

THE HERO'S GUIDE TO
Saving YOUR Kingdom

THE HERO'S GUIDE TO
Saving YOUR Kingdom

Written by

CHRISTOPHER HEALY

With drawings by

TODD HARRIS



WALDEN POND PRESS

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Walden Pond Press is an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.
Walden Pond Press and the skipping stone logo are trademarks and registered trademarks of
Walden Media, LLC.

The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom
Text copyright © 2012 by Christopher Healy
Illustrations copyright © 2012 by Todd Harris

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written
permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For
information address HarperCollins Children's Books, a division of HarperCollins Publishers,
10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

www.harpercollinschildrens.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-0-06-211743-4

Typography by Amy Ryan

12 13 14 15 16 CG/RRDH 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



First Edition

For Dashiell and Bryn, my heroes



◀ TABLE OF CONTENTS ▶

MAP OF THE KINGDOMS	ix
PROLOGUE: <i>Things You Don't Know About Prince Charming</i>	1
1. <i>Prince Charming Misplaces His Bride</i>	5
2. <i>Prince Charming Defends Some Vegetables</i>	30
3. <i>Prince Charming Claims He Is Not Afraid of Old Ladies</i>	53
4. <i>Prince Charming Loses Some Fans</i>	72
5. <i>Prince Charming Is the Worst Person in the World</i>	91
6. <i>Prince Charming Has No Sense of Direction</i>	104
7. <i>Prince Charming Has No Idea What's Going On</i>	124
8. <i>Prince Charming Is Afraid of the Dark</i>	137
9. <i>Prince Charming Is a Wanted Man</i>	145
10. <i>Prince Charming Annoys the King</i>	156
11. <i>Prince Charming Takes a Dive</i>	174
12. <i>Prince Charming Hugs Trees</i>	180
13. <i>Prince Charming Is Completely Unnecessary</i>	194
14. <i>Prince Charming Falls Flat</i>	203
15. <i>Prince Charming Should Not Be Left Unsupervised</i>	211
16. <i>Prince Charming Meets a Piece of Wood</i>	218





17.	<i>Prince Charming Still Has No Idea What's Going On</i>	227
18.	<i>Prince Charming Gets Battered and Fried</i>	238
19.	<i>Prince Charming Needs a Bath</i>	250
20.	<i>Prince Charming Walks into a Bar</i>	267
21.	<i>Prince Charming Joins a Gang</i>	279
22.	<i>Prince Charming Is a Sneak</i>	298
23.	<i>Prince Charming Takes the Wrong Seat</i>	312
24.	<i>Prince Charming Hates Children</i>	328
25.	<i>Prince Charming Really Needs to Figure Out What's Going On</i>	345
26.	<i>Prince Charming Gives Up</i>	354
27.	<i>Prince Charming Gets Good News and Bad News</i>	377
28.	<i>Prince Charming Is Doomed</i>	385
29.	<i>Prince Charming Does Exactly What He Said He'd Never Do</i>	403
30.	<i>Prince Charming Almost Saves the Day</i>	413
31.	<i>Prince Charming Gets Just What He Thinks He Wanted</i>	422
	<i>EPILOGUE: Prince Charming Goes Where Everybody Knows His Name</i>	433
	<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i>	437



MAP OF THE KINGDOMS



◀ PROLOGUE ▶

THINGS YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT PRINCE CHARMING

Prince Charming is afraid of old ladies. Didn't know that, did you?

Don't worry. There's a lot you don't know about Prince Charming: Prince Charming has no idea how to use a sword; Prince Charming has no patience for dwarfs; Prince Charming has an irrational hatred of capes.

Some of you may not even realize that there's more than one Prince Charming. And that none of them are actually *named* Charming. No one is. *Charming* isn't a name; it's an adjective.

But don't blame yourself for your lack of Prince Charming-based knowledge; blame the lazy bards. You see, back in the day, bards and minstrels were the world's

only real source of news. It was they who bestowed fame upon people. They were the ones who sculpted any hero's (or villain's) reputation. Whenever something big happened—a damsel was rescued, a dragon was slain, a curse was broken—the royal bards would write a song about it, and their wandering minstrels would perform that tune from land to land, spreading the story across multiple kingdoms. But the bards weren't keen on details. They didn't think it was important to include the *names* of the heroes who did all that damsel rescuing, dragon

slaying, and curse breaking. They just called all those guys “Prince Charming.”

It didn't even matter to the bards whether the person in question was a truly daring hero (like Prince Liam, who

battled his way past a bone-crushing, fire-blasting magical monster in order to free a princess from an enchanted sleeping spell) or some guy who merely happened to be in the right place at the right time (like Prince Duncan, who also woke a princess from a sleeping spell, but only because some dwarfs told him to). No,

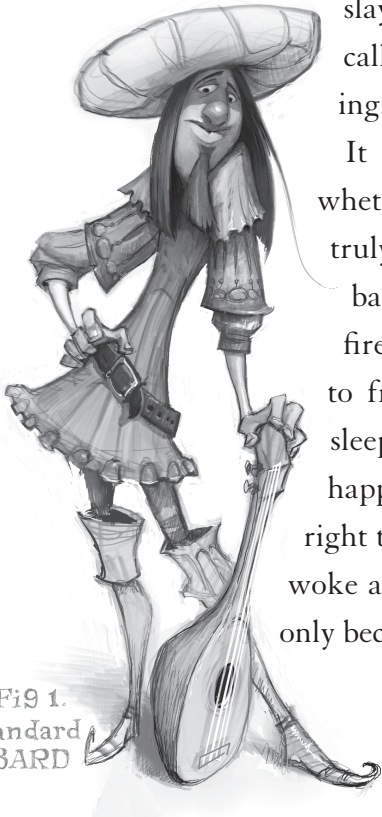


FIG 1.
Standard
BARD

those bards gave a man the same generic name whether he nearly died (like Prince Gustav, who was thrown from a ninety-foot tower when he tried to rescue Rapunzel) or simply impressed a girl with his dancing skill (like Prince Frederic, who wowed Cinderella at a royal ball).

