other led back into the woods towards the right. Squarely in the middle lay a small lake, its water beautifully clear and reflecting the blue sky, surrounded by emerald green grass. With a squeal and a wiggle Helena managed to throw herself off Toby's back and into the road.

"Oh look, Crispin! How beautiful!"

She ran towards the little lake, her capacious dress billowing behind her. Spurring Toby on, Crispin set off after Helena. "Princess..." Leaning over, she attempted to haul the errant princess back onto the saddle, but Helena dove headfirst into the lush green grass, evading her grasping fingers neatly. With a sigh Crispin pulled Toby to a halt and rested her forearms on the saddle, looking down at Helena. The princess was lying flat on her back with her arms extended at her sides, a blissful smile on her face. Suddenly she pointed to a spot behind Crispin.

"Look! A tiger!"

Instinctively the knight ducked down in her saddle, making the young blonde woman giggle.

"In the clouds, silly." She pointed into the sky again. With a snort Crispin sat up straight and gave the clouds a cursory glance.

"They're just clouds, Helena."

The young woman sat up with an incredulous expression on her face. "You called me Helena!"

"My apologies, princess. Now let's get going, shall we?"

With a grunt Helena rolled over onto her stomach and rested her head on her hands. "You know what your problem is?"

"You?" the knight ventured carefully.

"No." The princess shook her head categorically. "You. You're your own problem. We're in this beautiful area and you won't even get off your horse to feel the grass under your feet..." eyeing the armour covering the bridge of the knight's foot, she amended, "shoes."

"I know what grass feels like, thank you very much. What I *don't* know is what exactly is sitting behind a boulder on the hill watching its lunch develop grass stains."

As if on cue a rumble started in the hills, soft and low at first but building until it became a fully fledged roar. Sitting up rapidly, Helena rubbed at the gooseflesh on her arms and looked around anxiously, her green eyes wide. "Where is it coming from?"

"Probably from inside something big with teeth. Now *will you get on this horse?*"

Standing up, the princess brushed loose grass off her dress, ignoring the square hand that was extended to her. "This was a bad idea, you know."

"It was YOURS!" The knight's eyebrows skyrocketed into her hairline.

Shrugging noncommittally Helena took off one shoe and took a small pebble out of it. "I'm not assigning any blame, Crispin." Tossing the pebble into the lake she slipped the dainty shoe back on her foot. "All I am saying is that a knight should probably have known better."

"I'm... you... I'm so... YOU MADE ME DO IT!" The knight winced internally at her juvenile choice of words. This girl was definitely bringing out the worst in her. "Maybe I *should* just take you back."

Helena looked up at her hopefully, resisting the princess-like urge to flutter her eyelashes. "With my crown?"

"Yes, with that damned crown of yours. You're more aggravation than it's worth."

Suddenly remembering their particular situation, Crispin looked around warily - and unexpectedly catapulted off her horse straight into Helena, pulling her down flat into the grass next to the knight.

"Wha...?"

"Shush. There's a dragon." Crispin's whisper was so soft that Helena could not make out the words.

"What??"

"Shush - there's a dragon!" The knight's voice was still soft, but her words were much clearer. As the meaning sank in Helena's head shot up from the grass, much to Crispin's dismay. "Where??"

The fat green-blue dragon sat at the top of the granite road leading into the hill, watching Helena with a curious expression on his face. He was reclining on his stubby little arms, which left his massive rabbit-like hind feet to stick into the air rather absurdly.

With a sigh Crispin eyed the golden head next to her that had caught the dragon's attention.

"Well."

Jumping to her feet lithely she lunged for the scabbard tied to the saddle and drew her sword, spinning around to face the beast in readiness. After all that frenetic activity his reaction was almost a disappointment. Eyeing the knight's wild antics the dragon gave a small resigned sigh himself and rolled over onto his stomach, struggling to get to his feet. He rose a little awkwardly, his weight concentrated on one foot. Occasionally he gave a silly little hop to regain his apparently poor balance.

Raising one eyebrow Crispin lowered her sword and leaned on it with a puzzled expression. This was hardly appropriate behaviour. Next to her Helena scrambled to her feet, brow furrowed. "Is it attacking? What's happening??"

Chewing on the inside of her lip, Crispin shook her head. "I don't know *what* it's doing. Being very undragon-like."

"That's not a word, Crispin."

"It is now." Scratching her head thoughtfully the dark woman eyed the dragon, who - deciding that by all appearances the knight was not going to skewer him yet - had sat down promptly again. Daring to let the knight out of his sight for a moment, the dragon peered down at his right foot with his squinty little red eyes in what seemed to be abject misery. Next to Crispin Helena gasped so suddenly that the knight's arms slipped off the sword, causing the heavy metal to fall solidly on her foot. With a curse Crispin lifted the sword again and leaned on it while she rolled her ankle tenderly. "What now?"

The princess studied the dragon intently, not even glancing at the knight. "I think it's hurt its foot."

"Great. Then we should be able to run away quite confidently."

"What?!" Helena spun around, her expression incredulous. "You want to run away? Again??"

Crispin nodded solemnly.

"We have to **help** it!" Petulantly Helena folded her arms. With a sigh Crispin studied the profile which was turned prominently towards her.

"Princess. One does not help wounded dragons. It is not the done thing. One says a short thank-you note to whichever deity takes one's fancy and then one gets on one's horse."

"One can go stick one's leg in one's..."

Crispin listened to the suggestion quite solemnly. "Princess, apart from the fact that it's rather rude it's also physically fairly impossible. Unless I'm not nearly as limber as you?"

"Oh shut it, you pompous skunk." Huffily the princess gathered her skirt and began to walk towards the granite road. Pulling on her helmet and picking up her sword swiftly Crispin hurried after Helena, stepping in front of her and blocking her way in a potentially hazardous move.

"Princess. You are going to get yourself killed."

"You think so?" Helena turned up her nose expertly. "Do you care? You get my crown if I do."

"Hmm." The knight thought for a moment. "I might have to get it out of a dragon - which means I'd have to have it cleaned - but..." she pondered for another moment, "... okay, fine." Stepping out of Helena's way she rested her arms on her sword.

"What?" The princess stared at Crispin, her eyes blazing. "You're going to let me walk into this and get killed *for a crown*? What kind of a knight are you, really?? Do you even have legitimate papers and things to **be** a knight? Disgusting, I tell you..."

The knight let Helena rant and rave until it looked like she could think of nothing more to say.

"Princess?"

"WHAT?"

"You're supporting my point of view, actually. I'm just trying to let you do as you wish here."

"Hmf." Helena snorted and folded her arms. "Fine. If you want to be like that." She stalked up the granite hill, unmindful of the knight who was following at a decent distance. Crispin kept an

eye on the dragon, ready to defend the princess at any moment. The dragon, however, did not seem that interested in the approaching princess. His eyes alternated between the knight and his right foot. Noticing, Helena turned to the trailing knight and held up a hand.

"Crispin." Her voice was, for once, soft and soothing. "Stop there, please. You're making him nervous." Unsure, the knight stood still, sword at the ready, as she watched the princess approach the dragon with cooing sounds. For his part the dragon looked rather unsure too, as he watched the human approach him with outstretched hands. When she reached for his foot he twitched nervously and sat up a little more warily, which caused the knight to drop into a fighting stance. Keeping one hand where it was, Helena waved Crispin down with the other, and as the knight unwillingly lowered her sword again, the dragon relaxed a bit. With a small sigh Helena examined the huge foot. A sharp branch had been caught under one of the scales and was obviously pushing into the dragon's foot with every step. The small blonde woman tried to manoeuvre the branch out from under the scale, but the beast's tough hide was not making it easy.

Putting all her energy into a final tug, Helena pulled the branch clear of the dragon's hide with such force that she fell over backwards. Having gritted his pointy teeth and held his breath for the whole painful exercise, the dragon couldn't help but exhale in relief. The ensuing fiery blast went right over the princess who was at that moment lying flat on her back on the ground, but its last tendrils caught the momentarily distracted knight full in the chest.

When Helena pulled the branch clear and toppled over backwards, Crispin dropped the face guard on her helmet and began to run towards the princess, intending to pull her clear of the dragon. With her eyes on the princess she didn't notice the resolution of the problem and the dragon's response, so when the flames enveloped her it was a most, **most** unpleasant surprise. Luckily her armor took most of the force, but as is usual with metal the flames heated it up quite objectionably. Stumbling back from the haze she lost her footing, and that is how Crispin came to be rolling down the hill in blazing metal armor.

Chapter Four:

Helena got to her feet just in time to see Crispin stagger backwards from the flames and tumble down the hill. With a mildly reproaching look at the dragon - who was covering his mouth self-consciously with both paws - Helena took off after the knight.

Luckily for Crispin, she ended up face first in the lake at the bottom of the hill with steam rising around her ears. Sitting up in the mud, she pulled off her helmet and dislodged a lily pad from her head, doing a quick inventory of her body parts. Head, still there. Limbs, still there. Stomach, scorched. Hands, scorched. Armor, cooling down. Everything in between, scraped and battered.

"Crispin?!"

Princess, still there.

Crispin tried to rise to her feet but the accumulated water in her armor made her too heavy. With a sigh she wiped her hair out of her face and watched in grim amusement as Helena came running through the grass at full speed with her dress clasped above her knees in both hands. Even the shallow water proved to be no deterrent for her short stature.

With a final splash the princess dropped to her knees beside the wet and miserable-looking knight. She tried to seem nonchalant about the unfamiliar and unpleasant sensation of mud squelching under her feet, but couldn't control the invariable distasteful wrinkling of her nose. Wincing slightly, the knight stuck one finger in her ear and wriggled it.

"Well."

"Are you all right?" Helena quickly took stock of Crispin's appearance, trying to ascertain the damage.

"Hmm. Well, there was the bit when I got toasted by a dragon... now that was terrific... then the bit where I rolled down a granite hill with my armor on fire... no, no, *that* was really the best part... then the bit where I landed in the shallow end of a lake with mud in my pants... oh wait, it was **all** fantastic!"

Irritably Crispin struggled to loosen one of the metal clasps on the side of her armor and succeeded in scraping her knuckles. Brushing her fumbling hands away Helena loosened both clasps holding the vertical seams together over her ribs, then tried to lift the heavy armor over Crispin's head. Even with the knight's assistance she was still unprepared for the weight, and toppled over backwards until she was sitting in the water opposite the dark woman. They looked gravely at each other over the armor lying between them: one a tall dark-haired woman with blistered hands, covered in scrapes and bruises; the other a small blonde woman sitting in the mud with her dress billowing around her ears.

"I'm sorry."

The knight opened her mouth and then closed it in disbelief, brow furrowed. "What?"

"I'm so sorry." Helena was the very picture of remorse. She stared into the shallow water between them, trying not to look Crispin in the eye. "I'm really exceedingly sorry. You didn't want to do this and I insisted. And you ended up getting hurt. So I won't do what you don't want me to in the future and I'll listen to you when you tell me something. And I'm sorry. Really. Again."

Crispin sat silently for a moment, not sure what to do with this atypically remorseful character, and then cleared her throat.

"Erm. Thank you. Though I am very sure you will continue to do whatever it is *you* want to do in the future." Getting to her feet Crispin peered down and eyed what was left of her beloved formerly white shirt gloomily. The dragon's breath had trimmed an expanse of material off the front of the knight's shirt, leaving quite a space between her snug black pants and what remained

of the garment. When the knight looked back up at the princess, Helena shrugged and raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe everybody will be wearing it like that soon?"

Crispin raised an eyebrow too, looking almost amused. "I doubt this is going to catch on." Extending a hand she pulled the princess up, then lifted the armor from the water, ignoring the burning sensation in her hands. They waded towards the bank, the taller woman ahead. When she reached the grass she dropped the heavy armor and turned to watch Helena struggling through the water, weighed down by her sodden dress. It was an amusing spectacle, but the knight had already been made fully aware with a burning glare that no smiling or even moderate enjoyment would be tolerated. She sat down where she stood instead and studied the back of her left hand, rubbing at the red blistered skin with her right thumb.

"I'm truly sorry. Honestly."

Helena had seated herself on the knight's right and was looking at her hand with a mixture of concern and guilt. With a sigh Crispin flexed both hands and then shook them, glancing over at Helena.

"It's not actually your fault, princess."

"But it is! If I hadn't wanted to go in search of trouble you never would have gotten hurt."

Crispin shook her head, studying the wide green eyes. "Princess, it's not a bad thing when you want to help, even when it's something as horribly insane as helping a dragon. And it *was* an accident, impossible to predict."

"Still, I feel as though..."

"Princess..."

"Can't you just be gracious and accept my apology?!"

Sigh. "Fine. All right. Thank you and I accept."

It was nearing dark when they arrived at what Crispin had assured Helena would be a good place to make camp for the night. The knight had given directions from the saddle, forbidden to handle the reins, and Toby had happily followed the blonde woman as she led the way. When Toby came to a standstill Crispin slid off his back and untied the saddlebags, ignoring Helena's glare. Dumping them on the ground she turned to untie the blankets and found them pressed into her arms by the scowling princess.

"I told you to be careful with your hands!"

"I have to set up camp, princess."

"Fine, I'll do it."

"Um... Not to impugn your skills, but can you even make a fire?"

"The nerve! I've read a lot of books, I'll have you know." Helena tilted her head haughtily.

"Did one of your books teach you how to make a fire?" The princess pouted evasively and Crispin grinned. "Fine. When I need to hem a handkerchief I'll let you know."

"I'll have you know that I have **no idea** how to hem a handkerchief." They looked at each other for a moment, all four eyebrows raised, before Helena gave in graciously. "All right. We can safely assume that I won't be doing the ... more masculine ... tasks." Ignoring Crispin's outraged expression she continued. "Do you have any alcohol?"

"In my bag." Crispin watched as she stood up and retrieved the little flask, as well as a pretty white dress from her own bag. "No need to resort to intoxication, princess. I promise I'll teach you the basic ... masculine skills..."

"Don't get smart with me, knight," Helena snapped back. "Now hold out your hands." She poured alcohol over the burnt skin, watching as a muscle jumped in Crispin's tightly clenched square jaw, then began to tear strips off the bottom of the dress.

"Princess. Don't do that."

"You just love watching me struggle in these, don't you, Crispin? I refuse to be your entertainment fodder for one more minute... and besides, I don't need this much material when I'm wandering through the forest."

"True." Crispin nodded thoughtfully, and then held out a hand so that Helena could bind it with the strip of material. "First town we see, I'm going to buy you pants and boots."

With her hands newly bound Crispin gathered wood and made a fire while Helena laid out the bedrolls and brushed down Toby. Helena had gotten into a loose sleeping shift (behind a tree, of course, modesty prevailing) and had hung her wet dress over a small shrub close to the fire to dry. Crispin, on the other hand, did not possess anything so refined as a sleeping shift, nor any modesty to speak of. She had simply and unceremoniously stripped down to her undergarments and draped the wet clothing over another shrub. Now the knight stood by the fire, tossing logs into the flames. Already embarrassed by the casual disrobement, Helena found to her mortification that she could not look at Crispin for fear of staring at her near-naked body. She had never seen anybody - other than herself - in any state of undress, and the short underpants and white material that bound the knight's breasts left very little covered.

"Princess."

"Yes?" Automatically Helena looked up at the knight before she managed to turn around and find something for her hands to do. With a puzzled frown Crispin studied her.

"Helena?"

"What?" The princess spoke over her shoulder, but didn't face the knight. It seemed to be of paramount importance that she braid Toby's tail.

Scratching her head, Crispin studied herself as well as she could.

"Is there something wrong with me, Helena?"

"What? No. Why?"

"You're not looking at me."

"Erm." The princess swallowed noisily and cleared her throat a little too loudly. "No. No. Don't be silly. I'm just ... braiding this tail right here. I can't look at you all the time, you know."

With an impolite snort Crispin walked around the fire and took Helena by the arm, turning her around. The princess looked about wildly for a moment before settling on the knight's neck, which was right in line with her eyes. With a sigh Crispin folded her arms. "See? There it is."

For a few more moments Helena feigned extraordinary interest in the neck in front of her, but the knight's unwavering stare finally broke her resolve. "Don't do that! You're making me nervous."

"Why?"

"Because." Helena looked away for a moment, then sighed. "Because. Because you're naked."

"I'm *not* naked."

"You might as well be! Just look at this..." Helena pointed at the material covering her breasts, "... there's barely... I haven't..."

With a small frown Crispin scratched her head and thought for a moment.

"What is the problem here, exactly?"

"Well." The princess blushed a lovely scarlet red. "I haven't seen any naked... that is, in a state of unclothedness... is that even a word...?" Crispin stood patiently, hoping that the babbling would subside, "... well, it's just..." Helena glanced up at an ominously raised eyebrow and continued, "... when I look I can't seem to stop and you're going to think I'm strange for staring and..." She rambled off the sentence so fast that it took several seconds before Crispin managed to string it all together.

"I think you're strange already." Ignoring the little pout she continued. "Look, I understand that this is a new thing for you. So. You are most welcome to stare at me as much as you like. You

may even examine me - in moderation, of course." The princess opened her mouth, outraged, but Crispin held up a finger. "In return all I expect from you is basic cooperation."

Helena wrinkled her nose. "For how long?"

"Excuse me?"

"Cooperation for how long?"

"For the rest of the journey, of course." Crispin scowled down at her.

"That's not a very fair deal." Helena folded her arms assertively. "Considering that my lack of knowledge of the human body is a hereditary shortcoming - which you *really* can't blame me for - I do **not** think that you should be taking advantage of my disabilities by forcing me into submission, which, by the way, is in total disharmony with my inherent nature."

Crispin stared at her open-mouthed for a few seconds. "Eh?" Her voice had a definite tone of bewilderment to it.

"You heard me." Helena cocked her head assertively, eyebrows raised.

"Helena. When did this turn into a debate? And what happened to your earnest declarations while I sat in a puddle of mud??"

They glared at each other for a minute, arms folded. Then Helena relented. "All right, fine. I will of course do my utmost to be cooperative if and when the situation arises. Within reason."

"Of course." Crispin shook her head slightly and turned back to the fire. "And now I am going to tend to the fire. Feel free to contemplate my naked body. But can you brush Toby while you do so?"

The small woman stuck her tongue out at the retreating back with as much enthusiasm as she could muster before she pulled the brush from the saddlebag and began to groom Toby. Being quite the hedonist, the large black horse dropped his head limply as his eyes completely lost focus. He didn't seem to care that his minder had purposefully picked a spot where she could peer at his master over his back.

Crispin was a tall woman, a head or more taller than Helena, and years of hard physical work had shaped her body into a muscular frame. Her legs were extremely long and lean, her stomach flat and brown (though at this moment also red and swollen in patches), her shoulders square, and her muscular arms rounded off by large angular hands with long fingers. Helena could not help but notice the ease with which Crispin moved, the smooth agility, which declared her comfort in nature more than words would have. It was undemanding to watch her movements, since she was almost never still. The fire was fed with kindling and logs, the blankets were moved according to the smoke, and pots were hauled out. Then suddenly Crispin disappeared into the forest with a knife and a "Back soon," leaving Helena to contemplate why the knight had even bronze skin all

over. Surely she didn't make a habit of wandering around naked? Helena was just contemplating any and all occasions during which one would be less than fully dressed in the sunshine when Crispin appeared in the camp holding a dead rabbit by the hind legs. Somewhere a wolf howled mournfully and the taller woman stopped for a moment just outside the light, cocking her head, before she nodded to herself and approached the fire.

"Is it close?"

With a sniff Crispin began to prepare the rabbit for the fire. "No, it's a safe distance away." They toasted the meat over the fire and ate in relative silence, and then Crispin wiped her mouth and stood up with a groan.

"Princess, I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. Sitting in water really takes it out of me. So if you will excuse me..." Wrapping herself in her bedroll she sneezed once and then seemed to fall fast asleep.

Helena played with the fire for a while, poking at it with sticks and all manner of things, before she became utterly bored. Toby was asleep just outside the mellow light of the fire and barely twitched his ears when she tried to strike up a muted conversation. For a moment the princess twiddled her fingers thoughtfully, and then she began to sing softly under her breath.

"A princess once lived in a tower

in a land not so far away

She waited for a prince to come

And kiss her where she lay...

And the prince came and did slay

the monster who guarded the tower

And kissed the princess where she lay...

And that's where the tale turned sour."

She could have sworn that she heard a chuckle from the motionless bedroll.

Chapter Five:

Crispin was surprised to see the sun sitting higher than usual when she pried her eyes open the next morning. It was not the sunlight that had woken her, however, but a strange burning sensation on her stomach. Rapidly increasing, too. She looked down to see the princess plastering large green leaves over the scalded skin, a beatific smile on her face. Helena's

expression swiftly changed to horrified when the knight vaulted from the bedroll, knocking her hands away and brushing at the leaves frantically to dislodge them.

"Hey!"

"What in the name of... "

"I went to pick some leaves to soothe your burns. I read about these in a book of..." She stopped talking as the knight began a strange hopping sort of dance, rubbing her stomach frantically.

"Crispin?"

"You... yaaaah!" The knight looked around frenetically before she ran off into the forest like a rabid wolf. With a sigh Helena got to her feet and followed Crispin's strange sounds as fast as she could. Where the trees parted to allow a pretty little river, the princess found the knight sitting in the freezing shallow water, scratching at her stomach furiously. With a scowl Helena sat down on a rock near the bank, crossing her legs and resting her elbows on her knees.

"Do you have that much of an affinity for water?"

"You..." Crispin seemed to be struggling with the wording, "... you... was it a book of *witchcraft* you were reading??" She sounded livid.

"Why would it be a book of witchcraft?" There was now a pronouncedly insulted air about Helena.

"Because..." Crispin's voice started out silky, "that is the only book that will *possibly* advise you to cure a burn WITH POISON IVY!!"

"Oh ..." Helena's expressive green eyes widened in shock. "Poison Ivy? Are you sure?"

The knight stood up and held her arms theatrically away from her body. Her stomach, which was moderately swollen and red yesterday, was now raised in blazing angry bumps. "I'm sure." Eyeing the princess with malevolence she sat back down, bathing her stinging skin in the icy water.

Helena bit her lip in dread. "Will the... does the water help for it?"

The knight seemed to bite back a few retorts before she finally replied, her voice barely audible and barely under control. "I don't know. At least the cold is numbing it."

The princess sat on the rocks for a moment, completely lost for words, and then cleared her throat. "Crispin?" The knight merely glared at her darkly. "Crispin, I'm terribly sorry. I was only trying to help you because..."

"Stop - trying - to - help - me."

"But Crispin, I was just trying to..."

"If you help me any more I am probably going to die." Crispin's words were clipped and abrupt. "So far, Helena, I have been helped towards a dragon, into a burst of fire, down a hill, into a pond, into a bunch of poison ivy, and right back into the water. You have just turned me into someone who is now completely and utterly *terrified* of having any assistance whatsoever perpetrated towards me!"

Helena looked like a child who'd been reprimanded. "But that's not fair, Crispin. Just yesterday you told me that my impulse to help is not a bad thing..."

"Yesterday I was only burnt and wet."

"My intentions were good!"

"Your intentions are taking my skin off in patches!" Crispin ground her teeth angrily. "Tomorrow you can go back to your tower. Crown and all."

"What? Now you don't want me anymore?" The princess was a picture of righteous indignation. With a scowl she folded her arms and stuck her nose in the air. The knight sighed, spotting an unfair defeat approaching in the distance.

"Don't want you? Excuse me? Yesterday you were *begging* to go back and today you're complaining about rejection?"

"Crispin, do you know what your problem is?"

"Still you?"

"No." Helena stood up and dusted her dress off imperiously. "Your problem is that you *have* no good intentions. And **that**, Crispin, is why you do not appreciate it in other people." She turned her back on the wet knight, ignoring the open mouth. "I am going back to the camp. To pack my bag. Enjoy the water."

The small blonde was stuffing the last dress into her bag with vehemence when there was a sudden sneeze behind her.

"I do have good intentions. Isn't it a good intention to let you go back?"

Ferociously Helena pounded the ample material into the small opening with her fists. "No. It is not. You do not want to do it for me; you want to do it for yourself. So that you can be rid of me."

"Well, yes, I can't argue with that." Sneeze. "But I had good intentions when it came to the dragon - I followed you up there to make sure you would be safe."

"You were protecting an acquisition. My highly lauded and oft discussed crown." The princess suddenly stopped pummelling the dress, yanking it out fiercely instead. Then she sank her arm into the leather bag and scrabbled around, completely surprising Crispin when she withdrew her hand and lobbed the weighty golden crown at the knight.