If there was anything that Liam, Duncan, Gustav, and Frederic all had in common, it was that none of them were very happy about being a Prince Charming. Their mutual hatred of that name was a big part of what brought them together. Not that teaming up was necessarily the best idea for these guys.

If we were to peek ahead to, say, Chapter 20, we would see our heroes in a small mountain town called Flargstagg, sitting in just about the worst tavern in all of creation: the Stumpy Boarhound. The Stumpy Boarhound is the kind of dank and miserable place where pirates and assassins play cards while plotting their next despicable crimes (which often involve robbing the tavern itself). It's not the type of place where you would expect to find even one Prince Charming, let alone four. And yet, in Chapter 20, there they all are: Liam, bruised and soot-stained, with fish bones in his hair; Gustav, in charred and dented armor, massaging his bald, bright red scalp; Frederic, covered with enough dirt to make you think he'd just crawled out

of a grave; and Duncan, with a big bump on his forehead, and wearing . . . is that a nightshirt? Oh, and there are about fifty armed thugs surrounding their table, all of whom seem eager to smash the princes into paste.

Of course, by Chapter 20, you can't fault the princes for looking like wrecks. They're lucky to be alive after their run-ins with the witch, the giant, the bandits, the—well, you'll see. Basically, the fact that they're about to get into a major brawl is none too surprising, considering the kind of week these princes have just had. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Before we reach that turning-point night at the Stumpy Boarhound, we need to head back to the peaceful kingdom of Harmonia, where the whole adventure—or *mess*, depending on whom you ask—began. We have to go back to when Prince Frederic managed to lose Cinderella.



PRINCE CHARMING MISPLACES HIS BRIDE

Frederic wasn't always helpless. There was a time when he aspired to become a hero. But it seemed it wasn't meant to be.

From the moment he was born—and immediately placed into the delicate swishiness of a pure silk bassinet—Prince Frederic led a life of comfort. As heir to the throne of the very wealthy nation of Harmonia, he grew up with an army of servants standing ready to pamper him in every way imaginable. While learning to crawl, he was fitted with lamb's-wool knee pads to keep his baby-soft skin from getting scuffed. When he wanted to play hide-and-seek, butlers and valets would hide in the most obvious places—behind a feather, under a napkin—so that the boy

wouldn't have to work too hard to find them. Pretty much anything young Frederic could have wanted or needed was handed to him on a silver platter. Literally.

The only thing Frederic had to do in return was live the life of a proper gentleman. He was allowed to attend as many poetry readings, ballroom dances, and twelve-course luncheons as he wanted. But he was forbidden to take part in any activity that could be considered remotely risky or dangerous. Appearances were very important to Frederic's father, King Wilberforce, who vowed that no one in his family would ever again suffer the cruel mockery that had been heaped upon his great-grandfather, King Charles the Chicken-Pocked. "Not a scar, not a bruise, not a blemish"

was the motto of King Wilberforce. And he went to extreme measures to keep his son away from anything that might give him so much as a scratch. He even had Frederic's pencils pre-dulled.

For most of his early years, Frederic was perfectly happy to skip out on pastimes like tree climbing (twisted ankles!), hiking (poison ivy!), or embroidery (pointy needles!). King



Fi9. 2
Prince
FREDERIC

Wilberforce's warnings about the hazards of such endeavors sank in good and deep.

But at the tender age of seven, Frederic was inspired to try something daring. He was in his private classroom, being taught to write his name with fancy curlicue letters, when a commotion down the hall caused his tutor to cut the lesson short. Frederic followed his tutor down to the palace gates, where many of the servants had gathered to gawk at a visiting knight.

The old warrior, who was battered and exhausted from a recent bout with a dragon, had staggered up to the palace seeking food and shelter. The king invited the weary visitor inside. This was the first knight Frederic had ever seen in real life (and frankly, even the ones he'd read about in books weren't very exciting—his favorite bedtime story was *Sir Bertram the Dainty and the Quest for the Enchanted Salad Fork*). During the knight's short stay, a fascinated Frederic followed him everywhere, listening to his tales of ogre battles, goblin wars, and bandit chases. There was a look in the man's eyes that Frederic had never seen before. Frederic could sense the knight's thirst for thrills, his yearning for action. The knight was a man who thrived on adventure the way Frederic thrived on tea cakes.

That evening, after the knight departed, Frederic

asked his father if he could take sword-fighting lessons. The king dismissed his request with a smile: "Swords are sharp, my boy. And I need a son with both ears attached."

Young Frederic was undaunted. The next day, he asked his father if he could take a shot at wrestling instead. King Wilberforce shook his head. "You're what they call petite, Frederic. You'd have your spine snapped in an instant."

The day after that, Frederic requested a spot on the jousting team. "That's more dangerous than the other two combined," the king moaned disapprovingly. "You'll be skewered like a cocktail weenie."

"Archery?" Frederic asked.

"Eyes: poked out," the king insisted.

"Martial arts?"

"Bones: broken."

"Mountaineering?"

"Eyes broken. Bones poked out."

By the end of the week, King Wilberforce couldn't take it anymore. He needed to put a stop to Frederic's thrill-seeking dreams. He decided to set his son up for a fall.

"Father, can I try spelunking?" Frederic asked eagerly.

"Cave exploration? You'll fall into a bottomless pit," the king chided. Then he changed his tone. "But you can try animal training if you'd like."

“Really?” Frederic was stunned and thrilled. “You mean with *wild* animals? Not hamsters or goldfish?”

The king nodded.

“You don’t think I’ll be eaten alive?” Frederic asked.

“Oh, I fear that you will, but if you’re so determined to put your life at risk, perhaps I shouldn’t stand in your way,” his father said, weaving his deception.

The next day, with his heart racing, Frederic was led down a winding basement corridor to a storeroom in which all the old coats of arms, spare scepters, and crates of outgrown baby clothes had been shoved up against the walls to make room for an enormous cage. Inside that cage: a pacing, panting tiger. The animal let out a low growl as soon as it saw the young prince.