"There. Have it." Her hands were clasping the blanket which was draped around her shoulders, and Crispin could not react quickly enough to catch the offending object. It struck her chest with a hollow thump and dropped onto the ground, landing on one of her feet. Both women stared at the crown for a moment before the knight nonchalantly pulled her throbbing foot from under it.

"I do not want it. Not like this." Pulling the blanket closer about her freezing shoulders she stepped over the crown and looked earnestly into wide green eyes. "Helena. A lot of what you have said is completely correct. I more often than not do have my own best interests at heart. But when I followed you to the dragon it was not one of those times."

"Fine." Helena blinked and looked away, slightly taken aback by the candid sentiment in the knight's bright blue eyes. "But I am still going back."

"Fine." Sneeze. "Your constant bickering is driving me to drink anyway." Turning around Crispin bent down and picked up the crown, hefting it in one hand pensively. "Heavy. And quite attractive, too." She handed it over to Helena, who promptly stuffed it back into her bag. "If your aim had been better you could have cracked my skull."

"It will probably improve with practice." Helena picked up the dress which she had so unceremoniously dumped on the ground and tried to dust it off. At the sound of another sneeze she frowned and turned to study the knight, who was now sitting on a rock with the blanket wrapped around her. "Crispin, are you feeling poorly?"

"If I say yes, will you drug me with nightshade?"

"If you say yes I'll know you're feeling weak and be more optimistic about my ability to suffocate you when you're sleeping." Stuffing her dress back into her bag Helena muttered irritably under her breath. "Insufferable knights and their insufferable ..."

"Excuse me, I ..." sneeze, "missed the last part."

"I wasn't. Addressing. You." The princess dropped the bag and composed herself. "Now look, Crispin. If you don't ... Are you *still* wearing those wet things?" Striding over to the knight Helena pried the edges of the blanket from her cold fingers and opened it, her eyebrows almost touching her hairline. "No wonder you're not feeling ... you dim-witted knight... take that off right now." When Crispin complied Helena draped her own warm dry blanket around the knight's shoulders and hung the damp one over a branch in the sun. Crispin kept a hand cupped over her mouth surreptitiously, as much to control her sneezing as to hide her silent laughter at the incessant and rather rude muttering coming from the sweet-faced young blonde.

"If they just stop to consider, but noooo ... son of a ... I'd be better off with an inebriated Valkyrie suffering from a bout of ... and then she behaves like a bloody bandy-legged badger with a propensity for ... has the audacity to accuse me of... Crispin?"

"Yes, Helena?"

"How far is the closest town from us?"

"About two days."

"That settles it then." With a toss of her golden hair Helena started gathering their things. "We're going. I need to sleep in an actual bed. And you need to get some rest." She began to saddle Toby with the skill of a goatherd, and then looked at the bemused knight over her shoulder. "Up. Come now. You do this while I tie the bedrolls."

"Is this the part where I start getting decent rest?"

"Don't try to be clever with me."

"I don't have to try."

"Shut up!"

Sneeze.

All in all, Helena thought to herself, the next day could probably have been worse. How, she was not sure, not at all - but it helped to have a positive outlook on even the most miserable of miserable times. Or so those damned "Aid thyself" books said.

"Perhaps if a griffin sat down on me by accident..."

Sneeze. "Whad?"

"Nothing. I was talking to myself."

"Oh."

The princess kneeled next to the fire, her brow furiously furrowed as she stirred the soup. Behind her the knight sat propped against a log, her cheeks a flaming red against the grey blankets which were wrapped around her. To Helena's extreme ire the dark woman had refused her offers of assistance graciously. It wasn't so much the refusal that irked her as the polite tone of voice in which it had been delivered - somehow Crispin could make the most courteous comment sound completely impolite. What she had said, exactly, was: Thank you for your concern, but I am actually not feeling too poorly. What she had **meant**, exactly, was: Stay away, I'm too young to die.

Muttering another inventive oath under her breath Helena gave a floating chunk of meat a stab that would have severely damaged it if it hadn't already been dead. Before glancing at the knight she took a moment to compose a positively horrific scowl, but the effort (as usual) was wasted on the woman - Crispin had fallen into a light sleep and was snoring delicately. Curling her top lip into a rather inelegant snarl Helena gave a frustrated growl and turned back to the soup, poking around for another victim to molest. It wouldn't have been so bad, she mused, if she had actually been looking forward to reaching the next town in a day or two just so that she could discard the knight and return to her tower with her crown intact. The truth was - and this most definitely needed to stay between her and the flickering flames she was staring into - that imagining herself back in her tower with her books did not exactly provide the thrill she had imagined it would. The knight was an infuriating character, refusing with a certain amused inattention to yield to any of her wiles, and yet... And yet what? Biting her bottom lip thoughtfully she stirred the soup. And yet... even without the excitement of dragons and fire and all kinds of potentially hazardous situations, Crispin had shown her a way of life which was so much more stimulating than the royal domestic lassitude she had imagined to be her goal all of this time. Helena grimaced slightly and glanced back at the sleeping knight. Aye. There lies the rub, making a sound like a purring feline. This woman had almost been toasted alive, had rusted into her suit of armor, had been plastered with poisonous leaves, and had picked up an illness - all due to one sweet little blonde princess. Convincing her that it would be a passable idea to take that same sweet little blonde princess with her on her travels would take more than natural charm - it would take outright begging. And that was one skill Helena did not possess. She did, however, possess a fiery imagination, and by the time she had finished her soup her mind had already offered up and worked through a suited argument, leaving her outraged at the imaginary Crispin's lack of reason and downright discourtesy.

Of the two women sitting around the fire that night, only one understood what had just transpired to make her so fractious. The other could only utter a groggily confused "huh" as a soup spoon was unceremoniously stuffed into her mouth.

It was with immense joy that Crispin spotted the outer walls of the little town close to dusk on the following day. Helena had been strangely belligerent the whole day, and it was all the knight could do not to motion Toby into a gallop and simply leave the argumentative girl behind on her own. The forest had thinned out and their surroundings were now more even and open, but even in this area bandits and villains roamed freely; men who had been forcibly removed from society, and preyed on vulnerable parties at the edges of it. Sniffing peevishly the knight eyed the young blonde who was now having a complete conversation with an appreciative Toby, and then scratched a spot of rust off her armor with one fingernail. Once she was ensconced in a comfortable bed at a respectable inn, Helena would be most welcome to wander right back into the wild and offer herself up to any number of dangerous situations on her way to her tower, and Crispin wouldn't worry one little bit.

Well. Maybe just one little bit. All right. I'll just take a tiny detour when I'm feeling a bit more able... to see whether she's doing all right. Hah. And she says I don't have any good intentions.

The sound of a rapidly flowing river had been growing systematically clearer, and now they stood at the banks of the water. A narrow drawbridge stretched across the swirls and eddies,

providing an entrance to the town which was both secure for the traveller and safe for the townsfolk. In times of unrest Crispin knew that a series of gears would lift the drawbridge, not only blocking the entrance to the town, but also leaving the expanse of strongly flowing water to be reckoned with. A guard stood at the entrance of the town, leaning lackadaisically against his long spear. Having already sized up the knight and the princess, he had clearly dismissed them as inconsequential and was now chewing something earnestly. Not having seen anything she would classify as civilised in more than six days, the princess enthusiastically launched herself at him and began to chatter enthusiastically. For a moment he stopped chewing completely, his mouth half open, and stared at Helena with undisguised bewilderment. Almost bursting into hysterical laughter at his expression, Crispin managed to hide her empathetic reaction in a fortunate spell of coughing. Suspiciously Helena spun around and studied the knight with narrowed eyes, seemingly appeased when all that greeted her vision was a coughing woman swiftly thumping her own chest. Drawing a breath to continue her conversation (for so she thought of it) with the guard, her relatively good mood soured instead when she turned back and found an empty space where the guard had stood. He had taken his chance and fled into his small wooden guard hut, peering at her from the slats with apprehension. From this range Crispin could only see the whites of his big staring eyes. It brought to mind a wolf being cornered by a small white rabbit, and the image immediately brought on another coughing spell.

"How rude!"

Not sure whether the indignant woman was referring to the guard or to her, Crispin surreptitiously wiped a tear from one eye and gave a nonchalant snuffle, not even slightly surprised when Toby meekly followed the silently raging princess into the town streets.

Two inns were rejected offhand by the ill-humoured blonde; one on account of the grime which coated the windows, and the other on account of a large oafish ruffian whose over-sociable suggestions to the princess were met with rather icy disapproval - and then a spirited retort, naturally. The third seemed clean enough, reputable enough, and all-round civilised enough even for a princess, and it was here (though in the stables) that Helena discarded Crispin and wandered off into the downstairs room in search of ale. With a sigh at her taxing companion and a wince at her painful muscles the knight slid down from Toby's back and gave the stable-boy a coin to tend to the placid animal and clean her armor, then slung the saddlebags around her like a pack-horse and went to pay for a room. She paused for a moment at the foot of the stairs, hearing Helena already loudly knee-deep into an exaggerated version of their adventures. It sounded as if she was going to be the villain of this story, so with a shake of the head the tired knight wandered upstairs. The rooms were small but clean, with two soft beds placed on either side of a window that looked down into a courtyard at the back of the inn. Dumping Helena's bags in one corner unceremoniously she placed hers carefully under her bed and then collapsed face-down on the mattress, her feet hanging off the edge of the bed. It didn't take long for sleep to claim her ailing exhausted body.

Helena had finally found a place where she was in her element. Even though the truthfulness of most of the story she had told had been dubious, her audience had enjoyed her animated nature and been sufficiently charmed by her youthful innocence. They had even plied her with drinks to keep her from stopping. Truth be told, now that she stood rather unsteadily at the foot of

Crispin's bed watching the knight sleep fitfully, she felt just a tad guilty that the most enjoyed segment of her story was the bit where the pig-stubborn mule-headed knight fell clumsily over her own sword and rolled down a hill.

Stumbling closer she tried to put a strangely uncooperative hand on the knight's forehead, managing only to poke one finger into her ear rather insistently. The dark woman groaned in her sleep and turned her face in the opposite direction, dislodging the slender finger. Making another attempt, Helena leaned over Crispin, immediately losing her footing and landing directly on top of the warm knight. Groggily Crispin opened one eye, then the other, as she came face to face with a sheepish princess who smelled like a brewery and could not seem to move off her.

"Helena?"

The princess blushed a beet red which would under any other circumstances have been perfectly charming.

"H'loa Crispy, owayou feeling?"

"You have your hands all over me, princess. You tell me."

With an inane grin the blonde woman shifted her hands, managing to knock her forehead into Crispin's nose. When she looked up and saw the dark woman's eyes full of involuntary tears, she started patting her chest earnestly. "You're not feeling well, you should relly go backta sleep, you know."

"I could, if you got off me?"

Unperturbed by the solemn comment Helena climbed off the knight's body shakily, staying upright beyond expectation. With an inward sigh Crispin eyed her unfocused pupils.

"Helena?"

"Yeah?"

"Were you drinking tonight?"

"Oyah."

"Drink some water before you go to sleep."

"Not thirsty, Crispy." Giggle.

"Crispin."

"No. I'm Helena."

Sigh. "Just drink some water, all right? You'll feel better for it in the morning."

"Nuh uh."

Crispin scratched her ear irritably. "Fine. Then don't drink any water."

"Don't you tell me whada do!"

"I'm not telling you what to do. I'm telling you what not to do. Don't drink any water."

"I can drink water if I want." Picking up the jug that stood on the little table, the beleaguered princess drank most of it, spilling some down her chest. Then, giving a little hiccup, she turned to the knight and stuck out her tongue. With a small smile the dark woman rolled over and went back to sleep.

The blonde girl woke the next day with annoyingly fuzzy memories, but not much the worse for wear. Blinking the sleep from her eyes she sat on the edge of her bed and peered out the window, estimating it to be somewhere just after dawn. The dark woman in the bed opposite her had had a fitful night of sleep, as evident by the twisted linens under her. With a small frown Helena studied the flushed face. Why did she keep having flashes of herself lying stretched out on top of this woman? With a shrug she discarded the image. Probably something perverse concocted by her over-active imagination. Stretching her spine contently she mused on the joy of a soft bed as opposed to the hard ground, then stood and bathed her face with what remained of the water in the jug. She was just tying the laces of one of her nicer dresses when Crispin's rough coughing attracted her attention. Wandering over she placed a hand on the doubled up woman's forehead and bit her lip at the resulting heat. It didn't take her long to summon the innkeeper and send for a healer.

When the healer, a tall grey-haired man, arrived, Helena was rubbing Crispin's back gently to sooth her frantic coughing. After a quick examination he mixed some herbs into boiling water and instructed Helena to have Crispin drink it when it cooled down sufficiently.

"And don't let her wander about. She needs to remain still and calm. Otherwise she will not get well."

When it was time to wake Crispin Helena tapped her face softly with one hand, smiling sweetly when two blue eyes opened groggily and focused on her.

"Come on, Crispin. Sit up."

Sliding her hands underneath the broad shoulders she helped the knight slide up against the wall, then held the herbal mixture to her lips. To her silent disquiet the knight did not argue, but merely drank the foul-smelling brew before she curled up into a small ball and went back to sleep. With a regretful sigh Helena gently ran her fingers through the beautiful dark hair before she went downstairs to visit the merchants' stalls.

Chapter Six:

The knight woke up lucidly two days later, gagging slightly at the roughness of her throat. Swallowing experimentally she reached out blindly and found a cup full of water standing on the edge of the table. Taking a few sips she winced a little as the cold water hit her empty stomach and then sat up with her back against the wall, blinking sleepily while she studied the room. If she was not mistaken there were more things in the corner than she had dropped there originally? Some were packages tied carefully tied with string, others bulging paper bags that leaned against the bedposts.

So. The princess has a propensity for shopping. Of course.

With a wry smile she took another sip and then glanced towards the window. It seemed to be late afternoon, but more than that she could not say. Tentatively she shifted a little, pleased that her body felt a little less bruised, though it still felt as if her chest was stuffed with feathers. Laughter drifted up from the courtyard, and recognising one of the voices she rolled out of bed slowly and stretched a little, hearing her spine click with satisfaction. Propping both hands on the little table she leaned forward and peered through the window behind it. The circular courtyard was filled with roughly hewn benches and tables - and it was on top of one of these tables that Helena was perched. Surrounded by a group of people, mostly men, she had just dropped her voice and Crispin could not hear what she was saying, but by the raucous laughter in reaction the knight could only imagine that Helena was telling a very improper story or joke. As the crowd roared with laughter the princess grinned impudently at one of the serving wenches and slapped her rear, causing another wave of hilarity. Leaning back and letting out a roar of laughter, the blonde girl glanced up briefly and met Crispin's blue eyes, then jumped off the table excitedly. With a final comment to the complaining crowd she hastened into the inn, moving out of the knight's field of vision.

Crispin had just sat down on the edge of the bed, still feeling a little light-headed, when Helena came charging in, her agitation apparently a thing of the past. Laying a small hand on Crispin's forehead she seemed pleased by the moderate warmth, patting the knight's knee abnormally affectionately.

"How are you feeling, Crispin?"

The knight licked her dry lips. "Much better, thank you." Her voice was slightly hoarse, but it had regained its vigour. "You seem very well yourself, princess?"

"Oh yes." Helena was practically bubbling. "Oh yes. The merchants have so many beautiful things here. And the food, oh, it's glorious. I've made some nice friends, too; oh, I can't wait to show you the..." Her story dried up suddenly. "Oh, here I am prattling on and you're still not yourself."

With a small smile Crispin patted her leg. "It's all right. I like you much better this way."

Blushing a little the embarrassed blonde girl worried the pleats of her dress for a moment before her eyes fell on the packets. With a squeal that had a startled Crispin spitting a mouthful of water on her own shirt, Helena threw herself at the packages, searching through them.

"I have something here that I got for you!"

Wiping at the water down the front of her shirt Crispin grinned fondly. "I hope you got something for Toby, since he's going to have to carry all of this." Her hands stilled suddenly. "Oh. He's not. You're going back. I apologise... I forgot."

Helena's hands also stilled for a moment before she pulled a neatly bound package from the bundle and stood, handing it to Crispin. "Yes. I did say that I wanted to go back. Here. For you. I have to go and ... get you something to eat. You must be hungry. Be back soon." Stepping outside quickly she leaned against the wall dejectedly, unseen by the knight, and closed her eyes for a moment.

Waiting until the princess had walked out Crispin turned the package around in her hands a few times before she untied the string. It had been a while since she'd gotten a present, and it was with a sense of awe that she carefully unwrapped the paper. Lying perfectly folded within was a white shirt almost identical to the one which had been destroyed by the dragon. With a melancholy smile she picked it up and held it to her nose, breathing in as deeply as she could. It might only have been her imagination, but for a moment she thought that she could still smell on it the flowery scent that always seemed to hang around the princess.

When the princess strolled back into the room with a bowl of broth in her hands, both parties had composed themselves again sufficiently. Crispin had placed the soft white shirt on the table next to her and shifted up until she could sit with her back propped against the wall. Taking the bowl that Helena offered with one hand, the knight caught the smaller hand in her other and pulled the princess towards her, surprising her with a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"What was that for?" Helena attempted to mask her furious blush by turning away and fiddling with the waist ties of her dress.

"It's to say thank you. For the shirt. It's a lovely gift, princess." Leaving Helena to collect herself a little Crispin gingerly began to sip at the broth. Though her stomach was empty it still heaved a bit at the smell of food, and after a few mouthfuls she placed it on the table, sliding down on the bed to rest her head on the pillow. Noticing that the bowl was still quite full Helena sat down on the edge of the bed, scowling at the knight.

"You're not going to get better if you don't eat anything!"

"No more tonight. I just need some more rest, I'll be fine tomorrow."

"Okay. I'll let you get some rest." Helena stood up only to have Crispin wrap a large warm hand around her wrist loosely.

"Helena? Would you mind doing something for me?"

"Of course, Crispin." The princess nodded rapidly even though the knight's eyes were closed.

"Would you sing the rest of that moustache song for me? That one you were singing before we found the dragon?"

"From the look on your face I'd imagined that you found my singing heinous."

"No, it's just ... challenged. I'm exceedingly curious about what happened to the moustachioed nobleman."

Sitting back down on the edge of the bed Helena allowed herself a small grin before she cleared her throat.

"Now remember. This time you asked for it."

As she began to sing the rowdy last verse Crispin slipped into sleep, one corner of her mouth curving ever so slightly.

The next morning the knight woke sufficiently refreshed to get up. Aided by the moderately embarrassed princess she slipped into a clean brown pair of breeches and her new white shirt, tying her long dark hair loosely with a sliver of leather and wrapping her rapidly healing hands lightly in strips of linen. Then they wandered downstairs to find some breakfast, Helena assuring Crispin that the best place in the Inn would be the courtyard. Along the way the princess was heartily greeted by most of the people they passed. The glances Crispin received, however, were a lot less jovial and a lot more ... amused. Pondering the situation the knight followed the blonde out into the courtyard, sliding onto a heavy wooden bench gingerly to avoid splinters (experience). Glancing around her she noted the other guests, about ten of them, at their various tables. Though most of them were having animated conversations, there was a tad too much peeping and giggling for her comfort. Scowling, she leaned forward suspiciously to ask Helena about it, just as the innkeeper arrived at their table. The tall rotund woman greeted the princess with a dimpled smile, and then studied the knight with a thoughtful expression.

"Would this be that knight of yers, then, sweetie?"

Nodding, Helena attempted to look innocent. Considering the smile which threatened to creep onto her face she wasn't doing great.

"Crispin, this is Kate. The Inn belongs to her."

Politely Crispin shook the large woman's hand, trying to ignore the amused grin which had crossed the woman's face.

"A pleasure, my lady."

The woman's rotund face seemed impossibly innocent and impish at the same time. "Not as much of a pleasure as you have been to me, Sir Crispy."

The knight tried to ignore the sputtering sound emerging from Helena's tightly clamped lips. "Crispin, my lady."

"Yes, yes." Patting the scowling knight on one bandaged hand Kate turned away, her shoulders shaking in a suspicious manner as she wandered back into the building. Crispin studied her irritably until she was out of sight, and then turned back to an overly composed Helena.

"Let's hear all about it, princess."

Helena fluttered her eyelashes innocently. "What's the matter, Crispin?"

The knight leaned forward rapidly, her hands resting on the table between them. Her voice was an ill-tempered mutter. "I am being studied as if I were the two-headed hairy boy from South Pollster Island. And I'm quite sure I'm not - inasmuch as one can be - which leaves me to think that you've had a hand in this situation, princess. Now tell me about it."

Helena twirled the hem of her dress around one finger sweetly and shrugged in a wholesome manner. "I am not sure that I see a *situation*, Crispin. These people are merely enjoying their morning."

Biting back a rather inventive curse word Crispin stabbed the table fiercely with her index finger. "If that is the case then I should hire myself out as an alternative method of joy, since I'm apparently giving the majority of people here that gift purely with the utter radiance of my marvellous presence." Her eyes narrowed. "You've *done* something. Something bad. I know you have. Out with it, princess."

Helena cleared her throat and plastered a beaming smile on her face. "Just to mention that we didn't actually need to order anything - there are only two passable items on the menu and Kate knows which one I like." Her punctuating smile hung in the air like a dead squirrel. The knight merely glared at her sharply. With a sigh Helena bit the inside of her cheek pensively, and then cleared her throat. There was still silence from the other side of the table.

"Fine! All right!" Helena threw her hands in the air. "Look, Crispin, I was only telling some jokes in the courtyard and then I began to tell of how you ... erm ... rescued me from the tower. It wasn't my choice of story, somebody made me. I'm very susceptible to bad influences, you know, very young and all that..."

"Princess."

"Yes, I'm talking here, for Athena's sake! Anyway, even you would have to admit that the part where you rolled down the hill in your flaming armor and fell into the pond was very... ", the princess caught the knight's eye and decided to alter her direction, "... okay, not very, but still quite... ", the knight's blue eyes were decidedly frosty now, "... erm, well, it was at least

marginally amusing. Not a solemn moment, exactly. Don't you think?" Obviously the knight did not. Helena struggled on valiantly, ignoring the warning bells tinkling in her ears. "All right, well, maybe not for the blistery wet person sitting in the water. That I'll grant you. But I just told the story. Reluctantly, too. It's not like I made anything up, you know?"

From somewhere behind the princess there was a soft snigger which triggered quite a few others. Folding her arms Crispin sat back and slowly looked around the courtyard, her stormy eyes taking in the other occupants. Her expression was so devoid of amusement that it drained the laughter completely, leaving a whole bunch of people attempting hastily to be ensconced in tremendously astonishingly serious conversation. Lifting one dark eyebrow Crispin looked back at Helena, who was trying with every fibre of her being to be too adorable for retaliation. The knight drummed the fingers of one hand broodingly on the table and then pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"I would simply love to hear that story, Helena. *Love to*. But maybe I should ask someone else to share it with me so that I can enjoy the *delicate nuances* I'm sure you've been able to weave into it." The knight sat back for a moment to allow the returned Innkeeper to put the platter of cheese and freshly baked bread between them. She nodded politely at the round woman.

"My lady."

"Sir Crispy."

This time Crispin did not correct her. Lifting a slice of cheese to her mouth she took a small bite and chewed it slowly, her eyes firmly on the face of the blonde woman sitting opposite her. Helena did not seem to be breathing. Putting the rest of the slice in her mouth Crispin chewed and swallowed with delight. Then, rising, she snatched a slice of bread.

"I'm terribly disappointed, princess. You realise of course that this means war."

Leaving the princess wide-eyed at the table she wandered back to her room, trying valiantly to ignore the giggling chamber maid who had to duck into a doorway every time she spotted her.

Chapter Seven:

Helena spent the next day chewing her fingernails in a most ungracious manner, waiting with baited breath and nervous palpitations for the knight to leap out from a dark corner unexpectedly and scare the living royalty out of her. Crispin, however, did nothing of the sort. As she wandered from stall to stall in the market, whistling the chorus from the moustachioed tale of woe, her usual equanimity was killing the princess (who was naturally surreptitiously following her). Helena watched with thwarted frustration as the knight leisurely picked up items and examined them at random, stopping to have short conversations with merchants who had particularly interesting wares. Though the princess had vowed not to let the knight out of her sight the boredom was almost more to bear than the anticipation. Stifling a yawn she leaned around the stall she was currently hiding behind, just in time to see Crispin disappear around a

corner. With a little shriek Helena skittered into the falafel merchant, who, ignorant of his furtive guest up until this moment, dropped a blob of hot oil onto his hand with a startled yelp.

"Excuse me, excuse me, that will come right off, don't you worry." Leaving a very sore man in her wake she tore around the corner, almost careening into a throng of bodies before she reined herself in and came to a halt.

She was standing at the edge of an open square surrounded by an avid audience. The source of their entertainment was an acting troupe performing some sort of vigorous (or semi-lewd, depending on your point of view) play at the centre of the square. Currently a very handsome young man with a mop of wild brown hair and a manic grin was having his shoes shined by a young blonde woman with her skirt pushed up over her head and her pantaloons in the air. Or at least that was what seemed to be happening from where Helena was standing. Casting a quick look over the people surrounding her (well, as much as one can when one's viewpoint is being badly let down by one's height), the princess attempted to find the knight in the moving crowd. Accepting that possibility as impractical after a while she turned her attention back to the actors, pushing a little closer to find a better vantage point. For anyone who loved stories as much as she did, this was a definite treat.

The young man slapped the young woman securely on her rear, eliciting a roar from the crowd, before she sprang to her feet and gave him a very double-entendre snub. Though the princess's hitherto unsullied mind did not have the resources to make the licentious connection, there was nothing wrong with her imagination. Letting out an amused chortle she elbowed the person standing next to her unconsciously.

"Good, aren't they?"

Helena gave an enthusiastic nod before she realised who the voice belonged to. Folding her arms imperiously she glared at the sunny knight with all the imperiousness she could muster. "What are you doing here?"

"Well," the knight stopped to laugh at a witty comment from one of the older actors who had appeared on the scene, "you should be a little more thankful that I led you here. Now enjoy the play and stop following me like a drunken rabbit."

For a moment it looked as if Helena was chewing on air, her jaws moving without a sound. "I was **not** following you. How rude!"

"Very good." Crispin's voice was dry. "Let's keep it that way." Turning around she disappeared through the crowd.

Helena was more than a little aggravated to notice the way in which people seemed to step out of the knight's way. Scowling, she turned to the man behind her. "I was **not**." Shrugging with a slightly alarmed expression on his face he stepped back a little, trying to demonstrate his intense interest in anything else but the small irate (and talking to herself) blonde. "Well, I **wasn't**." It was a prickly mutter. Knitting her brow Helena thought about pursuing the knight, then

discarded the idea. By the time she escaped from this mass of people Crispin would be long gone. And so, with little more than a nagging doubt in the back of her head, she settled down to watch the rest of the play.

It was a very funny tale well told, and after the applause died down many people gathered around the players, wanting to congratulate and praise them. Having had the same thought, Helena studied the multitude with a sigh. Not much hope of her short frame getting through that. Tentatively she wandered around to the other side of the square, but there was not much difference. With a dejected sigh she sank down onto a trunk standing strangely, yet conveniently next to her.

"I might need that."

The voice came from behind her. With a suppressed little squeal she jumped up and spun around, surprised to find the young actor standing behind her. Tousling his brown hair further with one hand he gave a crooked smile. "I need to replace some of the props."

"Oh. Of course. I'm sorry." Helena stepped away from the chest. "Your play was charming, by the way."

"Thank you." He displayed an impressively white even smile and stuck out his hand. "I'm Philip, by the way. Philip Kerr." When Helena extended her hand he shook it enthusiastically, obviously not au fait with royal treatment.

"Pleased to meet you, Philip. I'm Helena. Princess."

"Oh." His green eyes darted around animatedly while he thought about it. "Oh. You're a princess? A real one? Pshaw. What am I saying? Here you are, you are most obviously real. Thought you were calling me princess there for a moment, though."

For once not the person to babble, Helena watched him with a smile.

"I met a princess once in Aminstoat, but she looked as if she'd been trampled by a rampant cow. We performed "The courtier's bustier" for her... or was it "The dressmaker's décolletage"? Either way she yawned too much and laughed in the wrong places, and then she tried to stick her hand down my... But see how I'm just rambling along, why don't you tell me all about you?"

"Well." Helena thought about all of the activities she'd been involved in lately. "I really can't give you a brief version - that would take a whole lot of time. Suffice to say that I am the daughter of King Gregor of Bernam, and until a few days ago I was waiting patiently in my tower for a suitable knight to rescue me from Boris. And then that blasted Crispin appeared and yanked a clump of hair out of my head."

Philip's mouth formed a comical "o". "No, no, that **definitely** won't do. You can't start a story like that and then just abandon it. I won't stand for it."

Noticing the lengthening shadows Helena suddenly realised that she'd spent a lot more time at the square than she'd thought. "I have to go back, Philip. Oh, Crispin has probably been thinking up heinously evil things to do to me. Will you still be here tomorrow?"

"Aye." He nodded. "We have our last performance in the afternoon and then we roll west out of town day after tomorrow."

Deciding that he was bound to be terribly interesting (not to mention dashing handsome) Helena made a quick decision. "Would you like to meet here tomorrow morning? We can have a light meal together at a nearby inn and then I can tell you my ever so sordid story."

His eyes darted around again as he pondered the idea. "Aye, that would be a pleasure. But..." Helena thought she heard a note of nervousness creeping into his voice, "wouldn't this Crispin character have something to say about it?"

"Naturally." Helena's voice was dry. "But I have never paid much attention and I do not actually intend to start now."

When they had finalised their plans for the next day and parted cheerfully, Helena returned to the Inn. She'd half expected Crispin to be waiting at the door with a lecture about the lateness of the hour, but the knight was nowhere to be seen. Upstairs in their room a small package had been laid on Crispin's bed, yet there the knight was also missing. Fighting the urge to tear off the paper wrapping and peek inside the package, Helena wandered back downstairs to ask Kate if she'd seen the absent knight. Before she could find the cheerful Innkeeper, however, an ebullient shriek from the courtyard attracted her attention. Sticking her head around the doorway she fleetingly glanced outside, her mouth dropping open witlessly when she realised the cause of the high spirits.

Crispin was sitting at one of the wooden tables, her head barely visible over the shoulders of a man who sat with his back to the peeking princess, but even at that angle Helena could see the dark woman laughing riotously at something her cohort was saying. Between the two on the tabletop stood a multitude of empty upside-down ale mugs. When the knight had regained her breath she said something in a muted voice and leaned over to grasp the man's cheek affectionately between two fingers, causing him to let loose a hysterical roar.

Incredulous at this display of liveliness, Helena let her feet carry her reflexively towards the two animated companions. They were so engaged in their hilarity that Crispin only noticed the princess when she was right next to the table. Leaning back the dark knight let out a muffled giggle at Helena's amazed expression before she slapped a hand over her mouth, smothering a series of hiccoughs. From the dip in his torso the man opposite Crispin appeared to be kicking her under the table before he jumped up and presented the most well groomed hand Helena had ever seen on a man.

"Eric De Fontenèt at your service, my lady."

When she extended her hand he took it lightly in his, kissing her knuckles chivalrously. Eric's manners matched the rest of him. Light golden hair framed a fine-featured clean-shaven face and striking blue eyes. His trim body was elegantly clothed in a pair of tight black breeches and a perfectly tailored luxurious purple tunic with golden braiding which had obviously been very expensive to create. Wondering about his relationship to the aggravating knight on the other side of the table, Helena slid into the bench next to him at his polite request.

Arching her black eyebrows irreverently Crispin tilted her head at the young man. "Suddenly so very unassuming, dearest? You do know how the ladies love the title." With a broad smile at Helena she bluntly ignored his petulant look. "Helena, this is *Prince* Eric De Fontenèt himself, at your royal service." The man in question leaned back a little and slid down his seat, obviously connecting his kick this time as Crispin yelped sharply and shifted away before she continued, apparently quite unfazed by his action. "Bugger, I'm afraid I'm feeling rather common now, between the pair of you."

Before Helena could respond with a suitably acidic reply Eric leaned over and grasped Crispin's hand in a histrionically affectionate way, his tone fond. "You, my love, could never be common. Your sense of style, perchance. Your vocabulary, most definitely. Your footwear, without a doubt. But you yourself will always remain completely exquisite." He landed a smacking kiss just above her knuckles, chuckling deep in his throat when she knocked him lightly under the chin with the back of her fingers before pulling her hand away.

Helena, feeling rather left out by their noticeably familiar banter, almost didn't realise it when Crispin directed the conversation back at her. "Pardon?"

"Eric and I are old friends. We met just after he relinquished his throne to his younger brother and went on a quest to find his ... true calling."

"Some lovely adventures we had, I recall," Eric interrupted with an affectionate smile.

"And some really terrible ones," Crispin finished. Pursing her lips she studied the two royals side by side. "Such a lovely pair you make. I'm betting that by now princess Helena is vigorously wishing prince Eric had rescued her from the tower rather than I."

"It's never too late." Helena shot the knight a cool glare. "I would run off with Eric the moment he said the word."

The blonde man gave the princess a kindly pat on her hand. "Ah, as exceptionally charming as you are, my dear, I have abandoned the royalty game for good. And also there is but one woman for me."

"Who?" It was a puzzled question.

"That woman sitting right there." He pointed at Crispin, who batted away his hand nonchalantly before she stuck out her tongue and crossed her eyes rudely (much to Helena's vexation). "She is

a vision of loveliness - though maybe not right at the moment - and I do simply adore her with every fibre of my being."

Crispin spread a slightly unsteady hand on her chest, roughly where she imagined her heart to be (which was completely and utterly wrong). "And of course you are, as ever, the only man for me, Eric."

"Oh, my darling." Wiping away an imaginary tear he rolled his eyes in mock worship before he turned to Helena. "And so - regretfully, my lady - I cannot take you off Crispin's hands. Though from what I have heard of their competence I would suggest that you take advantage of your position and let ..."

"Eric!" Leaning over the table Crispin smacked him soundly on the shoulder.

Helena (who had not been able to follow their conversation at any rate **and** was getting rather annoyed at being ignored) decided to take the dialogue into her hands and into a new, distinctly more sensible direction. "I met a rather nice man today."

"Pshaw." Crispin poked her empty ale mug crossly. "It's only Eric."

"Hey! How come I suddenly get relegated to the name behind '*only*'? I'll have you know that I'm a paradigm... paragon of something or the other." With a desultory pout he lifted an eyebrow at one of the serving girls, relaying as if by magic the need for another round.

"No, not Eric - he was a player with the..." Helena began, but the more evil half of the terrible twosome interrupted her without noticing.

"A paragon of craftiness, your highly wiliness. Wily highness, I mean."

With a small scowl Helena looked first at the empty mugs, and then at Crispin's face with new awareness. "Are you ... drunk?"

The knight chortled at her outraged tone. Puffing up his chest Eric nodded fiercely. "Indeed she is, by my utter masculinity."

Sniggering so liberally that she fell prey to an uncontrollable fit of coughing, Crispin managed finally to regain control of herself. "If *that* were the case then I could just as well commit myself to a vow of sobriety here and now, my darling Eric."

"Harpy."

"Troll."

Bursting into gales of hilarity they left a speechless Helena staring from one party to the next. Rarely had the princess seen the generally controlled knight so abandoned, and for a moment the strange and inappropriate thought struck Helena that sitting there on the bench with her bright

blue eyes sparkling and her black hair tumbling around her shoulders, Crispin really *was* almost as exquisite as the prince declared her to be. With an impatient shake of her blonde head she rejected the odd thought and stood up. "Well. As much as I have enjoyed meeting you, my lord..."

"Eric, if you please."

"Eric. I have things to attend to, but I am quite sure we'll meet again." Dipping her knee graciously at his courteous bow she turned to glare at the madly grinning knight. "Goodnight, Crispin. I hope that when I see you again you'll be... yourself."

Solemnly the knight rose and dipped her head. "Good night, Helena. I *would* kiss your hand ... but I can't trust my teeth so close to you." Presenting all of the said teeth in a beaming smile she waited agreeably for the piqued princess to storm back into the Inn before she plonked down opposite a silently giggling Eric.

"I say. Feisty little creature."

The next morning when Helena awoke Crispin was spread across her own pallet in a tangled heap of limbs and a disarray of clothing. Stepping around a bare bronzed leg that hung precariously off the edge the princess dressed and left the room, pulling the door closed behind her. No doubt the knight had only returned to the room in the early hours of the morning, and would be asleep for some time to come. And after her disorderly behaviour the previous evening, the princess had no desire to tell Crispin where she was going anyway. Sniffing haughtily in the direction of the door she walked out of the Inn to her meeting with Philip.

She spied him the moment she stepped around the corner. Dashingy clothed in a flamboyant tunic he seemed to be in serious and intense conversation with a shabbily dressed older man, occasionally nodding or sketching gestures in the air. When he caught her eye he said something to his companion, who turned his head and scrutinized her quickly, giving her a clear view of his eye patch before he walked away. Presenting her with the broad white smile that she remembered from the previous day Philip waited until she was close before he extended his hands and clasped hers between them.

"How pleased I am to see you!"

Helena returned his pleasant beam. "Me too, Philip. But who was that you were arguing with earlier?"

His smile weakened for a moment before he shook his head emphatically. "No, no. We were merely ... disagreeing. Claude would have preferred that I do some things for the troupe this morning."

"Oh." The princess frowned worriedly. "If you would rather..."

"Definitely not. I would rather spend my morning in the presence of a beautiful woman." Grinning slightly at her blush he continued. "Besides, he could send anyone. Anyone at all. Now, have you decided on an establishment for our light meal?"

They chose a tavern with a pleasant front and strolled inside, choosing a table where they could watch the passing amblers at their leisure. Ordering simple dishes from a friendly barmaid they soon fell into a comfortable and pleasant discussion. Though Philip had seemed rather erratic at their first meeting he turned out to be a charming escort with an engaging manner. In telling the story of her adventure with Crispin again, Helena found herself playing down the more comic aspects and appealing to Philip's sympathy, which he contributed accordingly.

"This Crispin seems a positively horrid type of person."

"Well..." for no good reason the princess suddenly found herself loathe to be too derogatory, "not horrid. Perhaps a tad... insensitive to my situation."

"If I met this fellow I would knock him senseless for treating a lady in such a way."

It was a moment before Helena realised the misunderstanding that the actor was labouring under. Pondering quickly she rationalised that if he knew Crispin to be a woman, he would most possibly be a little less sympathetic. And he was never likely to meet the knight, was he? What harm would it do to have a concerned friend of her own? Poking out her tongue mentally at the insufferable dark woman Helena shot a sweet smile across the table to her new friend. "As much as I would like to see that happen I will most probably go back to my father's castle for Crispin to claim the reward. And then..." she sighed, sincere this time, "I will almost certainly be married to Sir Gunther Totherington or another such foul doddering old fool."

"But that's atrocious!" Philip was outraged. "How can a knight carry you to such a fate?"

"It's what knights do. I would have had to marry Crispin, had it been possible."

"What makes it impossible?" He continued before Helena could find a suitable answer. "His harsh nature, I'd bet. Yet it's a blessing in a way. Could you even *imagine* spending the rest of your life with Crispin?"

"We would throttle one another soon enough." Her tone was dry. "Let's talk about something else, Philip."

"Oh, do pardon me. Here I am indulging in the subject when you must want nothing more than to escape from your position for a time." And with just the proper amount of sensitivity he turned the discussion to plays and poetry.

The morning went by quickly, and when it came to noon he regrettably had to excuse himself. "It is time for me to go and prepare for the afternoon play now, but I should like it very much if you came to watch the show."

"I would be delighted," Helena assured him with a smile. When he had left her with a small warm grin she wandered between the stalls, browsing amongst the interesting wares. Once or twice she actually considered going back to her Inn and informing Crispin of her whereabouts, but the memory of the previous night and the knight's shocking behaviour put her off. Sticking out her tongue mentally (or so she thought, but a suddenly protruding pink tongue quite startled a passing man) at the dark-haired woman she decided to go straight to the play. And so she did.

The play that afternoon was every bit as entertaining as it had been the previous day, and after it had ended she felt no need to press closer, staying instead where she was to applaud. The players shook hands warmly, and when Philip caught her eye over the head of an enthusiastic spectator he gave a broad smile and a slight self-deprecating lift of the shoulders. She waited until the mass had scattered before she approached Philip, who was once again stuffing props back into the large trunk.

"That was delightful, again."

Wrinkling his nose he shook his head. "The writing is quite formulaic, you know. I would rather have been in a troupe that performs the works of that great dramatic playwright Artois, though this certainly outshines being a blacksmith."

"Is that what your father is?" She watched curiously as he threw a cloak into the trunk with a slightly venomous air.

"No." His speech was clipped, and after a deep breath he seemed to regain his composure. "I apologise. I'm not on a good foot with him. He is in the same profession as I am."

"Oh." The princess pondered the thought of leaving the subject be, but subtlety had never been a strong point. "Is he in this same troupe?"

"No. He is not in this troupe." Philip slammed the trunk shut, resting his hands on it for a moment before he turned to her, all signs of sullenness carefully removed from his face. "When will I see you again, Helena?"

"Would you like to see me again?" The question was out before she could stop it, and Philip turned it around in his mind a few times, his eyes darting in that familiar manner before they came to rest on her face.

Taking her hand in his he pursed his lips. "I would. I don't think that anyone should treat you as a possession. This Crispin fellow definitely does *not* have your best interests at heart. What is it that *you* want?"

Sudden images of her journey with Crispin came flooding into her mind, and as indignant as she sometimes felt towards the knight she could not help but suspect that she had enjoyed the adventure rather more than an authentic princess should have. Clearing her throat she pulled her hand smoothly from his. "I... erm, I am not sure, Philip. Though Crispin is really not that bad. Honestly."

"Well," he shrugged, "he must have you under some kind of spell. Should you realise your error ... you are most welcome to join the troupe for the rest of the season. I am quite sure that we could transcribe that story of your journey into a good dramatic piece. And who better to play the princess than the princess?"

As unfamiliar as the idea was, Helena had a vision of herself singing on the stages of the great theatres, roses streaming down at her feet, before she collected herself. "Thank you, Philip, if I change my mind I'll take you up on that offer." It was said more as a finish to the conversation, but the young actor seemed satisfied.

"Then, if you wish to come with me, meet us here tomorrow morning at sunrise. If I don't see you again, Helena, it was a positive joy to meet you, and I wish you only the best." Kissing her hand gallantly, though a little less elegantly than the prince had, he turned away. "And now I must go."

The square was clear, and the sun setting, when Helena finally returned to the Inn. Thoughts of herself on stage had inundated her continually. She did love singing, and stories. Perfect makings of a player, right? And if Crispin returned her to her father she would surely have to yield to the proceedings she'd explained to Philip. Or rather, she'd have to yield to old Sir Gunther Totherington. Picturing his florid fleshy lips and the curlicue of hair on his forehead that was meant to distract from the complete baldness of his skull she gave a small shudder. She would do anything in her power to avoid *that* outcome, most definitely. Yet... running off with the troupe would mean abandoning Crispin.

What are you thinking? she chided herself. *Half of the time you can't stand that woman.*

Except when she's being exceedingly patient and her cheeks practically disappear into her face with the effort. Or when she really enjoys something and laughs right from her stomach. And except for the fact that she's hauled you out of that isolated tower and showed you places you never knew existed.

Well. A few more days won't do any harm.

Chapter Eight:

She reconsidered her logic the moment she walked into the courtyard. There they were again, the evil duo, fewer ale mugs between them this time, but still the rollicking air of hilarity that shrouded them. It was so infectious that even Kate the Innkeeper sashayed by more than once, apparently flirting with the giggling prince. Or so it seemed to Helena, who almost bit her tongue when she noted the large woman winking at the knight rather saucily as she refilled their drinks. Lifting the mug Crispin clanked it against Eric's, pausing fleetingly as she spotted Helena over his shoulder. The princess was about to steal away upstairs when she heard her name being called.

"Helena! Come here!"

Though usually she would have taken the yelled words as a command and immediately refused, Crispin's tone was welcoming today, and that in itself drew her closer without thinking. Taking a sip from her mug the knight slid over to one side of the bench, a quick odd flinch on her face before she reached down under one thigh with her hand and pulled out a wicked splinter. Throwing it into the flowerbed next to her she patted the open space. "Come. Sit with us."

Ever the gentleman Eric stood up as Helena approached, sketching a slight bow in the air, and again she found herself wishing that *he* had rather come to her tower. And then, strangely, she felt guilty. Especially when Crispin motioned one of the serving girls closer with a leisurely wave of her hand and ordered ale for Helena. Sipping it demurely she listened broodingly to their current conversation (a deep and profound discussion about knife throwing) before she established that they were in all likelihood not drunk. All that much. Yet. Judging it thus safe to join the discussion she started with short comments and reactions ("yes", "uh-huh", and the more advanced "naturally") before easing gradually into full sentences.

"Of course it had been six years since I'd last thrown a knife..." Crispin paused to take a sip of her mead, "but I *had* made a promise. Though the result attracted a bit more attention than I would have hoped."

"Uh huh."

The knight gave Helena a slightly disconcerted look before she continued. "Obviously, with the ... said appendage sliced off, he attracted rather *less* attention than he would have hoped."

"Obviously."

It was subdued under Eric's muffled giggle, but Crispin's ears were remarkably sharp. Raising her eyebrows at the composedly mead-sipping princess she paused for a moment, but when nothing else was forthcoming she continued. "And that is the reason why I am now banned from the Goodwin Forest Games. And also, to a lesser degree, why John Thwaite has moved back into his mother's cottage."

Eric let out a very loud roar of delight. "You wicked creature!"

"Quite." The blonde's tone was dry. Instinctively avoiding the handsome prince's jovial fist Crispin leaned towards Helena, her eyebrows raised curiously. The princess tried to ignore her, but considering that the dark eyes were only a few inches from her own she abandoned her effort after a time, peering over the rim of her mug at the knight innocently. "What?"

"Yes. What, indeed." Crispin cocked her head to one side, studying Helena with interest. "Did you find a vendor with brevity for sale?"

"Ohh." It was an exhalation of irritation. Slamming her mug on the table Helena folded her arms tetchily and shook her hair in a noble, yet universally peevish manner. "I am just being *agreeable*, Crispin."

"Quite." The dry tone mimicked the blonde's earlier answer. "The last time you were being agreeable you medicated me sweetly with poison ivy. No, wait, the last time you were being agreeable you had just turned me into the luminary of the greatest comedy in town. Forgive me, therefore, if I get slightly *apprehensive* when you get *agreeable*."

"How rude!" The princess leaned closer, her nose almost touching the knight's. "I had great intentions, you oaf. Perhaps not so much with the story, I'll agree... But you complain when I'm difficult, and then you complain when I'm agreeable. Which is it to *be*, Sir Crispin?"

"Perhaps she would prefer your mouth otherwise engaged?"

Receiving a sharp kick (and a quick flash of amusement) from the knight for his helpful comment, Eric returned to rubbing his ankle and observing the argument in awe, his head swivelling between the opponents like that of a spectator at a jousting match. Both parties, in actual fact, seemed to be perversely enjoying the quarrel.

"I prefer you obstinate, your highness. Then at least I know I'm marginally safe from everything life-threatening - except your tongue." From the corner of her eye the knight caught sight of the prince's mouth opening. "Eric." Placidly he shut it again.

Folding her arms coolly the princess raised her eyebrows. "You should have let me know of this affinity of yours sooner. I could have been a great deal *more* tetchy."

"Strangely, I don't doubt that for an instant."

They took synchronised sips of their ale, a mutual armistice for the time being. Noticing the blonde's slight pout the prince smiled to himself, admiring her obstinacy in the face of the knight's infuriating air of utter nonchalance. Crispin was at that moment studying Helena's lovely features with a slightly confused frown.

"Princess, I have a question."

"Back to princess, are we?" Helena's full lower lip twisted slightly. "What, Crispin?"

"I thought that you wanted to go back to the tower once I'd recovered. Why didn't you?"

Whether the knight was being incredibly straightforward or incredibly rude was impossible to tell, though it wasn't as hard to tell which one the princess was voting for. Raising her eyebrows she presented the dark woman with a long icy. "I had not realised that you were so eager for me to leave, Crispin. If you'd said so earlier I would have accommodated you happily."

Her brisk haughty tone left no doubt - she was furious. Yet, under all of that the prince could swear that he detected a note of hurt.

"That's not what I meant, Helena! You're welcome to go, or to stay, or whatever takes your fancy. I would just appreciate being let in on the decision, seeing as I'm very much a part of it."

The tall woman was trying hard to be appeasing, but in the face of her naturally exasperated nature it wasn't working all that well.

"Thank you for your *permission*, Sir Crispin." Even Eric winced. "However, my decisions have absolutely nothing to do you. And will continue to have **even less** to do with you in the future. Good night."