“Wow, I didn’t know we’d start with something so big,” Frederic said, considerably less eager than he had been a minute earlier.

“Are you ready for this, Your Highness?” the animal’s trainer asked. Frederic barely had time to nod before the trainer slid back the bolt and let the cage door fall open. The trainer uttered a quick word to the tiger, and the big cat burst out into the room, rushing straight at Frederic.

Frederic screamed and ran. The giant tiger, easily three times his size, dashed after the boy. Frederic darted among

the crates of tarnished goblets and out-of-tune lutes, looking for someplace to hide. “Why aren’t you stopping it?” he shouted at the trainer.

“I *can’t* stop it,” the trainer replied. “It’s a *wild* animal. Your father told you this would be dangerous.”

Frederic ducked under a heavy wooden table, but the tiger swatted it away as if it were nothing more than a piece of dandelion fluff. Frederic scrambled across the floor in an attempt to get away from the beast, but was soon backed up against a stack of rolled tapestries. There was nowhere left for him to go. With tears running down his face, Frederic shrieked as he saw the tiger’s open mouth coming at him.

When the tiger snatched him up into its maw, Frederic was too terrified to realize that the animal had no teeth. The big cat calmly carried the limp, weeping boy back to its cage and set him down gently on the floor—which is what it had been carefully trained to do. For this was no ordinary tiger: This was El Stripo, the talented and cooperative star of the Flimsham Brothers Circus. The Flimshams were famous for their visually horrifying—but impressively safe—act in which El Stripo’s trainer would stuff the tiger’s mouth with up to five infants from the audience and then instruct the animal to spit them back to their mothers. The babies

almost always landed in the correct laps.

It took Frederic a few seconds to realize he hadn't been eaten. At which point his father appeared. Frederic ran into the king's arms, burying his wet face in his father's royal robes.

"Do you see now?" the king asked. "Do you see why I say you can't do these things?" Behind Frederic's back, he flashed El Stripo's trainer a thumbs-up.

King Wilberforce's plan had worked. The prince was so deeply frightened by his experience with the tiger, so chilled to the core, that he never asked to try anything daring again. *Father was right*, he thought; *I am not cut out for such bold escapades*.

Fear ruled Frederic from that moment on. He even found a few Sir Bertram the Dainty stories to be a little too scary.

Instead Frederic focused his energies on taking etiquette lessons, putting together stylish outfits, and becoming exactly the kind of prince his father wanted him to be. And he became pretty darn good at it. In fact, he began to love it. He was proud of his excellent posture, his artful flower arranging, and his flawless foxtrot.

More than a decade passed before the thought of adventure found its way back into Frederic's mind. It

happened on the night of the big palace ball, at which it was hoped that Frederic would find a bride (he never left the palace, so this type of event was the only way for him to meet girls). Among the dozens of elegant women at the ball that night, there was one girl who caught Frederic's attention immediately—and it wasn't just because she was beautiful and elegantly dressed. No, she had something else: a daredevil gleam in her eyes. He'd seen that look only once before—in that old knight all those years ago.

Frederic and the mystery girl had the time of their lives dancing together. But at midnight she ran off without a word.

“Father, I have to find that girl,” insisted Frederic, newly inspired and feeling a bit more like his seven-year-old self again.

“Son, you've never been outside the palace gates,” the king replied in a foreboding tone. “What if there are *tigers* out there?”

Frederic shrank away. That tiger episode had really done a number on him.

But Frederic didn't give up entirely.

He instructed his trusted valet, Reginald, to find the mystery woman for him. It turned out that Ella (that was her name) wasn't a noblewoman at all; just a sooty cleaning

girl. But her story—the way she mixed it up with a fairy and used magical means to escape her wicked stepfamily—intrigued Frederic (even if he hoped he'd never have to meet any of her relatives).

When he told his father he wanted to marry Ella, the king sputtered in surprise. “I thought I'd fixed you, but apparently I didn't,” the king scowled. “You don't get it at all, do you? An ill-bred wife would destroy your image more than any scar or broken limb ever would.”

Up until that point, Frederic had always believed that the king enforced strict rules because he feared for his son's safety. But now he saw that wasn't necessarily the case. So, for the first time, Frederic stood up to his father.

“You do not rule me,” he stated firmly. “Well, technically you do, being as you're the king. But you do not rule my heart. My heart wants Ella. And if you don't bring her here to be with me, I will go to her. I don't care how dangerous it is out there. I would ride a tiger to get to her if I had to.”

In truth, Frederic was utterly intimidated by the thought of venturing out into the real world. If his father refused to meet his demands, he had no idea if he would be able to follow through on his threat. Luckily for him, the king was shocked enough to give in.

And so, Ella came to live at the palace. She and Frederic were officially engaged to marry, and the tale of the magical way in which the couple met became the talk of the kingdom. Within days, the minstrels had a new hit on their hands, and the tale was told and retold across many realms. But while the popular version of the story ended with a happily-ever-after for Prince Charming and Cinderella, things didn't go as smoothly for the real Frederic and Ella.

Ironically, it was Ella's bold and venturesome spirit—the very thing that Frederic found so attractive about her—that came between them. Ella's dreadful stepmother had treated her like a prisoner in her own home and forced her to spend nearly every waking hour performing onerous tasks, like scrubbing grout or chipping congealed mayonnaise from between fork tines. While Ella suffered through all this, she dreamed of a more exhilarating life. She fantasized about riding camels across deserts to search ancient temples for magic lamps, or scaling cloud-covered peaks to play games of chance with the rulers of hidden mountain kingdoms. She honestly believed that *anything* could happen in her future.

When Ella met Frederic at the ball, it was the climax

of a day filled with magic and intrigue, and she assumed it was the beginning of a nonstop, thrill-a-minute existence for her. But life with Frederic was not quite what she'd expected.

Frederic tended to sleep in. Sometimes until lunch. And he'd often spend over an hour grooming himself to his father's specifications. By the time Ella finally saw him each day, she would be more than ready for some sort of excitement. But Frederic usually suggested a more subdued activity, like picnicking, listening to music, or quietly admiring some art.

Don't get me wrong: Ella enjoyed all those things—for the first few days. But by the fourteenth picnic, she began to fear that those same few activities were all she was ever going to do at the palace. Her unchanging routine made her feel uncomfortably like a prisoner again. So one morning, she decided she would speak frankly with Frederic about what she needed.

That morning, as usual, Frederic slept late. When he eventually got up, he spent fifteen minutes (pretty quick for him) browsing a closet filled with ultra-fancy suits, before finally deciding on a crisp white outfit trimmed with gold braiding and tasseled shoulder pads. The five minutes after that were dedicated to straightening his short, light-brown

hair. Unfortunately, a few stubborn strands refused to stay in place, and so the prince did what he did whenever he got frustrated:

“Reginald!”

Within seconds, a tall, slender man with a thin, pointy mustache popped into the prince’s bedroom. “Yes, milord?” he asked in a voice stiff enough to match his rigid posture.

“Good morning, Reginald,” Frederic said. “Can you fix my hair?”

“Certainly, milord,” Reginald said, as he grabbed a silver brush and began using it to tidy the prince’s bed head.

“Thank you, Reginald,” Frederic said. “I’m off to see Ella, and I want to look my best.”

“Of course, milord.”

“I think I’m going to have Cook surprise her with breakfast in bed.”

Reginald paused. “I’m reasonably sure, milord, that the young lady has already eaten breakfast.”

“Drat,” muttered the prince. “So it’s happened again. How long ago did she wake up?”

“About three hours ago,” Reginald replied.

“Three hours! But I asked you to wake me when Ella got up.”

“I’m sorry, milord,” Reginald said sympathetically.

“You know I’d love to help you. But we’re under strict orders from the king: Your beauty sleep is not to be disturbed.”

Frederic burst from his seat, waving away Reginald’s brush. “My father *ordered* you not to wake me? He’s still trying to keep me and Ella apart.”

He rushed to the door of his bedroom, then quickly back to the mirror for one last check of the hair, and then out and down the hall to look for his fiancée.

Ella wasn’t in her room, so Frederic headed to the gardens. He paused briefly to sniff a rosebush, when he heard the sound of approaching hoofbeats. He looked over his shoulder to see that a large white horse was bearing down on him, tearing through the garden at a fast gallop, leaping over one hedgerow after another. The prince tried to run, but the golden tassels of his jacket caught on the shrub’s thorns.

Frederic tugged frantically at his stuck sleeve as the horse’s rider pulled up on the reins and brought the steed to a halt. From the saddle, Ella looked down at him and laughed. She wore a distinctly unfancy blue dress, and her tied-back hair was disheveled from the ride. Her strong, athletic build and warm, healthy glow were a stark contrast

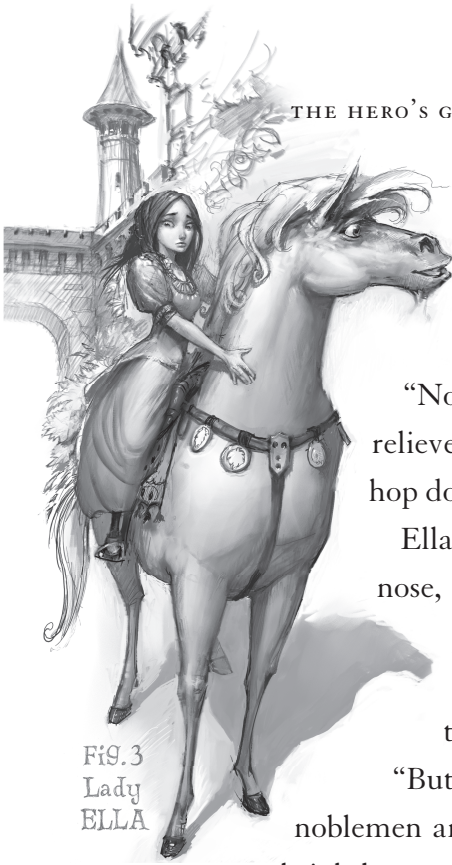


FIG. 3
Lady
ELLA

to Frederic's slender frame and sun-deprived complexion. "I hope you haven't been stuck there all morning," she said, only half joking.

"No, this just happened," Frederic said, relieved. "I don't suppose you could possibly hop down and lend me a hand?"

Ella slid off the saddle, patted her horse's nose, and crouched down to help free the prince's jacket from the thorns. "I told you those tassels would get you into trouble someday," she said.

"But they're what all the most fashionable noblemen are wearing these days," Frederic said brightly.

He brushed himself off and struck a chest-out, hands-on-hips pose to show off his outfit. He hammed it up to get a laugh out of Ella. It worked.

"Very nice," Ella said with a chuckle. "I'd love to see you up on a horse sometime," she hinted, petting her mare's pink nose.

"Yes, I'm sure I'd look positively heroic up there," Frederic said. "It's a shame I'm allergic to horsehair." He wasn't allergic; he was afraid of falling off.

“A terrible shame,” Ella sighed.

“I didn’t realize you knew how to ride,” Frederic said. “Considering the way your stepmother kept you under lock and key, I wouldn’t have thought you had much time for equestrian lessons.”

“I didn’t,” Ella said. “Charles, your head groom, has been teaching me these past few weeks. I usually practice in the mornings, while you . . . um, while you sleep.”

Frederic changed the subject: “So, have you heard the song that Pennyfeather wrote about you? That bard of ours certainly has a way with a quill. The song is very popular, I hear. Supposedly, the minstrels are singing it as far as Sylvaria and Sturmhagen. Before you know it, you’ll be more famous than me. Or even more famous than Pennyfeather. Though I don’t really like the fact that he called you *Cinderella*. Makes you sound dirty and unkempt.”