The princess stood stiffly, retaining just enough of her royal breeding to nod civilly to Eric when he rose and bowed his head. To Crispin, however, she gave no more than a dreadfully hostile glance before she strode back into the Inn. Both parties were silent until her stiff back had disappeared around the doorway, and then Eric exhaled with a loud sigh.

"Goodness, Crispin, I've never known you to be so verbally... incompetent. You utterly and completely screwed yourself there. Many happy returns."

"Oh, shut up." The knight took a long drink from her mug, draining it completely before she slammed it back onto the table with obvious frustration. "Damn it, Eric, a few days ago she couldn't *wait* to run away whenever I turned my back. I had to resort to ridiculous threats just to keep her near the fire at night. And now, suddenly, when I want to let her leave, she tears strips out of my hide and makes me wear them as earmuffs!" Dropping her head into her hands in annoyance she chewed her lip thoughtfully. "I *do not* understand women, Eric."

"Well, I honestly doubt that I'd be of much help in that department. But," he tilted her chin gently with his fingers to look into her eyes, "maybe I can work with you on just this exact occasion, Crispin. Is it inconceivable to think that she might not actually *want* to leave you?"

"But why not?" Her blue eyes were genuinely confused. "I forced her to come with me, Eric. When I return her to her father for a reward she will probably be forced to either return to the tower or to marry a man most likely suitable only in rank. That would be good enough motivation for most people to go when they are told they're free to."

"She doesn't strike me as anything like most people." Eric shrugged loosely and downed the last sip of his ale. "You've managed to insinuate to her that you were *enthusiastic* for her to go, dear heart. It's no surprise that she's taken offence. The two of you stir up very fiery reactions in each other, for some or other reason. The best course of action would probably be to let her calm down for now, and try to mollify her in the morning. Here, let me order another round."

"I should have let the dragon eat me."

It was little more than a petulant mutter.

"I wish the dragon had eaten her!" It was an irate snarl, delivered in the direction of the peacefully snoring knight's back. Pacing up and down Helena eyed the blissful bundle evilly, and then stopped to deliver a monstrous kick to the pallet's leg. The dark woman's head snapped up blearily. "I **do** like them apples," she declared foggily before she flopped over and began to snore

again. For a moment silence reigned while the princess stared at the knight with a perplexed frown.

"What ap... you know what? I don't care! I *do not* care. I, princess Helena of Bernam, do. Not. Care. Do I care? No. You can take your apples and do indecent things with them, you hear me ..." Muttering a few more things that would curl Crispin's toes (if she were awake and actually paying attention for once) Helena began to hurl her clothing into her pack. "... fit that apple, no, any fruit, I wouldn't be particular... and then she asks me why I'm still here, the beastly brute... got to write the dragon a thank thee note, only polite... and mind you, I should have taken that poison ivy and shoved ..."

Giving the pallet one last kick she stalked out of the room, ignoring the voice that suddenly piped up behind her. "I was only shoeing her horse, honestly..."

When the knight woke up she had the groggy thought that it was rather too quiet. The princess should have been fuming enthusiastically and pointedly in one of the corners. There should have been stares as icy and spiky as daggers sinking into her exposed spine with zest. Instead - there was heavenly peace and quiet.

It felt... odd.

Something was not right.

Rubbing at a clump of hair on the back of her skull which had obviously exchanged pleasantries with something sticky, she pondered the wisdom of lifting her head. It was readily obvious when she attempted it that her rational thought had been affected. With a muffled groan she pushed her face back into the scratchy pillow and gave a half-hearted sniffle. No, still too silent. Turning her head slightly she peered around the room with one narrowed eye, taking in the clear space where there ought to have been parcels and other swanky effects.

Oh dear.

Oh damn.

Oh buggery dragon on a stick.

Chapter Nine:

"Eric!"

Scowling bleakly the dishevelled prince shoved a dry cracker into his mouth and chewed with messy effort, barely glancing up as the knight slid into the seat opposite him. Considering that the previous night they had between them single-handedly boosted the revenue of the inn beyond any point thought possible, she looked far too good for his taste this morning. Motioning at a serving girl for a cup of coffee she rubbed the back of her head thoughtfully.

"Eric, Helena's gone and ... Eric, are you listening at all? Why is that redhead in the corner winking at me?"

Studying the woman in question the prince blinked gingerly. "Well, she would. With you dancing on her table so scantily dressed and all. Told you it was poor taste, but would you listen? No. Not you. Why are you shouting??"

"I wasn't even talking right then!" Examining his bloodshot eyes and the tuft of blonde hair that stuck up from the hairline above his brow like an eagle's crest she shook her head faintly. "You, my dear friend, are a mess."

"And you have no right not to be." Picking up a cracker he lifted it halfway to his mouth before he paused. "What did you say about Helena?"

"I said she's gone. Taken every last thing and left. Oh - and welcome back to the world of the fairly conscious, by the way."

"Take your fair consciousness and stuff it in your ears. It's overrated." Taking a bite of the cracker he chewed wistfully before he continued. "Where did she go, Crispin?"

"Here, let me consult my magical clairvoyant thumb." With a waggle of said digit in front of his bleary eyes the knight glowered at him. "How should I know, Eric? I was as attentive as a bear in winter, hibernating on my stomach with bits of food stuck on my head. It's not as if she left me a nice note and a bunch of flowers!"

"I don't blame her," Eric mumbled petulantly. "You may look good in the morning but your temperament certainly makes up for that." He considered her as she picked up the coffee and glowered at him over the rim of the cup tetchily. "Though you do look so damned good, you swine. Look, she couldn't have gone far. All we do is ask a few choice questions at the two gates and follow the trail. Coinage begets information."

Crispin took a cautious sip of the hot coffee, her blue gaze far in the distance. When she had swallowed she placed the cup squarely back on the table before she looked Eric straight in the eyes. "And what if she doesn't want to be found, Eric? I told her she could go, and she's wanted to, all of this time. Surely her choice should count for something? By now, at least?" Frowning at herself she picked up the cup again and cradled it between her hands, staring into the dark liquid for a moment before she collected herself. "Would it be fair to do this to her a second time? I think I need to let her leave, Eric. I think I need to ... go to that hot spring in Morag Mountain and eat fruit off the trees for a few days."

Eric clapped his hands enthusiastically before wincing first at the loud sound and then at Crispin's resentful look. "Sorry. Reflex. It's a lovely idea, though. My skin could do with the miraculously restorative powers of stinky water. It's been a rough year for me - I look a little peaky, don't I look a little pea..." Catching sight of the dark woman's even darker expression he trailed off and shrugged his broad shoulders. "Well, I **feel** a tad peaky. At any rate. It's an immense idea. Just you and me, soaking up the good life like we used to..."

"I was thinking I'd go alone."

"Well, then you obviously aren't that great at thinking, Crispin." Dusting the little bits of cracker off his crinkled tunic he interrupted before she even had time to speak. "Oh, shush. You're a spoiled brat. I'm coming, and that's final."

"Fine."

"Fine."

"Good."

"Excellent."

Crispin glared at the handsome blonde man until she was sure that he was paying absolutely no attention before she abandoned the effort and took a sip of her coffee. "Well all right then. I was going to invite you anyway."

"Troll."

"You've said."

They spent a rare moment in silence before Eric dropped a few coins on the table and stood up. "Well, that's settled. Now all we need to do is find the princess and then, tallyho, hot springs here we come!"

Halfway through rising from her seat Crispin promptly sat back down. "When exactly did you get distracted and wander off from the conversation, Eric? Would you like me to fill in the blanks for your ale-soaked mind?"

"Oh pish, Crispin." Eric sat down again, completely confusing the serving girl who was on her way to clear their table. "I'm not suggesting that I hunt her down and sling her over my shoulder like some type of lout..."

"Your shoulder wouldn't know what to do with her."

"... I'm only suggesting that we find her and make sure that she's all right before we just abandon her. She might not have gone of her own free will, did you ever consider that?"

He watched her carefully as she first made a rather rude noise and shrugged, then started drumming on the table slowly with her long fingers, her blue eyes fixed on a distant point. When she looked up at him her gaze was expressionless, but her voice couldn't hide the hope. "You think she might not have wanted to leave?" Clearing her throat against the telling lilt she continued in a more subdued tone. "That's not entirely impossible, Eric. Maybe we should find her - just to make sure that she's all right, of course."

Patting himself on the back mentally the blonde man reached over and took one of her hands in his. "You know her better than I do. Where do we start?"

"Well, she wouldn't go to her father, she seems to..." Suddenly Crispin stopped, her hand tightening around his in a rather disagreeably firm grip. "Eric, do you remember two night ago when Helena told us that she'd met a man?"

"Hmm, of that night I remember amazingly little."

"**Try.**" Pulling her hand from his she smacked his arm for emphasis. "She said he was a ... damn it, what was it... was he a priest? A painter?"

"You're sticking with a theme, I see. Are you positive that it started with a 'p'?"

"Positive may be too positive a word, but it's the only thing that I'm having any memory of at all."

"Do let's have faith in *your* mead-soaked mind." Leaning back to avoid the back of her hand he rubbed his bristly chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Let's see. Priest. Painter. Pig-farmer. Pot-maker. Pastry baker. Peach seller. Player. Parmesan. Platypus. Perti..."

"What in the name of trotters are you doing, Eric?"

Pouting at her raised eyebrows he folded his arms. "It's called being helpful, Crispin. It's a new thing. You wouldn't know about it."

"It should be called being an obstruction of justice. Of all the silliness. Platypus? The word doesn't even exist."

"It does!" Eric was just shifting in his seat to get a good position for a long argument when Crispin abruptly leaned forward, her sudden nearness to him a little startling for his liking.

"What were the other ones you said? The reasonable ones, I mean."

"Right. Peach seller?"

"No! How's that reasonable? It was... it was a *player*, Eric."

"And that's more reasonable to your mind? Well, that speaks for itself."

Crispin ignored his banter, her gaze thoughtful. When he saw the expression on her face he sat forward, immediately serious. "Are you completely sure about that, Crispin? It was a very vague night for both of us."

"I'm sure, Eric. And I know where they were, at that. The square near Aldrich's Tavern to the east. I led Helena there myself on the day that she was following me." Standing quickly Crispin almost knocked over the unfortunate serving girl. "That will be the place where we should start."

Eric dropped another coin on the table before he joined her. "Good woman." Hooking his arm through hers he waltzed her out, stopping just before the exit to take a deep breath and tilt his handsome face up to the sky. "Ah, I can already feel the warm water on my skin." His bliss was short-lived, as he suddenly found himself propelled rapidly from the Inn by a flushed knight. "Crispin? What was that about?"

Glancing over her shoulder quickly she never slowed her pace. "You may have been feeling the water on your skin, Eric, but in that exact spot I was feeling rather something else on my behind." When he took a quick look over his shoulder and spied the redhead grinning to herself it was only Crispin's dark scowl that prevented him from bursting into laughter.

Chapter Ten:

When Helena had left early that morning with Philip he had been as attentive as ever, telling her stories of the places he'd seen while they loaded her baggage into one of the colourfully painted wagons. As the day went on, however, he became more pensive and quiet until all efforts to draw him from his shell only produced a deeper scowl on his handsome brow. Finally she resorted to conversation with the beautiful young blonde woman sitting next to her who frequently released alarmingly loud nonsensical sounds.

"Hello. I'm Helena."

Grasping her extended hand enthusiastically the young woman shook it. "I'm Harmony. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Me too. Harmony - that's definitely an unusual name."

"Ah." Harmony blushed charmingly. "Actually I used to be a Patricia, but Master Gaites - he's our director - feels that we must live up to the mystic something or other in the something mind's something of the audience ... actually I think I have that wrong. PAAAAAAH."

Jerking at the flatly nasal honk Helena cleared her throat nervously. "Erm, yes. Of course. Have you been with the troupe for long?" She stayed as poised as she could, determined not to be startled by the next incomprehensible outburst.

"Well, yes, I suppose. I used to be a milkmaid and then my father decided to match me with Clem Urhins, the Innkeeper's son. So I ran away and joined this troupe."

"Didn't you like Clem?"

"Oh, no, Clem was perfectly nice. I was allergic to milk." The blonde smiled sweetly. "It is lovely that you have decided to join us. Now *you* could be the princess, or the noblewoman, or the courtier."

With a quick shake of her head Helena hurried to reassure her. "Oh, no, I wouldn't dream of it, Pa... Harmony. I'm here as a novice, in every sense of the word. I want to learn from you."

The young woman snorted quite gracelessly, reminding Helena for a brief moment of the knight. "You would be doing me a favour. I'm all curtseyed out. If I saw a curtsey coming I would kick it in the nuts, but for my bad knee. From too much curtseying, ironically.
BLUHBLUHBLUHBLUH!"

The gobbling sound paired with the sight of Harmony's full lips vibrating outrageously startled Helena again. With a sharp "Yah!" she jerked her head back, only to thump it rather rigorously against the side of the wagon. The comical sight of Harmony pausing mid-BLUH with her lips in a wobbly pout almost made the sting bearable. Almost. Rubbing the back of her head with one hand Helena glared at the blonde with one eye closed.

"What exactly **are you doing?**"

One dainty hand lifted to cover the pouting lips. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I startled you. I didn't realise. They are tenderising exercises. For the face. To keep it mobile and expressive. For the communicative something in the art of the ... something device, you see."

"Oh." It was clearly grouchy. Deciding to leave the irritable princess well alone Harmony pouted her lips and took a breath to continue, swiftly and perceptively changing to a very silent exercise when she noticed Helena's nostrils twitching. Trying to ignore the breathy "Bwahhhhhhhh" that floated from her left Helena rubbed irritably at her throbbing head, sporadically cursing Crispin and Philip in her mind. The brooding player had substituted his seat in the wagon for a horse earlier, claiming a need to stretch his legs. With the cramped conditions inside their wagon Helena could almost believe him. With her as the novice and Harmony as a 'mere' woman, they had been assigned the very last cart, crammed in between heavy trunks and various props. Shifting slightly to allay the pressure of a large rubber chicken under one buttock Helena caught sight of Philip some way off, suspended gloomily on a barely conscious horse.

"He's lovely, isn't he?" Harmony had paused her forceful exhalations and was admiring the handsome young man with a suspicious flush on her cheeks.

"Not exactly as friendly as I'd thought him to be, I'll admit."

"Oh, no, you mustn't think that. He has an artistic soul."

"Which means that he's bloody temperamental." Reaching under her body Helena pulled out the gods be damned chicken and threw it into a far corner where it hit the wall with a muffled squawk and collapsed in a little heap. "How long has Philip been with this troupe, Harmony?"

The blonde twirled a lock of hair around one finger. "Oh, about a month. Not long at all. He is quite the dandy - excellent swordsmanship."

"Where was he before this?"

"I have no idea, really. He mentioned a performance that had gone wrong, something we could all relate to here. Other than that ... who knows?"

"Harmony, if you start with that horrendous honking again I am going to damage you with that chicken."

The pouting blonde began to whistle innocently.

Chapter Eleven:

"Are you absolutely **positive** that you haven't seen them around, Daedalus?"

"Oh, yes, positive. Definitely."

"Eric, I'm going to slice off his ears. I don't like them."

"Now sheathe your sword, will you? Look how pale he's gone. That's because you're frightening him."

"Eventually it will be from loss of blood. Hehehe."

"That blade's going to slip and then nobody will be laughing. Put it away."

"But see how he blinks so much faster when I do this. Rather entertaining, you have to admit."

"Ack!"

"Now look what you've done!"

"Well, I would apologise and say I'm sorry, except that it would be a lie and I'm a generally truthful sort of person. Anyhow, I expect that will heal in a few days. Barely a scratch."

"Why are you *doing* this to me?!"

"Hey, don't look at me! I'm not doing a thing. Direct your gaze to the crazy dark knight over there, because the only thing to see in this direction is me accepting no responsibility at all."

"Two reasons, Daedalus. Firstly, I take offence to the fact that your name is not Aldrich. It is just against the laws of nature, you understand."

"Aldrich was the previous owner! I would have lost customers if I'd changed the name! That's not a fair thing to hold against me!"

"He's actually got an excellent point there, Crispin."

"No, Eric, *I've* got an excellent point - on the end of my sword. Damn, look, now it has a spot of blood on it. Besides, when have I ever cared about *fair*?"

"Well, there is the matter of a **fair**-haired young woman at this moment on her way to..."

"Excuse me..."

"... god knows where, and I think a **fair** amount of ..."

"Excuse me..."

"... caring for is evident in that specific case."

"Eric, you're full of ..."

"Excuse me..."

"... badger poop. WHAT?"

"I was just wondering about the second thing."

"What are you talking about?"

"The second thing. You said two reasons. Maybe if you tell me we can settle this quickly and with no - further - damage to anybody present..."

"Oh, that. Please don't whine, I hate that. The second thing is that you are trying to convince me that you have never seen a certain blonde-haired princess with a male friend who is also a player. I want that princess - shut up, Eric, I mean that I want her *here*, shut up - and if you can't be persuaded to change your name for the sake of all that's good and reasonable, you must at the very least oblige me with this, do you understand?"

"But I see a lot of people! You can't possibly expect of me to make use of such a sweeping description!"

"Oh, but I do. I'm completely, utterly, dementedly unreasonable. I thought you might have realised that after the small accident with your chin. Would you like me to draw you a map on your chest?"

Aggrieved sighs all around.

"Crispin, don't think that I don't recognise that glint in your eye. Don't even consider doing that here!"

"What is she ..."?

"Look, I beg of you - just tell her what she wants to know. I find standing between a perfect stranger and an extremely messy death wearying."

"I may remember *something*."

"You may need to."

"Ack!"

"Crispin! Gods be damned! Stop that!"

"It was an accident. And it's just a scratch. Don't be so pernickety."

"Who is going to pay the healer's bill?"

"Not me. But I'm more than willing to pay the undertaker."

"Look, look, step back a little. And put that down. Please. I'm not saying I know a thing, all right? But if you're looking for real information, find Claude DeChamps. Easy to spot, has pockmarks all over his face and an eye patch. Real Helen of Troy. Now **will** you leave me alone?"

"It is a good thing that you never aspired to be a player."

"Eric, jealousy is a nasty trait. I was brilliant. Command performance."

"Yes, to be sure. I longed to *command* you to stop."

Shooting an evil look in his direction Crispin stuck out her tongue and crossed her eyes. "You are just sour because you wanted to be the bad knight and I wouldn't let you."

"You always get to do it." Very petulant. "Would once have hurt? No."

"Oh please. You, my darling, look about as dangerous as a dormouse. What would you have threatened him with - an infectiously sunny disposition? Dearie me, I quiver in my boots."

"Shut up."

He stretched his neck and took a good look around him, blushing slightly when he noticed a group of young girls who were gathered near the door of an Inn and very obviously and

appreciatively appraising him. Looking away quickly he nudged the knight in the ribs with his elbow. "Anything?"

They had been walking the small streets around the square for a few candlemarks now, asking around after Claude, but as of yet they hadn't found a single clue. Studying the road names that were engraved on wooden pallets Crispin shook her head. "Not a thing. We've been here before. Let's take Sycamore down there and double back to the square." Turning into the small side street she abruptly halted, the prince almost stumbling into her.

"What?"

Following her eyes he noticed a man who was leaned nonchalantly against a pole, a pipe drooping over his lower lip as he playfully joshed a sly-looking serving girl. Even at this distance his marked face and the leather thong tied around his head were obvious. With a muffled "huh" Crispin began to move, her gait somewhere between noticeably purposeful and awkwardly casual. It was when they had crossed about half of the distance that the man glanced utterly by accident in their direction. Taking in the speedily approaching dark woman and the tall blonde man lagging behind he made a quick decision, and then hastily spat out his pipe and turned on his heel to escape. When Crispin took off in pursuit Eric spat out a curse and sprinted to catch up. The knight was fit and extremely fast, more so than her prey, but as she was about to grasp at him he swiftly took a sharp turn to the right into a small dark alley. Thwarted by her own speed she went careening into a stack of empty boxes, righting herself as Eric ran up to her side.

"Are you all right?"

Nodding briefly she sprinted into the alley, but by the time their eyes had adjusted to the gloom there was nobody to be seen. The walls seemed to be solid until they closed off abruptly in a dead end. Scowling, Crispin walked down the narrow alleyway with her arms extended, both hands running down the gray brickwork in investigation. She was about halfway when a hand landed lightly on her shoulder.

"Wha...?"

Eric was standing behind her, his finger pressed to his lips in an appeal for silence. Standing motionless she concentrated, and then realized what he had heard. Up on the roof there was a faint scrabbling. With a frown she glanced up, and then down the walls to the dead end. Barrels and boxes stood haphazardly piled against a wall that reached right up to the roof in a smooth unbroken surface. Taking a deep breath Crispin rolled her shoulders once.

"What are you doing, Crispin?"

Without a word she took a few steps back and then began to accelerate towards the wall. Approaching the stack of wooden objects at high speed she took a leap onto the closest barrel, hurling herself into the air. Her feet pushed off against any surface she could find, and then she launched herself against the wall, scarcely able to wrap her arms over the rough top surface as the pile beneath her began to collapse. The energy of her movement forced the air from her lungs

and she hung from the barrier for a moment, her chest heaving against the cold brickwork. When she'd regained her breath she pulled herself up onto the wall, grateful to feel Eric's hands wrap around her ankles and provide extra leverage. From the wall it was a simple short step onto the flat roof.

Claude had made one very good choice, and one that was not as bright. Deciding on the alley with its concealed niche that led to the roof had been a stroke of genius. As a local of dubious nature he knew all about such nifty little things. Moving onto the next roof in panic had not been such a good idea. If he had stayed still they might have gone, but now they seemed to be pausing down in the alley. Cocking his head he listened carefully, trying to establish what was happening. It had not been a good day for Claude, and this was going to be his next bad choice. He was trying to stay as still as possible, in the hope that they would be convinced to leave. It was, therefore, a rather nasty shock to him when a most almighty noise sounded from down below. He was still trying to determine what had happened when the dark woman popped over the side of the roof.

Why he had stood still in the first place when he was being chased, she didn't understand. His thin lips formed a comical 'o' when her feet hit the floor, and he almost stumbled as he turned and started running again. With a resigned sigh she pursued him, her long legs making it much easier for her to jump over the gap between the two buildings than it had been for him earlier. Though he was not as fast as the following woman, he was a skillful evader, using his obvious knowledge of the area to good effect. Ducking and weaving he managed to avoid her, and although the space between them was shrinking it was doing so at a very small rate. They raced along the rooftops, jumping from building to building, with surprised spectators looking on from below as they suddenly found themselves covered by shadows.

"Eric!"

At an interval of ten steps Crispin bellowed out her companion's name, knowing that he was not on the roof behind her and hoping that her loud shout would keep him informed - and close - on the ground. Her energy was diminishing but she pushed herself to keep her pace, with the knowledge that the man now barely ahead of her was beginning to slow down in exhaustion. It was a complete and utter anti-climax when Claude just stopped and bent over gasping for breath, resting his hands on his knees. Slowing down wildly to avoid colliding with his body Crispin stopped a couple of feet from him, her blue eyes at once irritable and confused as she folded her arms in frustration.

"If you were just going to stop anyway why in the hell did you run in the first place??"

He breathed deeply a few times before he tilted his head and looked up at her, his face hostile. "Ye was chasing me. I don't stand still for that, 'lright?"

His thick accent and gritty voice conjured the image of a toad halfway sunk into a bog. With a frown Crispin crouched down next to him, the corner of her mouth twitching surreptitiously when he slid further away from her irritably. "You don't stand still for that, but you stop?"

"I was tired." Catching her slight smile this time he spat to one side hostilely. "And I was wearin' the wrong shoes for runnin', okay?"

"You have special shoes for running? Did you do something wrong, that you would be running away that much?" The tone was as innocent as she could make it (which was not that much at all).

"No." It was gruff, rude, and much too quick. "I'm not telling ye nuthin. Piss off."

With a small smile Crispin shifted closer. "It is a very reckless thing you did, throwing yourself onto rooftops. Don't you realize that the loss of an eye can affect distance perception? You could have had an accident."

"What the hell is the matter with ye, huh? Are ye goin to be kissin my ouchies next?" He scowled at her from underneath bushy eyebrows.

"I'm not letting my lips anywhere near your person," she informed him with affable disgust. "And if you force me to chase you again I'm simply going to throw my dagger at the collar of your shirt. I do **not** feel like running any more today. Do you understand me?"

For an answer he sat down where he stood and folded his arms sullenly. Keeping an eye on him Crispin stepped closer to the edge of the roof, risking a glance into the street below. "Eric?" There was no reply. Walking to the other side she peeked down. "Eric?"