“I don’t mind,” said Ella. “I *was* dirty and unkempt for years. I was always covered in soot and cinders from cleaning the fireplace, so at least I see where he got the name from.”

“Speaking of names,” said Frederic, “have you noticed that the song refers to me as ‘Prince Charming’? My real name’s not in there at all. People are going to think I’m

the same prince from that Sleeping Beauty song or the Rapunzel one. Here, listen and tell me what you think.” He called out to a passing servant, “Excuse me, my good man. Could you please fetch Pennyfeather the Mellifluous for us? Tell him that the prince and Lady Ella would like a command performance of “The Tale of Cinderella.””

“I’m sorry, milord,” the servant replied. “Mr. Pennyfeather is unavailable. He hasn’t been seen for days, actually. It’s the talk of the palace; we assumed you would have heard by now. No one knows where the royal bard is.”

“Well, that explains why I haven’t been getting my lullaby these past few nights,” Frederic said thoughtfully.

“Frederic, maybe something awful has happened to Pennyfeather,” Ella said, sounding a bit too excited by the prospect. “We should check into it. Come on, let’s go. We need to figure out the last person to see him. Let’s start by asking at the gate—”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing so dramatic,” Frederic said quickly. The only thing he had a harder time imagining than a crime occurring within the royal palace was himself investigating such a crime. “He’s probably just off at a bard convention somewhere, one of those gatherings where they vote on the precise number of feathers a minstrel should

have in his cap—that sort of thing. But don't worry, just because Pennyfeather himself isn't here doesn't mean we can't have music. I'll just send for—”

“Never mind the song, Frederic,” Ella said, taking a deep breath. “Remember how we were just talking about my sheltered childhood?”

Frederic nodded.

“Now that I'm free, I want to have new experiences. I want to find out what I'm capable of. So, if we're not going to look into Pennyfeather's disappearance, what can we do today?” she asked. “What kind of adventure *can* we have?”

“Adventure, right.” Frederic pondered his options briefly. “It is a lovely day. Nice and sunny. I'm thinking picnic.”

Ella slumped. “Frederic, I need to do something different.”

Frederic stared at her like a lost baby rabbit.

“I hear there's a troupe of traveling acrobats in town,” Ella suggested. “Maybe we could get them in here to teach us some tumbling.”

“Oh, but I've got that problem with my ankle.” He had no problem with his ankle.

“How about a treasure hunt?” Ella proposed excitedly.

“Some of the kitchen staff were gossiping about a bag of stolen gold that one of your father’s old valets hid in the tunnels below the castle. We could try to find it.”

“Oh, but I can’t go below ground level. You know what dampness does to my sinuses.” Dampness did nothing to his sinuses.

“Can we go boating on the lake?”

“I can’t swim.” This was true.

Ella huffed. “Frederic, what *can* we do? I’m sorry if this sounds rude, but I’m bored.”

“We could have a different *kind* of picnic,” Frederic offered hopefully. “We could do breakfast food for lunch. Croissants, poached eggs. How’s that for shaking things up?”

Ella walked back to her horse and hopped up into the saddle. “Go ahead and order your picnic, Frederic,” she said flatly. “I’m going to ride a bit more while you wait.”

“Okay,” Frederic said, and waved to her. “I’ll stay right here.”

“I’m sure you will. You’re very good at that,” Ella replied. And she rode off.

An hour or so later, Frederic sat out on the palace lawn (well, on a carefully unfolded blanket, actually—he didn’t

want to get grass stains on his white pants), waiting for his lunch and his fiancée to arrive. A servant arrived and set down a tray of breakfast delicacies in front of Frederic. “Milord,” the man said, as he bowed and backed away. “There’s a message there for you.”

Frederic saw a folded piece of paper nestled between a bowl of grapefruit slices and a plate of chocolate-chip waffles. He picked up the note, with a sudden sinking feeling about what it might say.



Sweet, good-hearted Frederic,

I'm terribly sorry to do this to you, and I hope that someday you will understand why I had to leave. You seem very comfortable in your life here at the palace.

I can't make you into someone who wants to climb mountains, paddle rushing rivers, and explore ancient ruins. You don't want to do those things, and that's fine. It's just not your cup of tea. Your cup of tea is, well, a cup of tea.

But I need something more.

When you mentioned that song about Rapunzel, it got me thinking. The prince in that story tried to rescue Rapunzel, but Rapunzel ended up rescuing HIM.

Now, THAT girl is an inspiration. So, I'm heading off to find her. I think Rapunzel and I will hit it off. I think she'll make a great partner for hunting down Pennyfeather. And even if we end up finding him at a boring old convention like you say, who knows what kind of adventures will be in store for us along the way?

Frederic, you are a lovely man and I have nothing but good wishes for you. For what it's worth, that night at the ball really was the most romantic night of my life.

*All the best,
Ella*



Frederic dropped the letter onto his empty plate. So, he thought, *the ball was the most romantic night of her life, huh? Well, that's not saying much coming from a girl whose typical nights consisted of scraping dead spiders out of cracks in the floorboards. And look how she signed it. "All the best"?* That's how you sign a thank-you note to your dog walker. Frederic had completely lost his appetite.

"Reginald!"

"Am I really that boring?"

Frederic was back in his room, sitting slumped on the

edge of his cashmere-covered bed, while Reginald, rigid as ever, stood next to him, awkwardly patting the prince's head.

"There, there, milord," the valet answered. "I don't think the Countess of Bellsworth would call you boring. Do you remember how elated she was when you taught her how to cha-cha? You have many, many admirers, sir."

"Yes," Frederic said sorrowfully. "But Ella is apparently not among them."

"It seems that Lady Ella simply seeks a different kind of life than that which you can provide for her here at the palace," Reginald said.

"Poached eggs! How stupid can I be?" Frederic smacked himself on the forehead.

"There will be other women, milord."

"I don't want any other women. I want *Ella*. Reginald, what do you think I should do? And be honest with me; don't just tell me what you think my father would want you to say."

Reginald considered this request. He'd been caring for Frederic since the prince was a child. And he'd never been more proud of Frederic than when he saw the young man stand up to his overbearing father. Frederic could use someone as feisty and fearless as Ella in his life.

“Don’t let her get away,” Reginald said, dropping his overly stiff posture and speaking in an unusually casual tone.

“Wow,” Frederic gasped. “Did you just get two inches shorter?”

“Never mind me,” Reginald said. “Did you hear what I told you? Get a move on! Go after Ella.”

“But how?” Frederic asked, still bewildered to hear his longtime valet speaking like a regular person.

“We’ll put you on a horse. Charles can show you the basics. You don’t need to be the world’s best rider; you just need to be able to get around. Stick to the roads and you’ll be fine.”

“But—”

“I know you’re scared, Frederic. But here’s my advice: Get over it. Ella wants someone as adventurous as she is. A real hero.”

“Then I’ve got no hope.” Frederic sulked. “I’m a fantastic dresser. My penmanship is top-notch. I’m really good at being a prince, but I’m pretty lousy at being a hero.”

Reginald looked him in the eye. “There’s a bit of courage in you somewhere. Find it. Go catch up with Ella, wherever she is. And just see what happens. She might be

impressed enough that you've left the palace."

"There's no way my father will allow me to do this."

"We won't tell him."

"He'll notice I'm gone eventually. And when he does, he'll send his men to retrieve me."

"Whichever way you go, I'll send them in the opposite direction."

"I'm still not sure I should. It's really dangerous out there."

"That's your father talking," Reginald said. "Look, if you go on this journey, you're not just doing it for Ella, you're also doing it for that little boy who once wanted to try everything."

"You mean my cousin Laurence, who broke his leg trying to fly with those wax wings?"

Reginald looked at him soberly. "Frederic, you don't really remember your mother, but I do. And I know what she'd want you to do."

Frederic stood up. "Okay, I'll go."

"That's the spirit," said Reginald.

Frederic marched out of his room. A second later, he marched back in.

"I should probably change into something more appropriate for the outdoors," he said.

Reginald put his arm around him. “You don’t own anything more appropriate for the outdoors,” he said with a smile. “Come, let’s get you down to the stables.”

The next morning, after several hours of secret, intensive riding lessons, Prince Frederic trotted out through the palace gates on horseback, with Reginald and Charles the groom waving him good-bye. His eyes were tightly closed, his arms wrapped around the horse’s neck. Then something dawned on him.

“Wait,” he called back to Reginald. “I don’t know where I’m going.”

“Ella’s note said she was going to find that Rapunzel girl,” Reginald said. “Those bards are never very good about telling you exactly where their stories take place. But based on the clunky rhymes, I’m pretty sure ‘The Song of Rapunzel’ is the work of Lyrical Leif, the bard from Sturmhagen. Humph. With a name like Lyrical Leif, you’d think the guy could come up with better lines than, ‘Her hair was real long, not short like a prawn.’ Anyway, I’d try Sturmhagen. Head south.”

“But Sturmhagen? Isn’t it supposed to be full of monsters?” Frederic said, his eyes growing wider by the second.

“Ride fast,” Charles the groom called out. “With any luck, you’ll catch up to Lady Ella before you reach the border.”

“I can’t ride *fast*,” Frederic said. “I’m trying hard to make sure I ride *forward*.”

“Then so far you’re succeeding,” Reginald yelled. “Stay strong!”

Frederic gripped his horse tighter, wondering what in the world he’d gotten himself into. Within twenty-four hours, he would be sniffling through a rainstorm, wishing he’d never left home. In a little over a week, he’d be quivering in the shadow of a raging giant. Another week after that, he would end up at the Stumpy Boarhound. But for now, he was on his way to Sturmhagen.



PRINCE CHARMING DEFENDS SOME VEGETABLES

Sturmhagen wasn't a big tourist destination, mainly because of all the monsters. The kingdom's thick and shadowy pine forests were crawling with all sorts of horrid creatures. And yet, that fact never seemed to bother the people who lived there. For most Sturmhageners, the occasional troll attack or goblin raid was just another nuisance to be dealt with, on par with a mouse in the pantry or a ferret in the sock drawer. These are *tough folks* we're talking about. Take the royal family, for instance: King Olaf, at age sixty, was seven feet tall and capable of uprooting trees with his bare hands. His wife, Queen Berthilda, was only two inches shorter, and once famously punched out a swindler who tried to sell her

some bogus “magic beans.”

Prince Gustav, who stood six-foot-five and had shoulders broad enough to get stuck in most doorways, was nonetheless the smallest member of his family. Growing up as the “tiny” one among sixteen older brothers, Gustav felt a desperate need to appear bigger and more imposing. This usually involved puffing out his chest and speaking very loudly: Picture a six-year-old boy standing on top of the dining room table, posing like a statue of a war hero, and shouting, “The mighty Gustav demands his milk cup be refilled!” This didn’t make him look impressive—it made him look strange. His older siblings mocked him mercilessly.

The more people laughed at him, the more distraught Gustav became. He stuffed balls of yarn into his sleeves to make his muscles look larger (and sadly, lumpier). He tied bricks to the bottom of his boots to make himself taller (and clomped around like a sumo wrestler in a full-body cast). He even grew



FIG. 4
Prince
GUSTAV

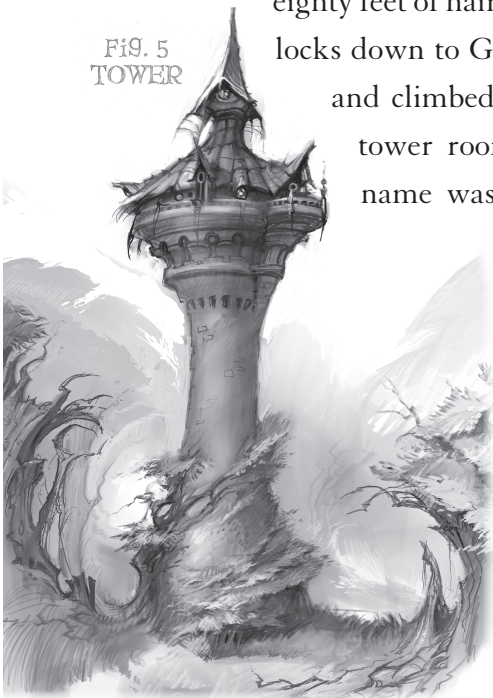
his hair long, just so he would have more of *something*. Unsurprisingly, his brothers continued to tease him.