"Here." It was more of a long drawn-out breath than a word. The handsome blonde man stood below on the cobblestones with his hands propped on his thighs, his back heaving as he gasped for air.

"Are you all right?"

In lieu of words he waved one hand in her general direction, not moving from his position. With a last glance down Crispin turned and ambled back towards the man who was sitting in the middle of the floor with a sneer on his face.

"You were hopping over these roofs like a joyful little gazelle in spring. It would appear that you know this area quite well."

"Might do." He couldn't resist a little smugness.

"Well, then, show me the way down."

"Find it yerself."

With a sigh Crispin stepped back to the edge of the roof. "Eric? If I push him over will you catch him?"

"I could give it my best." The voice that drifted up to them sounded more than a little dubious. "I might drop him, though; I'm warning you. He didn't look all that light to me."

"Oh well. Means justifying the end and all of that." Stalking back she shoved one hand under the sitting man's arm and pulled him up, then dragged him towards the edge of the roof. Though he was trying to struggle it was not that easy with his arm lifted so high that his feet barely touched the floor.

"'ere, ye're not just goin to toss me over. Ye wouldn't."

A smothered snigger drifted from below. "If you're trying to appeal to her better nature you're an optimist, my friend. Praying for wings would be more likely to get a result."

"Right, right," twisting his arm the shorter man attempted to catch Crispin's eye, "stop it, will ye? Nothing I know's worth this aggravation. What is it ye want?"

"I do love a rational man." Lowering her hand a little she alleviated his uncomfortable position, though his shady character forced her to keep a light hold on him. "We are looking for a young woman, a princess to be exact, who may have left this town with a player at some point late last night or in the early hours of this morning."

The ugly man tapped his chin thoughtfully. "What did yer princess look like?"

"What, you have such a inundation of princesses that you need a description?" The knight waved one hand somewhere in the vicinity of her ear. "Yea high, fair hair, green eyes, royal attitude. Let's hear it."

"Hmmm," raising one bushy eyebrow Claude scrutinized her shrewdly, "there anything in it for me?"

"Oh, definitely. Unbroken limbs, a healthy spine, fairly good health and a nice even smile." Crispin presented him with one of her own.

"Now that ye mention it, I did see that gal with Philip at the square yesterday."

"Philip?"

"Yeah, Philip." He curled his top lip in disdain. "That no-good damned son'f mine."

They sat around a table near the square, armed with mugs of mead supplied to them by Daedalus from the pure goodness of his heart. Or so Crispin told herself, ignoring the beady stare he fixed on her from behind the plasters dotting his face. Claude, having realised that this time, at least, he was not the guilty party, was only too glad to help.

"So when did you see your son last, Claude?"

"Well, 's yesterday, the time he were chattin to yer princess. I was tryin to get him to pull a job with me," noticing the curious expressions around the table he changed direction as gracefully as a dragon dancing in a fairy ring, "was construction, nothing ye'd be interested in, 'lright? So I was askin him very nicely and he says he has his own thing goin, don't need my scheme or me in his scheme ... buildin scheme, that is. Then yer princess drops in and he drops me. Just like that."

"What happened to a little honouring of one's parents?" Ever the gentleman, Eric was heroically fuelling the family feud. Claude nodded enthusiastically.

"Yeah. What did happen to that?"

Scowling at the excessively compassionate prince Crispin cleared her throat. "Claude, as much as I know that you have absolutely *nothing* to do with the building trade, apart from scaling them once in a while, or breaking into them, I couldn't really care. What I do care about is finding the princess, and for that to happen, I need you tell us what Philip's up to."

Claude scratched his head with a gnarly finger. "Well, I don't know as that would be the right thing to do. He is my son, after all, you know, and if he was to get into a predicament..."

"All we want is Helena, Claude," Eric assured him quickly, "and if we were possibly to frighten him a tad that would be right justice for maltreating his father, wouldn't it?"

"t would. That it would." Scratching his chin Claude came to a swift decision. "The troupe's goin to reach Flagstaff to the southwest in a few days. Philip'll be travelling with 'em maybe two days before he takes the princess and peels off. Where, he weren't sayin."

Tossing her mead back quickly Crispin stood, gesturing to Eric to do the same with a nod of her dark head. "I appreciate your help, Claude. If I didn't have such a solid policy with regards to the proximity of my lips to general dirt, I would kiss you right about now."

"Oh sod off." It was almost paternal. "When ye find that uppity son'f mine give him a smack in the rear before ye send him back. I'm gettin too old for this shite."

Chapter Twelve:

"... lo and behold, you horrid bugger

I take after my moustachioed mother

And saying so he drew his lance

And stuck it up the royal's... "

The knight testily interrupted the prince's deeply soulful squawking. "Eric."

"... yes?"

"Is there, in fact, some sort of royal finishing school where all of your types learn this damned song?"

One perfectly arched blonde eyebrow disappeared contemplatively beneath his rakish fringe. "Perhaps there could be a reappearance of it at Madame Contretemps' College for Young Nobles, sung in the washroom as a form of rebellion or something to that effect." He shifted in his saddle with the air of somebody who was about to communicate something of an incredibly boring nature with the greatest of enthusiasm. "It was, in fact, made very fashionable at the Court of Francolin the Seventh of Crane Valley by the renowned court jester Twerp, who performed it on fifteen separate occasions, one being to mark the arrival of the queen of you're not, in fact, even listening, are you?"

"No." Crispin shook her head lazily. "But I like not listening amiably to your talking more than I like listening with dismay to your singing, darling."

"Marvellous, for I reflect on nothing but your happiness. Troll."

They had been riding in a southwest direction towards Flagstaff for what had remained of the day, and the sun was now setting rapidly ahead of them. Dark shadows lengthened around them, and although they were on a communal road the hazard of bandits always remained. Studying the beautiful layers of colour in the sky Eric reined in his horse and swerved closer to the woman next to him.

"I think we should move off the main road and make camp in a less open space, Crispin. No need to look for trouble."

"Yes, it always finds us first. You're right, Eric. Do you see that break in the foliage up ahead? Let's pull in there and find a suitable area a little bit further in."

Gamely they trudged through the small undergrowth and into a lightly forested area, riding quietly for a good while until the trees fell off once again and gave way to a clearing.

"Eric? Have I finally lost my mind, or are there lights looking at us in the not-so-distant distance?"

Squinting in the near darkness Eric could barely make out what seemed to be three or four lamps glowing invitingly. "Does that have to be an either/or question? They're definitely not a figment of your imagination, Crispin. Lamplight, not too far off. Shall we rush up and plead for a little hospitality?"

"Oh yes. The few days in town have spoiled my rump for anything harder than a bed."

"What majestically vigorous knights we are." Eric's mockingly flattering voice elicited a burst of laughter from Crispin.

"Hey, do you remember the time when we swam into the tunnel at Gungjian for the alleged treasure and then you wouldn't dive down to the secret opening because it meant that your hair would be mussed?"

"The word to emphasize there is *alleged*. When you got back you were none the richer and very muddy, and I was still looking great."

"I have a natural appeal."

"Certainly you have au naturel appeal, but once you're dressed it comes down to personality, and there, my love..."

"Oh shush. What is this place, do you suppose?"

They had gradually been approaching the glow and could now see the building from which it originated. Stopping, they took a moment to consider the structure. It appeared to be a very old farmhouse with no extraordinary aspect about it save that it was in the middle of nowhere. Dark wood, obviously uncared for, was hammered at absurd angles, and the glassless windowpanes - the sources of light - had twisted themselves into odd shapes over the years. A porch obscured where they assumed the front door would be, vines growing and winding with abandon around its dark wooden pillars and onto the sloping roof. Three stairs led onto the dark porch, and in the gloom they could barely make out a massive boulder that sat incongruously on the front lawn. To the left a smaller building stood, its details concealed by the darkness falling around it.

Catching the movement of the golden head next to her Crispin leaned closer and glanced at Eric. "It looks a bit... ominous."

His head nodded a few times, the lamplight accentuating strands of his hair. "Ominous? Or just plain creepy?"

"And yet..." she sat up in her saddle and draped her hands over Toby's neck, "we're probably going to carry on until we are so irreversibly in trouble that we have no choice but to run away screaming like little girls."

The prince nodded solemnly. "That we will."

"Well then," Crispin nudged an unwilling Toby into a walk, "shall we? And why do we, by the way?"

"It is because we are knights," the prince declared with a noble air, "because we are proud, and righteous, and brave - and too bloody stupid to find a less dangerous profession."

Approaching the boulder they slowed down, caution creeping in and peeking over their shoulders. When Toby came to a complete halt and declined to continue politely Crispin glanced at Eric. "Perhaps we should just turn around and..."

"Welcome, strangers."

It was so unexpected that Toby took a pensive moment before he reared wildly and threw a startled Crispin clear off his back. Landing skilfully she rolled to her feet in a poised crouch, her blue eyes darting quickly to the figure that had apparently sprouted from behind the massive rock. Straightening up, it proved to be a rather pretty and unthreatening well-bosomed young woman, her features indistinguishable in the faint light. Though only the whites of Eric's eyes were showing over the broad back of the horse he was currently hiding behind, they managed to look more or less as sheepish as Crispin felt. With an embarrassed little cough she straightened up and rubbed one hand over her black hair uncomfortably. "Er. Hello."

The young woman stepped out from behind the boulder and approached the knight slowly, her filmy dress floating oddly about her legs. She moved so elegantly that her feet didn't seem to be touching the ground. "My apologies for having startled you." Her voice was agreeably light, and her strong accent slightly nasal yet charmingly lilting. "I hope that you are not injured?"

Avoiding the extended hand that was threatening to examine her limbs Crispin shook her head rather numbly. "No. No. I'm fine."

"You seem somewhat stunned. Did you knock your head? Please, you must come in. I will have it no other way." Swirling around the young woman floated towards the house, speaking over her shoulder as she did so. "I will fetch a lantern to take the horses to the barn. I will not be long."

For the next few moments Crispin and Eric were engaged in one of those sharply whispered interactions that regularly ended in the oft-repeated words "you!" "no, you!" In this case it actually happened to be "let's go!" "let's not!" but the principle remained exactly the same, and when the young woman returned it was to a smug prince and a petulant knight. Lifting her lantern to illuminate, briefly, a charmingly upturned nose and gently pouting upper lip, she motioned towards the barn with her head.

"Please do follow me."

They were pleasantly surprised at the interior of the apparently ramshackle barn. From the inside it almost looked like a different building altogether, clean and warm with such a good stock of hay that even Toby relented and discarded his injured air. Leaving two satisfied horses the young woman led two rather less satisfied but more ill at ease individuals up the porch stairs and through the slightly open door of the farmhouse. The interior had the same effect as that of the barn - that is, it seemed to be a completely different place on the inside. The living area that they had stepped into was warmly decorated and inviting, with large well-stuffed chairs arranged on thick brightly coloured carpets around a massive stone fireplace. A roaring fire was currently going, and it was in that light that the young woman stepped forward and was joined immediately by two others who had apparently just materialised from the chairs. Side by side it was unmistakeable that they were identical siblings. All three were crowned with a profusion of red hair that tumbled and curled around their delicate triangular faces. Large eyes and full pouting top lips were mirrored likewise in every face. The woman who had welcomed them shook her head.

"Oh, where are my manners, I *must* apologise. I am Souflay, and these are my sisters Biday and Lahtay." The other two girls bobbed at the mention of their names. "Welcome once again to our home, and I do hope that I have not caused you too much distress." Stepping forward towards Crispin Souflay spoke to her sisters over her shoulder. "This one's steed started and threw her." Extending her hands she reached out and patted clean air, mostly because the dark knight had tried to step back subtly at the movement and consequently tripped over a corner of the bearskin rug behind her. The three sisters watched the sprawled woman with such expressions of concern that she almost began to giggle from nervousness.

"Well, see, I'm all right. Nothing the matter at all. Solid as a bear. Except this one under me, of course." Stumbling to her feet with the help of Eric's hand under her elbow she dusted at her clothing, extremely aware even before she did it that there was absolutely nothing to dust away. *I did better with the dragon than with three harmless well-mannered amply bosomed young women. What is the matter with me? I'm behaving like a nervous colt.* Clearing her throat she knocked Eric in the ribs. It took him a moment, but he got there.

"Oh, we haven't even introduced ourselves. Pardon me. I am Eric De Fontenèt at your service, and my charming friend over here is Crispin."

The three sisters bobbed in unison before one of them spoke up. "Oh, you must be hungry. We have some soup and bread left over from our supper - it is a simple meal but we are most honoured to share. Biday, please fetch tea for our guests." The girl on the far right bobbed. "Souflay, please ladle the soup into the bowls." The girl in the centre bobbed. "And as our guests, please do make yourselves comfortable." The young woman motioned towards the richly upholstered chairs before she turned and followed her two sisters into a room to the left of the entrance.

The dark knight smiled politely until the three young women had disappeared, then swung around just in time to catch the amused grin parading around on Eric's lips. "What are you sniggering at?" she wanted to know irritably.

With a teasing pout the prince shrugged his broad shoulders. "Oh, nothing at all, Crispin." Wandering towards the chairs he picked one at random and dropped down into it. "You're as perfectly charming as ever."

With a crabby snort she picked the chair to his left and sat down, almost letting loose a startled yelp when her lean frame sank deep into the pillows. Shooting a dark glower in his direction to prevent any forthcoming laughter she shifted around a little. Eric watched with interest until she had settled.

"Crispin?"

"What?"

"Nothing is going to happen."

Eyeing him darkly she picked at a protruding strand of material. "Something *always* happens, Eric."

"Not in this case." Stretching over he took her restless hand in his. "Look, they are three frail lovely young women. We, on the other hand, are fearless knights with sharp daggers stuffed down our boots. There is absolutely nothing to fear. Are you sure you're not just nervous specifically *because* they're three frail lovely young women?"

"You always say such complete nonsense."

"Well, I shall protect your assets until such a time as you wish to distribute them," he declared solemnly, pulling his hand away rapidly to avoid the normally resulting slap.

At that point the door opened again to the three women who were each carrying a tray in their hands. The first placed expertly prepared tea on the small table in front of them. The second offered each a bowl of delicious-smelling soup, and the third placed a plate filled with thick slices of buttered bread on the table next to the tea. Though the sisters had described the food as simple it looked rich and appetizing, and with polite thanks both the knight and the prince set about demolishing their meals as civilly as possible. At a request from one of the sisters (neither Crispin nor Eric could tell the difference) they shortly related some of their adventures, the youthfully enthusiastic reception thereof encouraging them to relax a little.

"But you have had marvellous exploits! One must possess certain bravery to achieve such things!"

"Well," Crispin eyed the woman and cleared her throat uncertainly, "Souflay..."

"Lahtay."

The name shuffling had been going on for the entire evening. If the girls had stayed seated in the same places it would have been a simple task, but as it was they moved around constantly, shifting seats without a thought. They did not seem fidgety so much as purely fluid, and the two guests had long ago given up any pretence of knowing who it was they were speaking to at any given time.

"Erm, my apologies, Lahtay, it is not so much a question of certified bravery as it is of blind stupidity."

One of the other women, who had been perching round-eyed on a low stuffed bench, shook her head in admiration. "Oh, surely not. You must not think that. I can see, we all can see, that you are quite unique individuals."

Eric, who had been sporadically adding to Crispin's accounts from deep inside his comfortable chair, decided to interrupt at this point. "You must excuse Crispin, Biday..."

"Souflay."

"My apologies. Souflay. You must excuse Crispin, she is much too modest for her own good."

Blushing faintly the dark knight waved the comment away with one hand. "But please - it feels as though Eric and I have been talking the entire night, and as much as Eric always enjoys that, we'd like to hear your story as well."

The three sisters turned a coy glance on each other before the one in the middle - Lahtay? - started. "We were born in the northern coastal village of Cathcairn, which is mostly a fishing hamlet."

"That is in Marganstern County," one of the other sisters helpfully supplied.

"Our father was a fisherman, and our mother a net mender. When we were old enough to work, we became ... ship callers." She shot a brief look at her sisters, who both smiled at the guests in a manner that Crispin found mildly weird, but couldn't identify.

"Ship callers?" Eric was so deeply sunk into his snug seat that he'd missed the silent exchange between the young women.

"Yes." This time it was another sister who spoke. "We led ships into their moorings with signals from our positions on large rocks close to the shore."

"Don't they have light houses to do that?" Something was bothering Crispin, but the precise fact was eluding her at the moment.

The middle sister nodded. "Yes, there are light houses for that reason. But most small villages cannot yet afford them."

"It is most likely that the villagers will have built one by now," the sister on the left interposed. The sister on the right nodded.

"Though it will be sad to lose the sea to modern life."

"Lose the sea?" Eric smiled. "That sounds as if you see it as your possession."

"Oh, no, that's not the case." The middle sister shook her head. "*It* possesses **us**. That is... we love it with all of our hearts. We were born by the sea, grown at it, nourished through it... The sound of the waves always dwells in your head, and the smell of salt in your hair. The sea is so filled with... "

"Clams?" Eric, ever helpful.

The three sisters frowned faintly in harmony, honestly considering his comment. The young woman to the left nodded. "Yes. Clams. But also pleasure."

"Ah." From the expression on his face it was clear that Eric considered clams a much better suggestion.

"Excuse me, Lahtay..." Crispin had to change her point of focus very rapidly from the sister in the middle to the sister on the left who politely said, "Yes, Crispin?"

"If you love the sea so much, then why did you leave the village? And why live here, in the middle of nowhere?"

Another indefinable glance shared between the sisters before Lahtay spoke. "There was an incident between myself and some of the older fishermen. We were not welcomed there after that."

The dark knight shifted a little in her seat, suddenly alert. "What sort of incident?"

"The personal sort." For the first time the excessively well-mannered sisters were grim and unforthcoming. "We do not speak of it."

A quick look passed between Eric and Crispin. Clearing her throat the knight tried to soothe the suddenly brooding siblings. "I apologise. It's of course none of my business, and obviously upsetting for you to talk about. I was thoughtless."

That seemed to do it. Immediately all three pretty faces were smiling again. A moment of benign friendliness passed before Eric straightened in his chair, exuding manly chivalry and interest. "So what is it that you do on this land?"

"We farm." The middle sister. "... Mostly apples," Lahtay, sitting on the left. "... and a few vegetables," from the sister on the right.

"That's nice." Crispin smiled encouragingly.

The sister to the right patted her middle sibling's knee. "Souflay, shall we finish with our embroidery?"

"Definitely." Souflay nodded graciously at her guests. "That is if you do not mind?"

"Of course not." Eric was as gracious as ever.

Lahtay floated up and disappeared to the back room, returning with three frames and a satchel full of threads. The pieces they were working on were beautiful already, three oddly identical images of intensely blue waves crashing around a large rock on which a solitary redheaded figure stood with her arms raised as a ship approached her - and a jagged coastline. Arranging the material over their knees demurely the three sisters lifted their needles at once, working in perfect accord. With a slight frown Eric studied the upside-down images, wondering what it was about them that had caught his attention in the first place. He was still examining them

uncomprehendingly when Biday cleared her throat. "Would you mind if we sing as we work? It is our custom."

Eric's eyebrows suddenly shot into his hairline. "I don't ... "

"Please do. We would be most pleased," Crispin interrupted unintentionally.

As three voices began to sing in a melancholic and haunting harmony the prince sighed, "... think that would be wise."

Chapter Thirteen:

Helena had had just about enough of Philip's erratic behaviour. He had popped his head into the wagon once or twice to ask about her general well being, but all traces of the mannerly and eloquent young man who had attracted her attention was gone. Now, instead, he was self-absorbed and terse. Honest enough to admit that self-absorption was one of her own poorer qualities, the princess did not actually particularly admire it in anybody else.

To think that this is what I left my adventure and my knight for.

My knight?

*Pfft. Well, she rescued **me**, so she's more my knight than anybody else's.*

Harmony had abandoned her noisy facial exercises after a rather graphic threat from Helena concerning her bodily orifices and a wooden cutout of a cow. Now, instead, she was repeating the phrase "He's just a jester from Queen Quack's court" incessantly. It was still annoying, but on a comparative level it scored much higher than sudden blaring emissions.

Knitting her fingers together over her drawn-up knees Helena sighed. Her decision had been a stupid one. This she was prepared to admit to herself - though not to anybody else unless under threat of torture. Perhaps she could ask Philip to take her back to the town. But who was to say that Crispin would still be there? She had deserted the knight without as much as a word. *But that's what she wanted me to do*, the sneaky part of her mind immediately reminded her. *Yes, that's all fine and well, but now I've gone and gotten myself into a situation I want to get out of, and she's the only one I know who would be able to do that.* That was the more rational part, even surprising itself with its sudden utilization. With another sigh Helena leaned her head back and rested it against the wooden frame behind her.

"He's just a jester from Queen Quack's court. He's just a jester from Queen Quack's court. He's chester ... bother... He's just a jester from Queen Quack's qua... He just... bugger..."

The princess was about to make a very unladylike comment when her character was saved by the appearance of the director of the troupe. Master Gaites was a peculiar-looking little man with a black moustache that stuck out past his ruddy cheeks in two convoluted twirls. His black eyebrows arched profusely over small slanted eyes of an indeterminable colour. Festooned in his

usual gaudy top hat, which seemed to be taller than the norm and more ludicrous for the fact that he was so short, he popped his head through the sail into the wagon with a rigid toothy smile on his face.

"My deah."

Displaying a hand adorned with large ornamental rings he mopped his forehead with a fancy handkerchief before he tucked it back into his sleeve. "I juzt wanted to tell yu zat I am so happy to be havink yu here wiz us." His accent was unidentifiable to Helena and seemed to be mostly invented (and fluctuating, at that). "Ven ve get to Flagstavv yu must vatch de ... stop bowncing, yu goddamned hurse... shauw and begin to lern Harmony's parts, yu understand? After zat ve stop for a vhile before Lucarte, zen ve begin to practize. Yu understand?"

Sorely tempted to say no just for the sake of it, Helena nodded earnestly. The little man fished the handkerchief out of his sleeve again and mopped his forehead. "Gut. Grand. In ze meantime lern what does ... ay despize yu, yu stinky beast! ... lern what does Harmony, yu must vatch de practize of the elements of ze craft, yu understand?"

Having actually lost him this time, Helena plastered her best beaming smile on her face, hoping it would do the trick. It did. With a self-satisfied nod he pulled his head back, almost dislodging his hat before he held it on his head with a few more choice remarks to his steed. "Gut. Gut. Gutbye for now, Elinor."

Whether it was miscomprehension or his accent she did not know, but it seemed a better choice to let him go away than it did to correct him.

"He's just a jester from Queen Quack's court. He's jester jester ... bloody mary... He's just a jester from Queen Quack's court. Horse lorry donkey cart. Horse lorry donkey cart. Horse lolly lonky... buggerit... Horse lorry donkey cart."

Helena heaved a sigh and turned to the terrifyingly concentrating young blonde. "Harmony? Can I teach you a very good song?"

After a good few repetitions of the song "The Duchess and her powder puff", especially the particularly inventive fifth verse, the feeling of the wagon jerking to a halt was a welcome one. Popping her head through the sail Helena peeked around the wagon to where most of the men had dismounted and were now unfurling and setting up small tents. Philip was engaged in making a large fire, assisted by one of the extremely short men who were usually cast in the roles of children or otherworldly creatures. This specific one was hauling a log almost equalling his own length towards the crouching young man with the scowl furrowing his brow. Sniffing disdainfully towards him even though he was too far away, and too busy, to notice, Helena climbed from the back of the wagon as gracefully as she could, considering her massive dress, and stood waiting for the still-singing Harmony to join her.

Apparently ranking as mere women amongst these characters had its advantages, as they were expected to do very little apart from the dishing up of stew, ladling it into wooden bowls and

passing it to the men who waited in line with apathetic boredom. When everybody had been served they took their seats on low cushions around the large bonfire that had been lit, and tucked into a meal that was passable, if not exactly bordering on brilliance. During the meal one of the players, a swarthy villainous-looking man with a booming voice, told a true story so raucous and impossibly rude that the princess considered covering her ears - and she would have, had it not also been uproariously funny. She was still giggling silently when Harmony pumped her in the ribs with an elbow enthusiastically, causing her to slap herself in the face smartly with the sturdy wooden spoon. Impervious to the muffled laughter that this produced, the pretty blonde player clapped her hands enthusiastically. "Oh! Helena knows the best songs! Will you teach them the one that we sang?"

Blushing a little at the sudden attention the princess laid her bowl to one side and stood. "All right."