In his later teen years, Gustav became a frustrated, angry loner. For as much of the day as possible, he avoided contact with other people (which was not necessarily a bad thing for the other people). He would roam on horseback through the pine forests of Sturmhagen, hoping to find some creature he could fight—and thereby prove his strength and heroism. One day he stumbled upon something incredible.

There was a tall tower standing all by itself in a forest clearing. Oddly, it had no doors and no stairs. But it did have a girl stuck up in a room at the very top—a girl with eighty feet of hair. She lowered her shimmery blond locks down to Gustav, and he used them as a rope and climbed up to her. Once inside the small tower room, Gustav learned that the girl's name was Rapunzel and that she was the captive of an evil witch.

Now, Gustav was not exactly a ladies' man; in fact, this may have been the first time he'd ever made eye contact with a girl. But he was struck by

FIG. 5
TOWER



Rapunzel. She was so different from the girls he'd seen around the castle, especially his brutish cousins, who liked to hold him down and smack him with their thick, whiplike pigtaails. Rapunzel was all soft, pillowy curves and delicate, graceful movements. She smiled at him warmly, held his hand, and spoke to him kindly. *So this is why people like girls*, Gustav thought.

Overtaken by feelings that were entirely new to him, Gustav opened up. He complained about his brothers, and, to his surprise, Rapunzel listened. Gustav was in heaven. He yammered on for hours, until Rapunzel realized the sun was going down. The witch would be returning soon, she said, and she begged Gustav to go for help.

Gustav climbed back down Rapunzel's hair, hopped on his horse, and took off in the direction of the royal castle. But he stopped just a mile or so away from the witch's tower. There was no way he was going to round up his brothers to come and help him. They would take all the credit and probably even steal Rapunzel's attention away from him. No, this was going to be *his* rescue, *his* heroic deed.

Under the darkening sky, he

Fig. 6
Lady
RAPUNZEL



turned around and rode back to the tower. Rapunzel let down her hair for him but was confused to see Gustav reenter her prison room alone.

“Where are the others?” she asked.

“I need no others,” Gustav said with total confidence. “I will rescue you myself.”

“Did you get a ladder?” she asked hopefully.

“No,” he said, suddenly sounding less sure of himself.

“How are we going to get out then?”

Gustav had no plan, so he said nothing. He just peeked around in the corners of the room, pretending he was looking for something.

Moments later, a scratchy voice called from outside, “Rapunzel, let down your hair.”

“It’s Zaubera,” Rapunzel whispered. “Quick, you must hide.”

“I hide from no one,” Gustav said. “Let her up. When she steps into the room, I will kill the witch.”

“But—”

“Just do it,” Gustav insisted.

Rapunzel let down her hair.

When Lyrical Leif later chronicled the event in his song about Rapunzel, Prince Charming’s “battle” with the witch went on for three lengthy verses. In reality, it

was over in less than three seconds. As soon as the witch stepped over the windowsill, Gustav leapt at her. The evil old woman caught him and, with superhuman strength, hurled him from the tower. Done and done.

Gustav's landing was particularly nasty. He came down face-first into a painfully prickly briar patch. So painful, in fact, that the thorns scratched his eyes and blinded him. He spent the next several days stumbling through the forest, feeling his way from tree to tree. It was pitiful. After nearly a week, he collapsed from hunger.

Rapunzel, in the meantime, managed to get free (though how she pulled off that feat was a mystery to everyone but her and the witch). She searched the woods for Gustav, and eventually found him sightless and starving. Rapunzel cradled him in her arms and wept. And here's the really amazing part: As soon as her tears hit Gustav's eyes, his vision was restored.

Once the story got out—and boy, did the minstrels get a lot of requests for this one—Gustav's brothers treated him worse than ever. He couldn't show his face in the castle without hearing mocking calls like, "Look out, Prince Charming, I think I see a scary shrub! Don't worry, we'll call Cousin Helga to come save you!"

Gustav considered this the lowest point of his life. He'd

become famous for being a failure. He'd never been much of a people person to begin with, and this only made things worse.

One day, after being jeered by a group of shepherds (according to Gustav, the sheep were laughing, too), the big prince retreated into the forest, climbed a tall tree, and sat among its highest branches, hoping to avoid human contact. Rapunzel found him anyway.

"Come down," she called. "Come back home with me."

"Go away," Gustav said. "Can't you see I'm in a tree?"

"I see how the words of others hurt you," Rapunzel said. "But you'll hear no harsh words from me."

"Oh, that's right—you're Little Miss Perfect," Gustav grumbled from up above. "It's all your fault, you know. It's because of you that everyone thinks I'm a joke."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Rapunzel said, craning her neck to see him. "You know I only meant to help. When I saw you in that condition—"

"I would've been fine."

"You were half-dead."

"More like *half-alive*. See, that's your problem, Mega-Braid. You're always trying to fix something that doesn't need fixing."

"Fixing people is my gift."

Gustav snorted. “Well, I’m returning it. Go re-gift it to someone else.”

Rapunzel was silent for a moment, then said, “I should. It’s selfish of me to keep this gift to myself. The world is full of people in need; I’m wasting my talents here, trying to give you reasons to like yourself.”

“What?” Gustav jumped down, breaking several branches on his way to the ground. “Why don’t you use your power on yourself, Miracle Girl? You’ve obviously got something wrong with your brain. ’Cause I like myself just fine. I *love* myself. What’s not to love? I’m a better fighter than anyone, a better hunter, a better horseman—”

“If you truly like yourself as you are, why do you feel the need to prove yourself better than everyone else?”