It began fairly obedient and harmonious, wandered into pure merriment and enthusiasm, and then rapidly degenerated into improvised lines and those unexpected solo performances that sounded better when you'd been drinking. After the last round of singing, during which one of the participants tried to slap Harmony on the shoulder good-naturedly and ended up sprawling face-first into a tree (his aim was off by several yards) general consensus was reached that the night had been a tremendous success, but that it would be much too dangerous to continue, and that therefore everybody just needed to go to sleep right away.

Somewhere during the festivities Helena had woken up the sneaky rationalising part of her brain to reassure her. *See, this isn't bad. It's quite pleasant, actually.*

Only because you keep thinking it's only until Crispin comes back for you.

*But Crispin's not coming. Crispin thinks I **wanted** to go, and now Crispin will **let** me go.*

"**How** is that supposed to reassure me?" Catching sight of Harmony's wide eyes on the other side of the extremely small snug tent Helena waved a hand apologetically. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was talking to myself."

"That's all right." The willowy blonde sank down onto her low stuffed mattress. "I do that too at times. Hello, Harmony, are you having a pleasant day? Why, yes, thank you for asking. Like that, you see?"

"Um." Turning her back on the player Helena raised one eyebrow. "Ooooookay. Have you set eyes on Philip this evening? I don't recall seeing him at all."

"No, I didn't either. He sleeps in the green wagon at night."

"Oh. Thank you. I'm just going to chat to him for a moment." Ignoring the meaningful little grin she stepped out and tiptoed quietly over to the green wagon that stood at the outskirts of the low-pitched tents. In lieu of a door to knock on for civility's sake she took hold of the heavy material and gave it a good shake. Immediately Philip's tousled head appeared.

"Yes? Oh, hullo, Helena." He seemed dazed, as though he had already been asleep.

"Oh, I am sorry if I've woken you, Philip. I just wanted to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"If I wanted to go back to town, and to Crispin, would you take me back tomorrow?"

The scowl that shot across his forehead was instant and ominous. "What? Don't be stupid, girl." Feeling the air around him cool considerably he tried to fix his very wrong response. "I apologise, Helena; what I *meant* to say was that we have an important show in Flagstaff and I can't bow out now - that would be extremely insensitive to Master Gaites." He scratched his scruffy head thoughtfully, though it seemed to the princess to be a rather calculated gesture. "When we have finished that show, and if you still feel inclined to return to ... Crispin," his voice gained a noticeable edge, "then I will escort you myself. I do only have your best interests at heart, you realise?"

"But of course." Smiling sweetly Helena nodded. "That's only fair. Thank you, Philip, and sleep well."

"And you, Helena." He pulled his head back into the wagon and the princess could have sworn that she heard the sound of a woman's soft laughter. Shaking her blonde head she walked back to her tent. If he had been paying attention at all he would have known that a complacent Helena was a dangerous one, she mused. Her sickly-sweet smile and mental curtseying would definitely not have fooled Crispin.

When she returned to her tent Harmony was already snoring lightly, her slightly upturned nose hoisting her curving top lip into the air with each inhalation. With a soft chuckle to herself Helena slid into the low pallet and pulled the blanket over her body.

"Hey."

"Sngghhh."

"*Hey*."

"Sngghhhh-gh."

"**HEY.**"

"Snggh-hha? Whassa?" Finally more or less awake, Harmony pried her eyes open to the lovely sight of an appallingly handsome blonde man sticking his head around the entrance of her tent. From the light of the lantern that was, oddly, still burning, she could clearly see the strained frown that sat prominently above his perfectly arched eyebrows.

"Hello?"

Scrambling up quickly Harmony drew her body into a small bundle and pulled the blanket up to her chin. "Please. Please, I beg of you, I'll do whatever you want, but don't hurt me!"

He took a very short moment to process this before he shook his head impatiently. "I'm not going to *do* anything to you, woman!"

"Nothing at all?" It came out sounding disappointingly... well, disappointing.

"Nothing at all." He withdrew his head for a moment to glance left and right before he poked it back into the tent. "Look, I apologise for my unwelcome entrance," noting a risqué rising comment that he would have been bound to make himself he forged on, "but I'm looking for a friend of mine. Yea high, blonde, green eyes..."

"You're looking for *Helena*?" There was definite bewilderment in Harmony's tone.

The blonde man shook his head enthusiastically, causing a blonde lock to fall artfully over one eye. "Yes, yes, Helena. Have you seen her?"

"Why, she's right..." but as the blonde player pointed towards the mattress she suddenly realised that it was empty, "there. Oh."

"Drat." The blonde man eyed the mattress tetchily. "Are those her bags?"

"Yes." Harmony nodded. "Although... it looks like she's taken one of them with her."

"A HA." Striding in he seized the bags unceremoniously and tramped right out again. Harmony was just about to lower the demurely clasped blanket when his head appeared again. "Oh, and by the way, thank you very much. Enjoy your night." And then, finally, he was gone.

"Some girls have all the good fortune," she muttered as she slid down into bed and pulled the blanket over her shoulders again.

"Pssst."

"Sngh."

"PssssssssT."

"Sngh?"

"**Harmony.**" Some whispers were so loud that you couldn't possibly ignore them. It felt as though Harmony had just fallen asleep again, and with a confused grimace she wrenched open her eyes. It was still dark, with the lantern she had forgotten to snuff (again) throwing impressive shadows against the sides of the tent. Amongst those shadows Philip's handsome face, thrust into the tent, seemed dramatically appropriate. Impatiently he rustled the material clutched in his white-knuckled fingers. "Harmony."

"Yes, Philip?" There was a slightly irritated edge to her voice but he didn't notice, choosing to glare at her broodingly instead.

"Where is Helena?"

Aggravated, she sat up and folded her arms. "I do... not... know. All right? Not a notion, not an idea. What does everybody want with Helena in the middle of the night at any rate?"

"Everybody?" His brown eyebrows drew together furiously above his nose. "Who else?"

"It is probably not my business, Philip..."

"WHO ELSE?"

At his booming tone she cringed (and found to her absolute bemusement that she was quite enthralled by the ferocity of it all). "Please, Philip! You're going to harm yourself - or worse, me."

Tossing his head arrogantly he glowered at her. "Oh, calm yourself. I'm not going to do anything to you."

"Nothing?" She raised her eyebrows hopefully.

"Not a thing. Now tell me!"

Gathering her blanket about her Harmony pursed her lips irritably. "I really can't say exactly how long ago, but not long before you, a man came in here and asked for Helena. When she was nowhere to be found he ran out."

"A man, you say." He let loose a crashing roar. "*Crispin!*" Twirling on his heels he stormed away from the tent, leaving a dishevelled Harmony with her blanket drawn up to her chin.

"Well." She tucked herself in petulantly and this time remembered to blow out the lantern's flame. From the darkness came a mutter. "And what, exactly, may I ask, is wrong with **me**?"

Chapter Fourteen:

Due to Helena's utter lack of directional skills Eric had tracked her down easily as she wandered firmly and directly back towards the campsite, and attempting to head her off in the dark had produced a flurry of imaginative threats before he could identify himself. Now the princess was firmly ensconced in front of Eric on his horse as they galloped away from the players' camp.

"Why in the world did you run off, Helena?" His breath was warm on her ear.

"You were there, Eric. Don't you remember that she said she **wanted** me to go?"

She could feel his head shaking behind her. "No, Helena, I remember her asking you *why* you hadn't gone. As badly as she handled it - and my goodness, she really managed to mess up that one - I don't think that she meant to tell you to leave."

"She didn't?"

"No." He shook his head again, this time to dislodge the blonde lock that kept falling into his eyes. "But what I actually meant earlier is: why did you run away from the players?"

"Oh, that." She shrugged nonchalantly. "I thought it was what I wanted, and it wasn't."

"Ah. So you leaving was your own choice."

"Of course. What else?" She thought about tossing her hair imperiously and then rejected it as a bad idea. In order for the prince not to drop her in alarm at the sudden appearance of blonde hair other than his own in his eyes, she would have to warn him in advance of the imminent head toss, and to do that would completely ruin the effect. Instead she settled for squaring her shoulders regally and hoped that as a noble he would instinctively understand her meaning. They rode for a good distance before something suddenly occurred to her.

"Eric?"

"Hmm?"

"Where is Crispin? Why isn't she here? Too noble to come and be suitably remorseful herself, is she?"

"Well." He cleared his throat. "Crispin is actually in a spot of trouble right now."

"What?" She snapped her head back and tried to look at him. "What's happened? Is she all right?"

"For the moment."

"Well, out with it!" Helena was losing her patience at an alarming rate. "You knightly types are all the same, aren't you? Unforthcoming to a fault. Don't force me to ask questions, Eric, just offer the information, for Thyurus the Bald's sake!"

"I knew him, you know. Though he truthfully didn't have hair on his head, it was marvelously prolific on the rest of his b... "

"Eric!" The high-pitched snarl was punctuated by a smart slap to the back of his hand.

"All right, all right." She could actually hear the pout (purely through experience). "She has been captured. No, not captured, really. Enslaved."

"By whom?" Helena could barely sit still. In her agitation she slapped Eric's hand again, causing him to let loose a shriek and cover one hand churlishly with the other.

"Will you stop doing that? Crispin's been enslaved by Sirens."

"Sirens?" Helena's nose wrinkled.

"Yes. Sirens. They are sea nymphs who tempt sailors to their dea..."

"I *know* what Sirens are. **Sea** nymphs. We're nowhere near a sea, Eric."

Eric shook his head helplessly. "Don't ask me how. I don't even understand it myself." He heaved a sigh that spoke of frustration, powerlessness and the energy senselessly wasted to keep an actively moving princess on the back of a horse. "Yesterday," casting an eye at the dark sky, "well, I would presume yesterday, Crispin and I left town to come looking for you..."

"Really? Was she bothered that I'd gone?"

"Yes and yes. At any rate, somewhere around sunset we were searching for a good spot to camp, and found a farmhouse that seemed ... "

"But I didn't see any such place... Assuming that you took the main road, of course?"

"Yes, we took the main road, but no, then we wandered off." It was very likely from the sound of his voice that the blonde man was speaking through gritted teeth. "At any rate. The three sisters who live in the house offered us a place for the night, which we accepted."

"Why would Cri ..."?

"Will you just let me tell the story?! I am trying my best to be forthcoming and you're thwarting me all over the place!" Clearing his throat in frustration the prince continued. "At **any** rate. We accepted their offer - and then they asked if we'd mind if they sang as they embroidered."

"It would have been silly to accept that, considering that they're Sirens..." It was very softly said in deference to Eric's recent outburst, but phrased with that exasperating condescending lilt at the end of the sentence. Pinching his lips together he opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and wrinkled his nose. Opening his mouth again to speak he paused, then closed it and bit his own tongue for a reasonably painful amount of time. It didn't help.

"We didn't **KNOW** they were Sirens! How could we have known?! As you yourself said, they were nowhere near the sea - and it's not as if they carry around a wooden name placard like Thisby the Almost Martyr!"

"All right, no need to have a seizure. Calm down." Patting one trembling hand comfortingly Helena wondered whether the Sirens had affected his mental state. That brought up an interesting question. "Eric, if Crispin's in no state to fetch help, then why are *you*?"

"Why am I what?"

Definitely affected. "Why are you in a state to fetch help?"

"Oh." He scratched his stubbly chin thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. Their singing was very agreeable and harmonious and all that, but while I was simply listening with enjoyment Crispin seemed positively ... intoxicated. At the end of it she sat there with this vague smile on her face, and when the Sirens told her to go to their room, she went without saying a word to the contrary."

"Now that is *very* unlike her."

"Very. I called her, but she just smiled at me over her shoulder and left."

"Too much smiling. Also very unlike her." The princess pondered a world in which the knight smiled profusely, and discarded the thought with a shudder as extremely ... well ... wrong.

"Eric, what's your plan?"

"It goes like this: We know that I am, for mysterious reasons, unreceptive to their singing. So - I distract them, and while I am doing that you sneak in and bring round Crispin."

"What if she doesn't want to be brought round?"

"Then smack her about a little! I don't know..." The prince sighed dejectedly. "I don't understand how this happened."

Rubbing his wrist gently Helena tried to comfort him. "Eric, it wasn't your fault."

"Yes it was. I knew who they were and I couldn't stop them."

"But you will now." The princess nodded decisively. "Yes. You distract them, and I'll find Crispin."

They dismounted a good distance away and tethered the horse to a nearby shrub (the horse didn't mind; in fact, the only one who minded was the shrub), stealing up to the building with an approximation of stealth. The sun was on its way to rising and let rays of faint light through the trees. Even with the clearness of daylight the house seemed a little strange, as if its angles weren't meant for human consumption. Crouched behind an accommodating bush Helena peered over the leaves, trying to spot movement in the skew window frames. There was none. Leaning towards Eric, who was stooped next to her elegantly, she began to whisper urgently, making all sorts of interesting but quite pointless gestures as she did so.

"Do you see" pointing at her own eyes with two fingers, "the window to the side" left hand up, almost slapping Eric's face as it snapped into position vertically, "with the wooden trough under it?" Hands gesturing as if to tuck in sheets. With a fascinated frown and slightly narrowed eyes Eric studied her hands intently, missing the question mark un-indicated by any motions. One of the hands slapped him smartly on the thigh. "Eric!"

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry, please continue."

"You" pointing at his chest, "are going to go into the house and distract the sisters." At the word 'distract' she waved her hands over her ears in an incredibly strange motion. "I" pointing at her own bosom, "am going to... Eric, are you listening?"

Tearing his eyes away from her hands he glanced up at her in blank fascination. "Yes, yes, I am, but Helena... What exactly are you doing with your hands??"

He couldn't help but demonstrate with a silly little motion of his own, both hands clawing the air waggishly. Eyeing his gesture with chilly disapproval Helena tried to lower her hands unobtrusively, an action made more difficult by the fact that they were at that point doing something odd in the air all by themselves. "I thought you knights had some type of non-verbal communication during times of ... you know, silence and menace and ... silence."

"Erm," the prince by now had also lowered his hands, "no. Did Crispin tell you that?"

"No. I must have read it in a book." The last bit was pure mumble. "Fine. Let's get on with it, shall we? You distract, I climb through the window and find Crispin, when all is done I hoot like an owl and you run like the wind."

"What type of owl?"

"What?"

"What type of owl? There are plenty of different owls."

Helena actually pondered the wisdom of it before she realised that she shouldn't have. "Any type of owl! If we go on like this we'll still be sitting here under this bush as the sun goes down!"

"All right." Eric shrugged. "Let me hear your owl sound."

The princess cleared her throat and formed her lips into a pout that the prince actually found rather adorable. "Hoo hoo?"

"Good enough. If it were a few decibels deeper it would be a barn owl..."

"Good enough." And with surprisingly strong arms Helena shoved him unceremoniously onto the lawn.

Climbing onto what seemed to be half a barrel (and cursing her capacious skirts all the way) Helena popped her head up rapidly to consider the possibility of danger, but even as she ducked back down she realised that there was nobody to be seen in the room. Raising her head cautiously she peered into the window again. A small bed stood in one corner against the wall, a beautiful old washbasin behind the door, and a large oval mirror in the other corner, but there was no human inhabitant (or otherwise) anywhere. When a sudden ruckus broke out in another

part of the house Helena almost lost her footing and tumbled down, managing by sheer luck to wrap her arms over the sill and pull herself up again. It was Eric's voice, and a distraction he was most definitely providing. To Helena's ear it sounded much like a little song she learnt as a child and was subsequently forbidden ever to sing again (that time not so much for the vocabulary as for the incessant repeat of the inexcusably irritating chorus). Smiling to herself she gathered her skirts into a manageable bundle of sorts, and proceeded to climb through the window into the room with very little dignity.

"Oh, for Hermes' sake, stop!" a voice pleaded from somewhere outside, and Helena almost felt sorry for whoever was being subjected to that torture. It wasn't that Eric had an unpleasant voice - on the contrary, his singing voice was every bit as light and well-modulated as his speaking voice - but more that he had absolutely no respect for tones, keys, or anything of the sort.

The floorboards creaked ominously, as they always did in these kinds of places. Tiptoeing to the door Helena opened it a crack and peered out. There was nobody in the front room, and with a gentle nudge she opened the door and slipped out, heading for the door that she'd caught sight of to her right. A peek inside told her that it was the kitchen, and empty at that. Turning dejectedly on her heels she realised that there was one more door to the far left that she'd missed coming from the first room. Sneaking towards it -

"Please! I beg of you, do not start... again..." *That's what you get for stealing Crispin. Heh.*

- she grasped the brass door handle and turned it as softly as possible, pushing open the door with the flat of her hands slowly. The first thing one noticed about the room was that it was much bigger on the inside than the outside, though how that was possible was beyond Helena's grasp. A large window (its frames perfectly straight on this side) let in a beam of light, which fell, as fate would have it, on Crispin's prone form. She lay in the centre of a massive bed, her dark hair spread quite beatifically about her serene face.

"Crispin?"

It was a whisper that immediately got a result. The dark knight sat bolt upright, a pleasant (and totally out of place) smile stretched over her lips, and though she looked right at Helena her blue eyes were large and blank. "Souflay? Lahtay? Biday?"

"Eh?"

A light went out in the knight's eyes. "Oh. It's only you." Heaving a sigh she collapsed backwards onto the bed and studied the ceiling conscientiously. The princess glanced up quickly, but there was absolutely nothing to be seen. Frowning, she stepped closer to the bed and poked the knight's shoulder. Shooting a quick glance at her from the corner of disinterested eyes Crispin yawned and went back to studying the ceiling.

"What do you mean it's only me? I came a long way to get here, I'll have you know." Folding her arms imperiously came naturally, and this time it was actually appropriate too.

Crispin gave her another uninterested glance. "Shall I call the mistresses?"

"No, no." Helena waved her hands around vaguely. "It wasn't **that** long a way. Lie back, relax. What exactly do they have you doing here, Crispin?"

"Oh," the dark knight suddenly bounced up onto her haunches, animated, "I started a small tapestry. Would you like to see it?"

"No!" It was the reaction of someone who had just had something unspeakably repulsive suggested to them. "Most definitely not! Unless..." the princess paused, "... unless it's of blood and dragons and fighting. Please tell me that it is?"

"Well, hardly. It's of pretty flowers." Crispin smiled in a decidedly un-Crispin fashion.

Repressing a shudder Helena looked around the room, trying to figure out some kind of way to get the knight out of the house. A candelabrum stood in one corner, two of the three candles still burning, and a trail of congealing wax had dripped onto the beautiful little cabinet beneath it. *Perhaps I can smack her with the candlesticks.* "So, Crispin, I'm told that your mistresses sing delightfully?" It was more to keep the knight occupied while she searched for an exit, but it was the right topic. Abruptly Crispin rose to her feet on the unsteady mattress, standing perilously in front of the large open window. Stretching her arms out she made a snuffling sound that reminded Helena of Toby when he was eating an apple.

"Oh, yes! Their singing is extraordinarily beautiful!"

"Crispin, get down from there. You're going to hurt yourself." The blonde woman shot a scolding glance at the figure on the bed. "Besides, though I'm sure they have lovely voices and harmony and whatever else, I'll wager that they don't know the moustache song. So there."

"Where?" Crispin continued to stand on the bed, though her posture was a little more confused now. "I am not sure whether they sang about moustaches, but they do have this one song that's exquisite: it tells the tale of a young woman who loses her lover and walks into the ocean as penite..."

"Yeah, yeah." Interrupting quite rudely Helena waved her hands about. "Sirens and all that. Well, you know what? I am very musical myself, even though you've never even bothered to acknowledge it. You exasperate me even when you're not yourself, Crispin, you really do." And without a second thought she launched into her favourite song.

If she'd kept her eyes on Crispin she would have seen her facial expression change slowly: from pleasant vague beaming, to politely smiling, to rounded lips that formed a silent "o", and then the sound of air being driven from her lungs much too forcefully. Doubling over intensely the knight clutched her midriff and stumbled backwards, managing to fall neatly through the window behind her.

Helena was hefting the candelabra in one hand, gauging its usefulness as a weapon, when the explosion of air alerted her to impending disaster. Spinning around with the silver object held up in defence she was just in time to see Crispin's feet disappear from the window. Darting to the window Helena stuck out her blonde head. Crispin was lying full-length on the ground outside, her hands still cradling her stomach and her blue eyes blinking rapidly - but lucidly - at the sky over her.

"Ow."

"Crispin? Are you all right? Did you break anything?"

The knight lifted her head slightly, her eyes widening at the sight of the princess leaning from the window. "Helena?" One hand crept towards her temple. "Where've you been? We've been trying to... Oh, I have such a headache."

The princess disappeared from the window and then re-emerged with something clutched in one hand. Climbing through the window with a little more restraint than Crispin had, she landed lightly at the knight's feet and scurried over, wrapping a hand around the other woman's upper arm. "Can you walk?"

Pushing herself up into a sitting, and then standing, position, the knight rubbed her head again. "What happened?"

Apart from the headache she seemed relatively solid. Taking advantage of her slightly dazed state Helena reached up and pressed two soft wax pellets into Crispin's ears. She had peeled them off the candelabra before she'd left the room, and worked them into a supple state in her hand. It took a moment for Crispin to react.

"Hey! What did you do?"

Taking her hand Helena began to lead her towards the edge of the house, where they would sneak off and disappear into the bushes. Hopefully. "They're so the Sirens can't get you again."

"WHAT?"

"Shhh!" For added effect she looked back and placed her finger over her lips, then beckoned forward with her hand.

"WHERE ARE WE GOING?"

Turning, she slapped a hand over Crispin's mouth and glared at her until the dark woman yielded and nodded. Then, placing her feet as carefully as possible, she led the knight towards the barn. Saddling up Toby quietly they led him outside, veering off to the foliage on the right and stepping through it to disappear between the bushes. When they were a good distance away they began to circle the building, Helena trying to get into a position from which she could survey the porch. Apparently the Sirens had gone back indoors, Eric with them, and whatever he had been

doing to distract them - Helena sincerely hoped that it was not still that song; it could do serious damage to any individual - had worked perfectly.

Passing Toby's reins to Crispin Helena mouthed "you get on him" while making pointed gestures towards the knight and the horse, until Crispin seemed to get the idea and mounted. Then, indicating that the knight should wait for her, Helena turned and began to trudge through the small bushes. "Now just to get Eric's horse."

The stallion wasn't where she had left him, and with a puzzled frown she turned back to be greeted by the sight of the missing animal right behind her. But the fellow holding onto his reins was definitely not Eric. Disbelief coloured her voice.

"Philip?"

Chapter Fifteen:

It was most definitely Philip, but only the exterior supported that detail. The once pleasant and good-looking young man had a dark blaze in his eyes and a sarcastic half-smile on his lips that almost distorted him physically.

"Not what you were expecting?" His voice was acidic, a far cry from what it had been. Stepping closer he let go of the horse's reins. "Helena, Helena, Helena. I worked so hard to find you, and then you ran away from me. How rude." He took one small step closer. "And all of that for an ill-tempered knight who has no interest in you beyond a reward." And another small step. "What a shame." He now stood right in front of her; his head tilted a little as he stared down at her. "I, as you will no doubt respond, am not much better, but at least I won you with my character."

She should have been frightened, but that reaction didn't come naturally to Helena. Instead, what she felt was overwhelming anger. "You won me with a character that was a lie, Philip! How much is that worth? Nothing! Crispin may not have been as nice as you were at first, but at least there was some *reliability* in that!"

"Oh please." Philip shook his dark head with scorn. "Reliability is for the weak." Trailing one hand up her arm he grinned as she yanked the limb away. "Nevertheless, here I am, and where exactly is your knight? Nowhere to be found. Now don't kick and fuss, Helena. I'll admit that I do love it, but it does waste time." With that he wrapped one hand around her upper arm and began to stride back through the bushes. She was surprisingly obedient (and one would have thought he'd learnt his lesson about that) but he seemed ignorant as he paced right towards Crispin, who was sitting on her horse in silent meditation. She couldn't hear anything with the wax in her ears, but quiet reflection necessitated a lot of pensive looking about - if only to show off one's skilled pensiveness - and it was on one of those arcs through the undergrowth that her sharp eyes caught a glimpse of the dark man dragging the princess by her arm without ceremony. Sliding her sword from its scabbard she slipped from Toby's back and crept down into the foliage, moving to intercept him as quietly as her temporary deafness would allow.

Though Crispin and Helena had kept to the undergrowth and bushes, Philip had no such compunction. Not knowing that they were trying to hide he dismissed the foliage as unnecessarily bothersome and stepped out into the yard, dragging his obedient captive with him. It was right there that he ran into an intimidating woman, her dark hair streaming behind her in the slight breeze and her bright blue eyes as cool as steel. Considerably taller than him and hefting a longsword with deceptive ease in one hand, she simply stepped from a bush and right into his way.

"HEY."

It was much louder than it needed to be. Blinking in surprise he opened his mouth once and closed it, then let out a loud chortle. "Oh, this is lovely, Helena - did you bring a friend?"

Crispin could not tell what he was saying, but the laugh needed no explanation. She thought for a moment of pulling the blasted plugs out of her ears, but then decided with unusual foresight that the princess had obviously had her reasons. Swinging the sword loosely in her hand she looked him up and down, making sure to be as offensive as possible. Then her gaze slipped to the small blonde woman whose arm he was claspng in his fist.

"HELENA? WHO'S THIS?"

Before the princess could open her mouth Philip interrupted, his top lip in a skew sneer. "I am the man who's walking out of here with this woman, that's who."

For Crispin, who was trying hard to read his lips, the sneer just added difficulty to a sentence that seemed much too long to be a name in the first place - unless he was adding titles and triple-barrel surnames, in which case she would cut his head off simply for behaving like an ass. Settling for the less aggressive option as a start she furrowed her brow.

"WHO?"

Throwing his head back Philip began to hoot with laughter. "Who? Who?" he mocked her.

The result was a good measure of chaos.

A handsome blonde man exploded from the front door of the dilapidated property they were standing in front of and sprinted towards them, his legs pumping up and down frantically as he glanced over his shoulder. "Helena? You got her?!" Behind him three frail young women erupted from the doorway and began to ... well, waft... down the stairs, their voices raised in evident fury. They were all speaking in a singsong voice, seeming to finish each other's sentences and start them all at the same time. As Eric approached at a speed and noticed the strange situation, his eyes widened and he attempted to come to a stop, only succeeding once he was within two arms' lengths of the dark man who held Helena by one arm. The three sisters were wafting closer, but when they noticed that Crispin was a very vigorous part of the group they drifted sullenly together at the edge of the gathering, their voices muffled and soft as they consulted.

Eyeing the blonde man who had just skidded to a halt in front of him with contempt, Philip switched Helena over to his other hand and drew his sword. "Crispin. At last."

"Me?" Eric frowned in confusion. "No, there must be some sort of misunderstanding... "

"Ah. Of course you won't fight for her. Your reputation precedes you." With that Philip lifted his sword and pointed it at Eric, who was trying furtively to step backwards. "But I will gut you like the coward you are, Crispin."

"Me?" It was a repeat, but Eric felt that it was a proper and essential word for the situation. "As I said, there must be some confusion. I'm not Crispin... "

"You would bow out of it to save your gutless pathetic self, wouldn't you, Crispin?" Philip made a token slash in the air, arresting his motion rather clumsily as Helena tapped the hand holding her. "What?"

"He's telling the truth." She shrugged. "He isn't Crispin."

"What?!" It was a dramatic roar. "Where is he, then?"

"There." With an angelic expression Helena pointed at the dark woman who was now swinging her sword in lazy arcs. Turning his head Philip glared at the knight.

"Where? All I see is this woman..." Veering his sword around he pointed it in Crispin's direction, or intended to. Instead he found himself on the receiving end of an extremely powerful blow that took his own sword right out of his hands.

"HELLO." Crispin presented him with a lovely even white smile and stuck the point of her sword into the ground, propping her hands loosely on the hilt. "GET YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF HELENA."

Immediately he obeyed, though this had more to do with the fact that the princess was currently worth much less in his hands than his fallen sword. Pushing Helena forward into the knight he used the moment of confusion to scramble on the ground for his sword, grasping it and almost driving it straight through Helena before Crispin pushed her roughly into Eric's arms and out of harm's way.

What was so unnerving about Crispin was not that she had turned out to be a woman, or that her blue eyes were so incredibly blue and calculating, or that she handled her sword in a manner obviously superior to his own - it was a very disturbing combination of the three. Swinging his sword experimentally he performed a rather tricky exercise; to his indignation she repeated his movements and added an insulting little decorative twirl to the end. With a growl he threw himself at her and began to fight in earnest, his fury growing as he realised that her movements were still relaxed and peaceful whilst he was slashing about wildly.

Crispin was working very slowly on infuriating her opponent rather than attacking him. She had already judged his style as a form of stage fighting; it was functional, but still no opponent for the genuine article. Instead of attacking she darted between his furious blows to deliver stinging replies of her own, lighter and faster than his own and driving him into a pure frenzy. When his movements began to slow down somewhat she stepped back and rested her sword on the ground, to his great aggravation.

"JUST TURN AROUND AND WALK AWAY."

"No!" It was a hysterical screech, backed by blind rage. "And stop yelling at me!" Lifting his sword he charged forward, finding himself immediately flat on his stomach with a foot in the small of his back. The very sharp point of a sword came to rest on the ground a bare breath from his eyes.

"TURN AROUND. AND WALK AWAY."

At that point the natural coward in him came to the fore quickly and nodded enthusiastically. He was not going to win a battle with this ... spectre, for obviously she couldn't be an ordinary woman. Whatever reward was attached to the princess surely wasn't worth this, was it?

At the movement from his head Crispin lifted her foot off him and dragged him upward by the back of his shirt, giving the front a rather too firm dusting for good measure. "THERE. AND DON'T DRAG WOMEN AROUND AS IF THEY'RE BAGS OF FRUIT IN THE FUTURE."

"Fine. Fine." Philip held his hands up to fend off her hands. "I'll just go, shall I?" Turning he strode past Eric, who didn't realise the danger until it was upon him. Grabbing the unsuspecting princess suddenly by the arm Philip pivoted her into his grip and slid a dagger from his belt, resting it lightly against her neck. "Now who's going to turn around and walk away, huh?" Crispin stood helplessly much too far away, her free hand spread in mute entreaty. The brown-haired man grinned maniacally. "She is mine. You hear me? She ..."

It was odd how the singing started so softly that it only became audible after it had weaved its spell. Philip's eyes glassed over once before he shook his head to clear it, lightly nicking Helena's neck with the motion. "... she is...", " he started again before his dark eyes turned vague and an insipid little smile stretched across his features.

Helena would have slapped her hands over her ears immediately when she noticed the sisters opening their mouths in unison, but the blade pressed tightly to her neck persuaded her otherwise. Wrinkling her nose and closing her eyes in anticipation she was rather surprised not to feel any effects.

"Put down the dagger." It was said by the middle sister, her voice as soothing as honey. Without a word Philip dropped the dagger at his own feet and stood smiling at the sisters as Eric moved in quietly and pulled Helena away from him. The sisters studied the blonde man with a regretful expression.

"It is you we truly wanted," the right-hand sister confided. The one on the left shrugged, "but our powers are much weaker this far from the shore. Even our calling rock does not help." The sister in the middle nodded. "We cannot enchant the tone-deaf." They glanced over to the smiling man who stood waiting for commands. "If it is all the same to you," the middle sister spoke, "we will keep this one," the sister on the left chimed in, "and leave you be."

"Most definitely." Helena nodded. "Help yourself."

"And you are of course welcome to stay the night again." The sisters spoke in unison.

With a nervous smile Eric put his hand on Helena's shoulder and nudged her towards Crispin, walking backwards as he spoke. "No, no. Thank you, but no. Enjoy your person. I mean day." Each taking an uncomprehending Crispin by the wrist, they propelled her right back into the bushes where Toby and Eric's horse grazed placidly. Sheathing her sword and mounting her stallion, Crispin held out a hand to Helena, who let herself be lifted onto the horse without a word. Settling the princess in front of her the knight took a hold of the reins and then leaned forward.

"WHAT JUST HAPPENED?"

Chapter Sixteen:

"I just don't understand how you could just let him go like that!" Helena picked irritably at a dubious-looking sandwich, her brow crumpled as she attempted to get Crispin's attention. The knight, on the other hand, was poking a small stick into her ear with a meditative expression. "You've been at that for the last three days! Stop it!"

Proceeding to not even think about stopping, Crispin twirled the little branch with intense concentration. "Do you *know* how difficult it is to get candle wax out of your ears?" she questioned, her voice prickly. "And I didn't **let** him go - he is an adult, after all, and he can make his own decisions."

Finally accepting the bits she didn't like as vastly overriding the bits that she did, Helena sighed and tossed the sandwich into the small fire between them, where it spluttered and hissed in outrage. "That doesn't mean that his decisions are always very brilliant, Crispin. If you had told him not to he wouldn't have. That's how he feels about you, heaven knows why." Picking up a small stone she tossed it into the fire, trying to hit the rapidly toasting sandwich. She missed. "Oh, and by the by..." she pouted much too innocently, "getting wax out of your ears is probably not nearly as difficult as it was to save you from the Sirens." Silence. A silence filled with big letters spelling "*I won*" across the night sky in very bright colours and fireflies.

Studying the princess with a sidelong glance and a measure of reluctant amusement Crispin pitched the small stick into the fire, where it fell neatly on top of the now useless sandwich, and pulled her knees up to wrap her arms around them. "Gloating is not an attractive trait for somebody of your standing, you know," she remarked conversationally.

"Standing schmanding." Helena leaned back on her hands and gazed into the sky with satisfaction. "I don't care to hear your views on rank and status, sword-wielder. I only care that, this time, I am the hero."

"Yes, yes, and thank you for it. Again."

"No you don't." Sitting bolt upright Helena raised a finger in Crispin's direction. "Don't thank me. You have managed to make that sound like a disease the last twenty times or so." The knight presented a smug smile. "And don't imagine that you've heard the last of the whole Eric matter either."

Heaving a massive sigh Crispin plunged her forehead down onto her forearms. "What more is there to say, Helena?" she demanded, her voice a tad muffled. "I can understand that you wouldn't exactly be keen on the idea of him returning to free Philip from the Sirens, but it is, after all, his choice."

"His choice is a fine thing," the blonde was slightly belligerent, "but why? Why would he go back?"

"Well," Crispin lifted one hand in a bemused gesture, "according to Eric it was only the humanitarian thing to do." Catching a glimpse of Helena's cynical expression she nodded. "You don't have to tell me. We were less than ... charitable... when we threatened to throw Claude off the roof, or last season when we tied that messenger to a thorn tree naked, or a few years ago when we pretended to Thisby that we'd been converted to Thisbyism..." Shrugging her broad shoulders loosely she shook her head. "What it comes down to is that Eric has noticed a quality in Philip that we didn't."

"Philip has no qualities!" the princess insisted sullenly.

"Nevertheless. Look, Helena, I think it's as simple as that he likes him."

"But what is there to like? And liking is *definitely* not enough to make such a major decision!"

"You must have liked me enough to come back and rescue me from the Sirens," Crispin declared cheekily, her tongue pressed into one cheek.

Shooting an evil glance in her direction Helena glowered. "I can always take you back. They wouldn't mind."

"They wanted Eric right from the beginning, princess, so I might be an unwelcome guest. It's a pity, because I think I would rather have been ravished than done ..." she gave a mock shudder, "... embroidery. I'll probably have macabre visions of needles and thread in the night for the rest of my life."

Helena sat bolt upright. "You really would have preferred that..."

"Erm." Clearing her throat a tad uncomfortably Crispin began to twiddle her thumbs. "It would have been much more entertaining than embroidery, is all I'm saying."

"Oh." Leaning back onto her arms again the blonde continued to study the stars. "Embroidery is not that bad. I've always thought it a pleasant pastime myself."

Crispin cocked her head to one side. "Even more so than being ravished?" Her tone of voice portrayed incredulity, scepticism, and just a smidgeon of horror at the thought of somebody actually enjoying needlework.

"I wouldn't know," the princess replied dismissively.

"Oh, you have been in that tower for a *long* time." Crispin glanced upwards too, more to hide her small smile than to look at the stars. She could feel Helena's eyes on her suspiciously, though luckily the light from the flames did not reach as far as her face, and she could hide her quiet amusement in the dark. They sat companionably (which meant that they were not tearing each other's hair out at that very time) for a moment, both upturned faces revelling in the profusion of stars above them, before Helena felt it necessary to continue in a different - and less precarious - vein.

"So it was just that Eric liked him, huh?"

"Well," Crispin scratched her cheek with one hand to hide the slight grin which was apparently not ready to go anywhere, "it would almost certainly be fair to say that he really really... really... liked him. Really."

Shaking her head Helena lifted her shoulders. "Yeah, but I still don't understand."

Knitting her fingers together Crispin beamed at her over the small fire. "You have been in that tower for a *very* long time."

A pleasant breeze, a warm balmy day, Toby sauntering lazily through the sparse trees behind his favourite princess.

"Crispin?"

A knight extracting a small stick from her ear guiltily. "Yes, Helena?"

"I wonder why the Sirens' singing didn't enchant me as it did you?"

"Well," an awkward clearing of throat, "didn't ..."

"I know they told Eric that they couldn't captivate *him* because he was tone deaf. I'm just pondering what the reason would have been for me. Seeing as I am not. Tone deaf, that is."

A substantial silence as the knight weighs up the many, many, ways to make a mess of the situation.

"Crispin?"

"Uh. Yes?"

"Are you listening to me?"

"Um. No. No. Look, I'm poking a stick into my ear!"

"Crispin! Stop doing that! I am trying to have a conversation with you! Can you behave as if you are a civilised being for once?"

"Sorry."

"Now what were we talking about?"

The knight considers her options, and then tries in a tentative tone. "Embroidery?"

"Oh." The blonde frowns. "I could have sworn... Nevertheless. So which type of design is your favourite, Crispin? I prefer birds and nature scenes."

A pleasant breeze, a balmy day, a long-suffering sigh.

Another temperate day, another agreeable breeze, birds singing cheerfully in the few branches overhead as Toby ambled languidly after his favourite knight, who was for once not in the saddle. Having taken off the heavy armour and the plates that covered her shins, she was taking great joy in the slight gust that tugged at her white shirt. On Toby's back Helena was industriously braiding his mane, causing a black ear to flick every now and then.

"Crispin?"

The knight glanced over her shoulder, smirking at a placid Toby. "Yes, Helena?"

Her hands pausing for a moment, the blonde princess leaned to the side a little to catch Crispin's eye. "What's Thespyism?"

"Thes..." the dark woman frowned before comprehension set in. "Thisbyism?" Helena nodded. "You see, Thisby the Almost Martyr was born in the same village as I was, a few years earlier. His kin were sheep dealers, as most there were, and so the young Thisby spent his formative years up in the hills surrounding the village, tending to the family sheep. It was a lonely existence for a young boy. One day he was chasing a wayward sheep on a cliff when both his and the beast's feet slipped. He ended up hanging onto a branch for dear life, and the poor sheep fell head first into a vine extending from the cliff face and ended up hanging from a bush upside down."

Helena chuckled merrily, a cheerful sound that Crispin found vastly pleasant. "Surely you're making this up, Crispin!"

"Would I?" Turning around to look at the princess Crispin walked backwards with a melodramatically serious stare and placed her hand over her heart. "Me? Never!" Smiling at the light hilarity this produced she turned around and continued. "It's true. The sheep - Edmund, I think he was called - was hanging upside down from a vine with his minder alongside him in the direst of situations. Oh, by the by, I did make up the bit about his name."

Helena snorted. "I knew that. Edmund is no name for a sheep." Toby nickered in agreement.

"In any case, it was then that the dangling Thisby had a vision."

"Ooh." The princess shifted a little forward in the saddle. "Now it is getting interesting."

"It will when you stop interrupting." Waiting for the rude noise behind her to subside Crispin continued once again. "Thisby must have been about twelve years old at that time, by all accounts. What he saw in the sheep's fleece, or at least said that he did, was a revelation calling him to martyrdom. Of course his family attempted to keep him in the family business for a length of time, but after six years they had to bow to his greater determination. The only problem was that all martyrs had standpoints that conflicted with those of the ruling parties, but Thisby was an extremely likeable fellow with very sensible morals, as sheepherders often are. He started off by proclaiming love and compassion to all, and though it was a lovely point of view he was shattered when people in the surrounding areas took to his proclamations with nary a thought for his vision. In retaliation he took to praising the virtue of materialism, but it came at a time when the trading price of sheep suddenly elevated beyond expectation, and so Thisby once again became the unwilling prophet of a new trend. This happened to him with mind-numbing regularity, and I think old Thisby lost his mind a little somewhere in the middle, because in desperation he started to advocate strange trends like naming yourself for fruit, and wearing your pants on your head."

Helena burst into laughter. "Oh, you must be making this up!"

"Definitely not." Shaking her head solemnly Crispin threw up her hands in mock exasperation. "If you want to you can ask his main - or only - prophet, Pear. But I have to warn you, he *will* be bare-bottomed."

The princess let loose another peal of laughter. "And so what happened to Thisby?"

"Well, he burned his name into a wooden placard and carries it with him. When people ask whether it's his name he says no. It's a small measure of rebellion but unfortunately for him he's so nice that his opinions will never be received with the reaction that he wants. At least in this way he is his own personal martyr."

"That is rather sad." Helena wiped off a tear, though one of mirth rather than grief. "And how did you and Eric pretend to convert to Thisbyism?"

The knight smirked. "I spent an entire day with my pants on my head. It was ... draughty."

The image that brought to Helena's mind was too much, and with a hiccup she started to laugh again. Smiling, Crispin looped a hand into Toby's bridle and led him off the road. They were not too far from a small grove covered in sweet-smelling flowers. To one side a narrow waterfall dropped into a small clear pond. Taking a careful look around Crispin stepped up to the left stirrup and grinned up at Helena. "Let's stop here and swim. It's beautiful!"

With a furtive glance around her the blonde raised her eyebrows. "What if someone comes upon us here?"

"Nobody will."

"But if somebody does?"

"Then I'll cut them up with my sword and bury the bits all over the forest."

"Grim. I like it." The princess lifted her leg over the horse's neck, demurely taking care not to flash anything unbecoming, and slid down into Crispin's arms. Catching her solidly around the waist the knight set her down carefully before she began to unsaddle Toby.

"You might as well have a good time too, eh, boy?"

While Crispin stacked the saddlebags neatly against the thick trunk of a nearby tree, Helena ducked behind a shrub and undressed, hanging her dress over the shrub before she peered around the foliage. The knight had her back turned to the blonde, and with a slight giggle to herself Helena tore down to the pond and splashed into it. Turning around in amused surprise the knight grinned. "How's the water?"

"It's cold! Come on in!" The princess drifted on her back for a moment before she turned around and swam towards the waterfall with an unexpectedly strong stroke. "Are you coming?"

"Don't be so impatient!" Crispin slipped out of her clothing and patted Toby on the butt before she ran into the water, gritting her teeth at the sting. "It's freezing!"

Turning on her back again Helena wiped her hair away from her face and studied the dark knight with a smirk. "That's what I told you."

"No, you said it was cold. There is a difference."

"You knights are so lily-livered. Really." With a lazy stroke Helena approached the waterfall and broke through it, disappearing from view. Struck with abrupt alarm at the awareness that, when out of sight, the princess was much more dangerous than most short attractive blonde women, Crispin powered herself through the water and past the waterfall. Beyond it, nestled neatly under an extruding rock face, lay a little cove with a semi-circular ledge just below shoulder height.

Helena had her arms propped and folded on it, her face resting on her forearms as she sneaked a sly peek at the approaching knight. "Waterfall not too cold for you?"

Snorting, Crispin splashed her with water before she swam around to where she was at a right angle to the blonde, and draped her arms over the ledge. Closing her eyes for a moment she thanked whomever was responsible (she did not think it was Bibelot, patron saint of knights, considering her recent luck) for the peace and quiet. When she opened her eyes Helena was studying her inquisitively, only her large green eyes visible over her arms. The droplets on her long light lashes made for a charming picture.

"What?"

"What are you thinking? You seemed so peaceful for a moment there."

"Well," Crispin smoothed her hair away from her face before she mirrored Helena's pose, "I **am** peaceful for a moment here. Considering that I have no rash on my stomach, that I have skin covering my entire body, that there is nobody around who knows *your* version of events... Yeah, I'm a happy knight." Her crinkling eyes took any sting that there might have been out of the words. Helena's eyes crinkled too.

"You must have been very bored without me."

"Safe, solid, calm, peaceable ... but maybe just a *li-ttle* bored." Smiling at Helena's obvious surprise Crispin shrugged. "Hey, I know when it's the ugly truth."

"Well, good for you." The princess beamed. "At least I've improved your perception of reality." Grinning a little at the raised eyebrow she blinked innocently.

They were quiet for a while, the undisturbed and beautiful surroundings lulling them into a state of tranquility. Crispin had closed her eyes and was just drifting off on a good daydream when the blonde's voice disturbed her.

"Crispin?"

"Yes?"

"What will you do when you've taken me back?"

The knight thought about it for a time. "I don't know, Helena." Lifting her shoulders in a lazy shrug she tilted her head. "I've been thinking about travelling - not just roving around the countryside searching for quests, but actual exploration of the world. Maybe I'll get on a boat and see those wild places where they eat you if they don't like you. And I'll come back and tell you all about it if they don't have me for lunch."

"If it depends on your likeability then I'd rather say goodbye right now." Very pleased with herself Helena presented the spluttering knight with a smirk.

Leaning back Crispin stretched out her long arms and rolled her shoulders. "You can be very thankful that I'm resting, princess."

"Otherwise?"

"Don't make me threaten you."

"There's nothing you can threaten me with. So there."

One dark eyebrow arched wickedly. "Helena, I could get out of the water and sit on this rock between us completely naked." Patting the rock she sniggered - and almost swallowed a bucket of water - when she saw Helena's face redden swiftly. The princess coughed a little before she cleared her throat.

"Maybe there is that one thing."

"Yeah. Maybe."

Closing her eyes again Crispin listened to the clear sound of the waterfall behind them. Helena took the silence to regroup the part of her brain that had suddenly shut down and moved to Penguinbrook. Using the knight's shut eyes to her advantage she studied the sleek black head, the long black eyelashes that lay on the bronzed cheeks, and the broad shoulders that just protruded from the water.

I'm going to miss her. She made my world exciting.

In part to dislodge the unwelcome thought she glanced around. "Why is it so quiet? By all rights I should be in some odd sort of trouble by now."

Crispin's eyes shot open and her head lifted rapidly. "Oh no..." She looked around wildly. "You just *had* to tempt fate, didn't you?"

Chapter Seventeen:

And suddenly... absolutely nothing happened. Poison ivy did not suddenly sprout up around their feet and pull them under, no famished Gryphons appeared between the trees with a skewer and a salt cellar, and the sky did not burst open to reveal pointy-hatted zaftige Valkyries singing something fashionable whilst brandishing their pretty swords brutally. In fact, a little bird began to sing quite happily, but, realising his intrusion upon the happening of nothingness, stopped with a gargled croak (or an eagle got him, but the writer prefers the more profound first option).

Witnessing the absolute lack of commotion around them Crispin raised an eyebrow at Helena. "Have you lost your touch?"

"It's not as if trouble follows me everywhere," Helena replied archly, before she continued in a solemn tone, "occasionally it does let me go to the privy alone."

Bursting into laughter Crispin dipped into the water and wet her hair before she came up, eyes sparkling. "Why, congratulations. Someone's perception of reality *has* improved!"

Pouting playfully the princess pushed herself away from the rock. "That is it. I have endured enough abuse. Prepare to defend yourself."

Swimming through the waterfall with her short strong strokes Crispin turned around and was surprised to find the princess right behind her. Shrieking like a banshee the blonde hurled herself at the dark woman and managed to get two hands on her shoulders, pushing her into the water. Though the knight was taller and stronger she realised from Helena's movement that the princess was extremely proficient in the water. For a while they brawled playfully, splashing water around and each tugging at the other's legs. The game came to a sudden stop when Helena's hand brushed lightly over Crispin's breast. With a startlingly red face (the knight was sure she could hear the water sizzle around it) the princess swam away hurriedly. Waiting until her movement slowed Crispin drifted lazily in the water.

"Helena?"

"Yes." It was the tone of a morosely embarrassed child. Laughing to herself - but taking definite care to keep it to herself so as not to embarrass the other woman - the knight cleared her throat.

"See it as collecting on debt."

That confused the blonde so much that she actually turned around, her brow furrowed. "What?"

Crispin kicked around in a languid circle, her eyes on the blue sky above her. "Once upon a time, long long ago..." mentally she kicked herself for the silly introduction - who ever said that? "I told you that you were welcome to examine me, in moderation, of course, in exchange for co-operation."

"But I haven't been very co-operative."

"Well, that's very reasonable of you to admit, and I must confess that you're quite right. But you have, on very rare occasions, actually paid attention (and I use the term very loosely) to my opinion. Which was nice."

"Like when?" Helena actually folded her arms.

"Like when you... hold on, I'm thinking... like when you ... it'll come to me... like when you accepted that Eric went back to the Sirens."

"I haven't accepted that. When he comes to visit me he'll get a castigation of note."

"Oh." The knight bit her lip. "I guess I'll have to warn him then. Well, there's the time when... this shouldn't be so hard... Oh wait!" Triumphant she righted herself in the water and pointed

an imperious finger. "When you drank too much ale and I told you to drink water. And - eventually - you did."

Crinkling her nose the blonde thought about it. "I don't remember that."

"Just because you don't remember doesn't make it not happen." Folding her arms Crispin beamed. "A HA!"

"It's not much."

"The 'examination' wasn't much either. You need some practice."

Helena gave this some thought as well. "Fine. As long as we never mention it again."

"Your Highness." The knight arched a sardonic eyebrow.

For a time they drifted around on their backs, the clouds above them changing sluggishly in the clear blue sky. After a while Crispin got out of the water and slipped back into her clothes, turning her back gallantly when Helena snuck furtively into the bushes (and quite literally into them, by the sound of the cursing) to dry herself. They sat side by side on a patch of soft green grass, Crispin with her knees pulled up and her arms wrapped around them, and Helena flat on her stomach with her hands propping up her head. Studying Crispin from the corner of her eyes the blonde frowned.

"Crispin? Do you have any siblings?"

"No." The knight shook her dark head. "Which is a good thing, because if I had a brother he might have been named Fiona."

Snorting back a giggle Helena looked at Crispin. "Are you *actually* saying that Crispin's a boy's name?"

"Nothing of the sort." The knight looked duly indignant. "All I'm expressing is doubt in my parents' judgement."

"Tell me about them."

"There is nothing much to tell, Helena." Pulling out a blade of grass Crispin chewed it thoughtfully. "My mother is a milliner, which is what she wanted me to become."

"A milliner." Helena turned the idea around and then discarded it as ridiculous. "Never."

"Well," the knight twisted the grass blade between her teeth, "I am still in the family business, in a way. I make hats from furry creatures almost every day."

The blonde nodded gravely. "She must be proud."

"My father is. I alarm his friends and that makes him very cheerful. He hasn't got any hobbies." Spitting out the blade Crispin picked another one. "What about you, princess? Any co-princesses or princes?"

"No." Rolling over Helena stuck her hands under her head and studied the clouds. "I was their big hope."

"What for?"

"To marry well, of course. There is no other great duty for royalty. Women, that is."

"Hhm." Shooting a glance at the princess Crispin raised an eyebrow. "And for you it will be ...?"

"Sir Gunther Totherington." The scornfully regal pitch left the knight in no doubt as to Helena's opinion of Sir Gunther. "Or, if he is already engaged, to his cousin Piggie Hortentortle."

"Piggie Hort... do you really know people with names like those?"

"Yes." It was dry. "Assuming Gunther has found a suitable girl already I will probably soon be Her Highness Helena Hortentortle."

The knight was sorely tempted to giggle, but it did not seem to be the time or place. Instead she decided to be sternly serious. Or have a seizure trying. "You will refuse, I assume."

When their eyes met the characteristic sparkle in the green eyes was gone. "Why, Crispin? I have no reason not to. There is nothing else for me."

"But..." for once Crispin strained to find the words, "... but you're an intelligent beautiful woman, Helena. With a mind and a will of her own."

Helena smiled. "It's very kind of you, but as a princess I only need one of those characteristics. The others make me a liability, would you believe it?"

Studying the princess Crispin bit the inside of her lip in thought. "Would you like me to take you back to the tower?" she enquired softly. Glancing at her in surprise Helena smiled gently and shook her head.

"Thank you, Crispin, but no. After seeing the world, I don't want to be sitting in a tower waiting for life to happen anymore."

"You will be trapped in a marriage waiting for something to happen instead." It was said as kindly as possible.

Nodding her head once the princess turned over and stood up. "It's what princesses do. Let's get going. We're almost there."

They had been very quiet for a very long period, but this time the difference was that the air between them was glum rather than frosty. Even when the turrets of Helena's father's castle came into view, nicely highlighted by the setting sun, not much beyond basic pleasantries was exchanged. The princess rode in front of the knight - for once she had not been obstinate, but had simply offered her hand when Crispin offered. Over the blonde head in front of her the dark knight studied the castle sceptically as it approached. Nobility in these areas had increased of late (in title if not in manner), what with princes and princesses running off and marrying any old soul who could wield a sword and chop off a few heads. The result was a whole lot of satellite royalty who had barely more than the land they lived on. Not so in this case. It was obvious that somebody in the castle (Crispin was betting on the queen) had a propensity both for embellishment and dramatic statements. Apart from the solid outer wall that was visibly meant for practical purposes, the castle was a mass of gaudy detail, reminding Crispin somehow of a large overly decorated cake. Friezes covered in gold leaf sprang up from nearly every wall, depicting everything imperial, from the royal naval battle between Pups the Whiner and Pnifty, Duke of Trout, to the coronation of Queen Philimininea and her subsequent disastrous descent into complete sanity. The turrets were topped with gold-covered shapes that turned out, at closer scrutiny, to be giant pigeons. Smiling? Yes. Crispin smothered a smile, precisely as Helena said something over her shoulder that was carried away in the wind. Leaning forward Crispin spoke into the princess's ear.

"Excuse me?"

"I said..." turning her head so that she could be heard, "do try not to find it amusing. My mother loves it."

"Who did it?"

"My mother."

When they drew near to the large dark gate a trumpet swiftly sounded from the watchtower above them, and not a moment later the doors began to creak open ominously. They revealed a circular pathway that led to the imposing entrance. In the middle of the courtyard stood a golden fountain spurting water irregularly. The centrepiece was in the shape of a horse with a rather panicked expression (that looked a lot like a donkey). Riding slowly to the entrance Crispin studied the two figures that appeared at the top of the staircase. Helena's father was a short thin man, clothed in a dark red robe with a cut that did nothing to disguise his odd little protruding potbelly. His hair was a dark blonde and stood up around his head like a wild halo. Helena's mother looked almost exactly like her daughter, except that she had the narrow pinched appearance of somebody who had been... well, pinched too many times. She was also obviously shortsighted, because while the king was studying the approaching pair with a measure of confusion, her eyes were glued to Crispin's head with an expression of glee. Grasping the hem of her extensively decorated yellow dress with hands as dainty as Helena's (though much curlier around the outer fingers) she darted down the stairs and watched with twinkling eyes as her daughter slid from the horse.

"Darling Helena, welcome home! And do introduce us to your dashing compa..." she meant to glance up coyly, but at this distance even she could not mistake Crispin for a man, "ni... you... aren't... to your ... charming friend?" Somehow the sentence righted itself midair and pretended that it was everybody else who wasn't making sense (and it worked, too, but that's royalty for you). Sliding off Toby Crispin smiled grimly and waited until the rather stiff obligatory hug between mother and daughter had expired, then offered a hand to the short blond queen.

"Crispin at your service, milady."

Halfway to presenting her hand for the expected lip service, the perplexed queen spun around on her heels towards Helena, leaving the knight's extended hand reclining in the air like a reluctant otter. "But is Crispin not a man's ... "

"No," the princess interrupted tersely, waving closer a surreptitiously lurking servant, "it's not. Ivor can take the bags and settle in Crispin's horse. Shall we go in?"

Turning around Crispin slid her saddlebag and scabbard off Toby's back and draped them over one broad shoulder. Helena was greeting her father in a suitably respectable manner, and while the royals were occupied the knight rested her forehead against the horse's soft flank for a moment. All traces of the young blonde as she had experienced her at the waterfall - finally unwound, at ease in her own skin, silver droplets lining her lashes as she laughed from the pit of her stomach - had disappeared to be replaced with the young princess she had first encountered in the tower - haughty, brisk, infuriatingly acidic around the edges. This, apparently, was the effect that her parents had on her. Shooting a short but efficient prayer to Tesni, patron saint of fate (and wife of Pups the Whiner, which gave her automatic entry into the martyr stakes), Crispin plastered an agreeable smile on her face and turned to meet the king.

Hopefully she won't have to wait too long for Piggie Hortingsnortingmorkleton. Even he has to be better than ... this.

Endeavouring to peer at her down his nose (which was damned near impossible, if not a little droll, in view of the fact that he was approximately the height of her chest) King Gregor extended a royally floppy hand. Crispin was no stranger to court etiquette, considering her occupation, but on this occasion she felt oddly disinclined to behave well. Grasping his smaller hand in his she shook it enthusiastically.

"Such a pleasure, your Highness."

With as much dignity as he could muster (a lot, for such a short man) he extracted his hand from hers and attempted to ignore the aftershock travelling down his shoulders. "Yes, yes. Welcome to Bernam, Kathryn... "

"Crispin."

"Erm, quite. Come along."

She trailed behind the group as they entered the castle, eyeing the elaborate elephant-shaped sconces on the wall with a slight smirk. They were smiling too. *At least the wall decorations are happy.* The group veered left and with the movement Helena shot a quick reprimanding glance over her shoulder, wiping the grin off Crispin's face completely. The room they entered was quite clearly a dining room. You could identify it by the massive table in the centre, so large that to move around the corners you had to become relatively intimate with whoever was sitting nearest. Apparently this was to be the setting of tonight's reunion, because three servants materialised from behind the heavy tapestries hanging on the wall and pulled out the closest chairs, seating the royals. Left standing Crispin glanced around for a good place to leave her belongings, almost committing a very bad act when a pie-faced man with a woeful expression slid them off her shoulder smoothly.

"I will put them away for the ... lady." She could swear he looked her up and down as he said it, though his eyes never actually moved from her left shoulder. "And Ivor will seat the lady."

There was indeed a servant standing behind a chair on one of the long sides of the table, though she was absolutely sure that he had not been the one to take Toby to the stables. Smiling in a compliant manner that was already rapidly making her sick she nodded her acquiescence and attempted to squeeze past the corner of the table without shoving her backside into the queen's face. It was made a tad more difficult by the fact that the queen obviously prescribed to the school of thinking that stated any potentially embarrassing situation could be dealt with by remaining completely immobile. When finally the knight lowered herself into the ostentatious chair that towered over her and all but dwarfed the others, she glanced over at Helena, disappointed to see not even a glimmer of amusement. A solemn man in neat clothing served them each a goblet of wine before he vanished into the tapestries much like the rest of the servants.

Lifting his glass King Gregor leaned over the table to address Helena. "My daughter, I welcome you back into our home with a heart full of gladness," *and a bucket full of twaddle*, Crispin added mentally, "though I am rather confused as to the circumstances?"

Lifting her glass in answer to his Helena took a long sip before she considered her parents. Deciding that the outcome was inevitable in any case, she drew a resigned breath and began her story. "As you know, mother, father, I was in the tower at the eastern border of Richard De Rigby's kingdom... "

"Yes," her mother interrupted tetchily, "because for some reason you would not consent to marrying that nice Colonel Grigori Knarth."

"Mother," in this beginning the knight could spy the start of a familiar argument, "he was **60 years old**."

"Mature, is a better manner to think of that." And now Crispin could spy the origins of Helena's obstinacy.

"He only has one leg!"

"The cane makes him seem dignified."

"He was bald then."

"Very uncomplicated hygiene-wise."

"His daughter from the previous marriage was my age!"

"A lovely companion for you." The queen sat back and folded her hands over her stomach, gloating silently.

Placing her goblet on the table in a way that made Crispin's teeth ache, Helena raised her eyebrows at her mother. "Rumour was that he killed his first wife, mother." With a cock of her blonde head she invited a positive perspective on that.

The queen lifted her goblet to her mouth daintily and glanced at her daughter over its rim in an almost coy manner. "Well, you should be rather more thankful. That cleared the way for you."

Just then the knight had to apologise profusely for accidentally snorting wine onto the lovely table through her nose. Waiting patiently until all murderous glances had been glanced and all offensive bodily weapons had been discreetly wiped, the king took over the conversation in an unperturbed manner. "Please, Ivory," he directed at his wife, who shut her mouth with an audible clang and a fierce scowl, "let the girl finish. Helena?"

"Thank you, father." She nodded faintly in his direction. "To condense the tale, a knight did indeed challenge the terrible three-headed beast and the horribly clingy fronds of climbing vines ... "

"Horribly clingy, those," the king agreed. Crispin thought to concur but after a moment of thought decided that she'd probably soon be the reluctant focus of all attention in any case, and so took a sip of wine instead.

"Yes. And climbed up the tower and kissed the princess (rather unenthusiastically, though), all as it should be."

The king drummed a set of short fingers on the table. "And?"

"And there sits your - or my, I suppose - knight." Lifting her goblet at the dark woman Helena saluted her. "Cheers." At that very point Crispin could almost *hear* the old spark flickering in the green eyes. It was not hard to understand why, either. Queen Ivory had her elegant hand halfway up to her mouth and her lips already pouting to receive the rim of the goblet, and it was frozen in that pose that she now glanced from Helena to Crispin, and then back again with a frown. King Gregor's fingers were still drumming as he studied Crispin with a polite scowl.

"Who? Kirsten? But she's a woman. Impossible."

"It's Crispin, sir."

"Quite. Helena?"

Helena inclined her head coolly at her father. "These are modern times, father. And that is exactly what happened. "It was Crispin who rescued me from the tower."

"But *why*?" the king enquired quizzically.

Once more on the point of answering for herself Crispin was pre-empted by Helena. "Because that is what knights generally do, is it not? Rescue damsels for rewards?"

"Hmm." King Gregor thought about it for a moment and then apparently decided not to delay the serving of dinner. "All right. Delightful to have you back, Helena, and much thanks of course to Christa for returning you..."

"Crispin."

"... Quite... and I will most certainly reward you in an appropriate manner, young lady knight." Nodding graciously at the dark woman he clapped his hands, conjuring up a gaggle of servants with serving plates.

Dinner was delightful, and conversation was not. There seemed to exist a rather enthusiastic measure of disdain between mother and daughter, and whilst they engaged in verbal sparring of a fairly animated sort, the king perpetrated incredibly tedious monologues towards Crispin, not allowing her space for much more than to correct her name occasionally. Sporadically he would interrupt his pedantic reminiscence of some odd event such as the first Round Cheese Festival in a place called Pembnamshire (where, according to his recollection, he once won a prize for the best costume) to pay abrupt fierce attention to the sniping between Ivory and Helena, punctuating random snippets of exchange with "Quite..." before he would turn back and, catching Crispin paying fierce attention to her roast beef instead, commit yet more dialogue at her. In such a fashion the evening passed as slowly as Colonel Grigori Knarth strolling across the lawns of Fort Knarth.

Only once did the queen direct her stare at Crispin instead of her own daughter. "And what do you have to say for yourself?" she demanded in a tone as pleasant as a bleeding piranha. A heavy silence skulked into the room and made itself comfortable in the candelabra as everyone present at the table turned to study the knight. Even the servants unexpectedly materialised and proceeded to wait patiently. Clearing her throat Crispin smiled. "The food is lovely, thank you." According to the reactions it received it was not the correct response. Casting around for something suitably dreary, Crispin grasped at the nearest branch. "Those climbing vines *are* awfully clingy..."

"Quite. Have I explained to you the principle behind Chanky Fileominus's theory of chucking grain, Caitlin?"

Chapter Eighteen:

Shaking her head in wonderment Crispin collapsed into one of the plush settees in Helena's room. "And I used to think that *you* were strange. My goodness, Helena, how ever on earth did you turn out such a charming well-balanced example of the species in this place?"

"There was nothing in this world I dreaded more than resembling my mother, so what you see sitting here before you is a dedicated and committed study in disobedience." Helena fell back onto her huge canopy bed and stared up at the pink frills in fascination. "I don't think they've changed anything in here since I've left."

"Probably not. They do live in hope." One foot bobbed rhythmically over the edge of the pink settee as Crispin glanced about her. The ostentatious dress laid out neatly on the chest of drawers attracted her (unwilling) attention persistently. "Would ... is that for everyday wear?"

Glancing over the princess gave a bored shrug. "No, that would be a wedding dress. Mother obviously sent Ivor up here with it the moment we arrived. Well, not the exact moment. More specifically the moment when you wilfully and errantly flaunted the failure to be an eligible man."

"Oh." Crispin bit the inside of her lip thoughtfully. "I do apologise. I'm entirely unreliable when it comes to turning into a man on demand."

"Don't trouble yourself." The princess waved a regal hand around vaguely. "Just try harder next time."

"Oh dear lord, I sincerely hope there won't be a next time. I know she's your mother, Helena, but... I've faced gryphons that I've been less frightened of. She could kill an entire cave full of bats instantly with one look." As an afterthought the knight shuddered, concluding with a scowl. "Did you say Ivor brought the wedding dress?"

"Yes."

"Helena, has your mother poisoned my wine or...?"

"No, you're quite right." Rolling over onto her stomach Helena propped up her head in her hands and shot Crispin a half-hearted grin. "My father is terrible at remembering names. I'm not sure whether you noticed it... "

"What? Preposterous!"

Grinning at the knight's theatrical outburst Helena carried on, "... and so my mother has taken care only to hire servants named Ivor, or alternatively servants willing to be called Ivor. Even the women are called Ivor, so as not to confuse the matter."

"Right. Of course." Crispin nodded slowly. "And your name? He remembers that."

"He should. It's his middle name."

"And you gave **me** hell for having a man's name?"

"Let's not revert to old arguments when I have so many new ones to look forward to." Though it was said with an attempt at light-heartedness the knight could hear the forlorn note behind it. Sitting upright she draped her forearms over her knees and leaned forward.

"It is never too late to take you back, Helena. One word and I'll drag you out of here."

The princess shot her a disturbingly gentle look. "When I stepped into that tower I was no more than a child with glamorous ideas of romance, Crispin. I really, truly, believed that once my prince appeared, life would be exactly as it was meant to be, and I would be happy ad infinitum. Now I know that there's a world beyond my own, a world which does not necessarily conform to the perception that I had." Closing her eyes she smiled, perhaps at a pleasant memory, before she continued. "After that you can't just take me back and put me in a tower, Crispin. Not when I know what exists outside it."

When the dark woman frowned she reminded Helena of a moping little girl. "If you marry one of those men, Helena, then you'll be locked up in your own tower as much as if you came with me now."

"I don't actually have the luxury of very many great choices, Crispin!" The sudden anger startled them both. Taking a deep breath the princess tried to calm herself, sitting up and squaring her narrow shoulders. When she looked up her green eyes met the knight's in a defenceless gaze and held them pleadingly. "Crispin. Take me with you."

"I..." the knight could not tear her eyes away from the blonde woman's stare. She blinked rapidly, her eyebrows contracting into an expression that appeared to be on the brink of anguish. In that look the princess found her answer.

"Well." With the fingers of a slightly trembling hand she pushed a lock of hair away from her forehead stiffly. "I apologise for asking. I didn't want to put you in a difficult situation."

"Oh, Helena, I don't..."

"It's all right. I can't expect of you to be saddled up with..."

"Don't." Sliding off the settee Crispin hurried to the foot of the bed and knelt at Helena's feet, grasping a small hand in both of hers. "Don't think like that, Helena." She was shocked when the green eyes that lifted were bright with tears. "Oh, please *don't*."

"I thought you'd started to like me there at the end but..."

It was so soft that she almost didn't hear it. Reaching up she gently brushed one teardrop from golden lashes. "Helena, I did. I do. Who wouldn't? You're very unique."

"That's just a polite way of saying that I'm odd and impossible."

"No, it's not." Pressing Helena's hand lightly Crispin tried to catch her eye. "I'm not good at polite, Helena. You know that."

"You try."

"Yes, I try. But not very hard." Smiling at the slight crinkle of the princess's nose the knight sighed. "Helena, you are odd. And impossible. And infuriating. And such a great deal of fun to be with."

Helena clenched Crispin's hands in hers tightly. "Then take me with you, Crispin? Please?"

"I ... can't."

"But *why* not?"

"My life isn't like yours."

"I know what your life is like! I've been there, do you remember?" Helena tried to catch Crispin's gaze, but the blue eyes skittered away from hers tensely. "I've been there, and nothing bad happened to me."

"Nothing bad happened to you because I was there to catch you!" Suddenly the bright blue eyes were focused on her, and their intensity almost burned. "What if I turn my back for a moment and something horrible happens? What then, Helena? The world is a dangerous place, and you are not ready for it! I can't take responsibility for you, Helena; I simply can't, because if something bad happened to you I would **never** be able to forgive myself."

The forcefulness of her words left a sad silence in the air.

"I'm so sorry." It was an overwhelmed whisper.

"No." With a shake of her head Helena rubbed the tense hands under hers gently. "I'm sorry. I didn't think about what I was asking you to do." Leaning forward she tucked a loose strand of black hair behind the knight's ear. "I understand, Crispin. I do."

The dark woman looked up at her with a miserable expression. "Anywhere you want to go, Helena, I'll take you there myself. Right now."

Slowly shaking her head Helena smiled sweetly. "No, you're right, Crispin. I'm not ready for the world, and the world's not ready for me. One day, maybe. Hey," she scolded, "don't frown like that. You'll wake up looking like that one morning."

"And I'll have deserved it, too." Drawing her hands from the other woman's the knight rose and dusted off her knees assiduously. "What did that Ivor do with my sword and saddlebags, do you know?"

It was a clumsy change of direction, but Helena let it go, sensing the nervousness in Crispin's behaviour. "It will probably be in the room next door, Crispin." Are you... are you going to leave?" She said it as smoothly and casually as she could.

Shrugging her broad shoulders the knight bit her lip thoughtfully. "I suppose I'm a coward, but I'd rather leave under cover of darkness. I don't want to go through any more ceremonial feasts. It'll be ... easier this way."

"But if you leave tonight my father won't have the chance to give you your reward. And you came all this way."

Crispin waved the comment away. "I don't need it." She seemed on the verge of saying something else before she consciously straightened her posture and rolled her shoulders once. "Helena, it's time for me to go."

"I know." Before the knight could say anything more the blonde dashed forward and wrapped her arms around her waist. Pressing her face into the knight's shoulder she squeezed tightly - "I'll miss you, knight." - smiling against the smooth fabric of the shirt as she felt strong arms wrap around her shoulders and hold her securely for the briefest moment. Then Crispin loosened her grip and stepped back, her eyes soft.

"I have to go."

"I know."

She had hoped, if she were honest, for one of those moments she'd always imagined when reading her favourite stories, those moments when the hero stated an intention and go, and then never could. And hurled him -or her- self back into the other person's arms declaring that they would never ever leave them. If it was one of those moments then Crispin must have misunderstood the script, because with a small smile and a little nod of her dark head she turned around.

And walked out of the door.

It seemed like the middle of the night, and there was a sound somewhere that didn't belong there. Prying open eyes which had been crying just a little the princess scowled and reached out to light her lamp, knocking something off the table accidentally. Sliding out of bed she took the lamp and rose, almost dropping it in fright when she noticed the figure sitting in her window frame.

"What the...?"

The knight sat perched on the granite ledge as if it had been made for her, a pleasant smile plastered on her face. Putting her free hand on her hip Helena tilted her head at Crispin.

"Aren't you supposed to be off in a foreign country, petrifying little foreign children?"

"Well." The knight graced her with an even white grin. "In Lodelon, to be exact, studying the enormous statue of Pnifty Duke of Trout, where he's wearing cheesecloth on his head and missing vital bits."

"And?" Bending down the princess put the lamp on the floor and placed the other hand on her hip too. "Are you lost?"

"A little." The knight shrugged. "Can you point me in the right direction?"

"It's that way." Pointing a finger in a random direction the princess raised her eyebrows at the knight. "Now are you going to sit in my window the whole night?"

The knight raised her hands in mock surrender. "I'm going, I'm going... " and then she smiled, "... but I'm not going anywhere without you."

A slow grin spread across the blonde woman's face, lighting up her features like a fire. Taking a sharp breath she gazed incredulously at the other woman, who raised a wicked eyebrow at her.

"Oh, Crispin!"

"Don't run! I'm not... "

The warning came too late. The princess attempted to stop, she really did, but the momentum carried her into the knight, who summarily toppled backwards and disappeared from view.

".... hooooolding Oof."

Anxiously the princess peeked from the window. In the topiary lanterns' lights she could just make out the knight lying sprawled on the back of a giant (and probably smiling) duck.

"Crispin?"

One hand lifted slowly and plucked a small branch from black hair.

"Crispin? I'm so sorry, Crispin, I didn't mean to... "

Helena's shoulders sagged dejectedly. The figure below sat up and sighed, and then tilted her head back and gazed up.

"My hand's bleeding. Princess?"

"I'm sorry."

"I missed you."

THE END