“Leave,” Gustav barked. “You said it: Go help someone else. I don’t need anybody.”

Rapunzel gathered her hair and began to walk away.

“You’re right,” she said as she left. “Helping others is what I was meant to do. I don’t understand you, Gustav. But maybe you do understand *me*, after all.”

He never told anyone that Rapunzel had left. But her departure only made Gustav more determined than ever to show the world he was a hero worthy of respect. He

spent his days riding around the countryside, looking for someone to rescue.

Months later, on the outskirts of Sturmhagen, Rosilda Stiffenkrauss and her family were busily plucking beets from the ground, when the nearby trees parted with a rumble and a hulking troll stepped out of the forest, sniffing the air with its tremendous nose. If you've never

FIG. 7
TROLL

seen one before, trolls are about nine feet tall, covered with shaggy, swamp-colored hair, and may or may not have horns (this troll had one crooked horn jutting out from the left side of its head). Many people,

upon seeing a troll for the first time, think they are being attacked by a big, ferocious pile of spinach. Rosilda Stiffenkrauss, however, had lived in Sturmhagen her entire life and knew a troll when she saw one.

"Oh, for pete's sake," she sighed. "Here comes another one. Come on, kids; everybody inside until it goes away."

The big, greenish man-



thing grunted and lumbered toward the farming family with a hungry smile on its hideous face. Rosilda quickly ushered her eleven children inside their small wood-frame house, where they all watched from the windows as the monster sat down amid their crops and started tossing handfuls of freshly picked beets into its mouth. Rosilda was furious.

“Stinking up the yard is one thing,” she spat, “but there’s no way I’m letting that beast devour our produce.”

The thickset, red-faced farmer woman wiped her hands on her apron, threw open the door, and marched back outside. “Get your grimy hands off our beets!” she yelled. Her wild and frizzy carrot-orange hair bounced with every angry word. “We spent the whole morning pulling those things up, and I’ll be darned if I’m going to let you gobble them all!”

Rosilda picked a shovel up off the ground and raised it over her head, threatening to clobber the vegetable thief, who was nearly twice her size. Her children crowded in the doorway and cheered her on. “Mom-my, Mom-my!”

The troll looked up at her in shock, as bright red beet juice ran down its chin. “Uh,” the thing grunted. “Shovel Lady hit?”

“You’re darn right I hit,” Rosilda growled back. “Unless

you drop those veggies and head back into the woods you came from.”

The troll looked from the woman's scowling face to the long, rusty shovel she waved menacingly overhead. It dropped the handful of beets it had been about to eat.

“Shovel Lady no hit Troll,” it mumbled as it stood up. “Troll make no trouble. Troll go.”

Enter Prince Gustav. Clad in clanking, fur-trimmed armor and wielding a large, shining battle-ax, he charged at the troll on horseback.

“Not so fast, beast!” Gustav shouted as he approached, his long blond hair flowing behind him. Without stopping his horse, he leapt from the saddle, turning himself into a human missile, and knocked the troll flat onto its back. The prince and the troll rolled through the garden in one clanking, grunting mass, smashing down freshly sprouted beet plants, until the creature finally got back to its feet and tossed Gustav off. The prince crashed through the wooden planks of the farmer's fence but nimbly picked himself back up, ready to charge the monster again. That was when Gustav spotted the bright red beet juice around the troll's mouth.

“Child eater!” he screamed. All the children were, of course, perfectly fine—and had actually filed back out into the yard to watch the fight—but Gustav was too focused



on the monster to notice. The prince swung his ax. The troll caught the weapon in its large, clawed hands, yanked it away from Gustav, and tossed it off into a corner of the farmyard, where it shattered several barrels of pickled beets with a crunch and a splat.

“Starf it all,” Gustav cursed (which prompted some of the older children to cover the ears of the younger ones).

Now unarmed, the prince stood face-to-face with the troll. The monster was nearly three feet taller than him, but Gustav showed no hint of fear. Gustav didn't really do “fear.” Annoyance, consternation, occasionally embarrassment: Those were emotions Gustav was familiar with. But not fear.

“Why Angry Man do that?” the troll asked. Gustav charged at the creature, but it grabbed him in mid-run and lifted him into the air. The troll spun the prince upside down and rammed him headfirst into the ground with a pile-driver-like maneuver. Dazed, Gustav tried to crawl away, but the troll, still holding him by the feet, swung him to the left, smashing him through a stack of wooden crates. The monster then swung him back to the right, wrapping him around a fence post. Gustav swung his fist at the troll, but his punch didn't even land. The creature hoisted him overhead and was ready to chuck him up onto

the farmhouse roof, when Rosilda stepped up behind the troll and smacked it in the back of the head with her shovel.

“Ow!” The troll dropped Gustav in the dirt and rubbed the sore spot on its skull. “Shovel Lady said Shovel Lady would not hit Troll.”

“That was before you started beating up on that poor man,” Rosilda snapped. “Now get out of here.”

“But Angry Man hit Troll first.”

“I don’t care. You get out.” She raised the shovel again.

“No more, no more. Troll go.” And the huge creature shuffled off toward the forest. The children burst into cheers and danced around the garden.

Rosilda held her hand out to Gustav, who still lay on the ground. He angrily waved the woman’s hand away and stood up by himself. “I had it under control,” he scolded. “You shouldn’t have put yourself in harm’s way.”

“You know, the troll was about to leave when you jumped on him,” Rosilda said. “Everything was fine. And now look—you’ve wrecked our garden.”

Gustav surveyed the yard. There were broken fences, smashed barrels, squashed beets, and row after row of flattened plants. “You care about a few vegetables? The monster ate your children!” he shouted.

“It did no such thing,” the woman scoffed.

"It had blood on its mouth."

"Beet juice."

"Are you sure?" Gustav asked, looking around at the giddy, dancing children. "It must have eaten at least one kid. Have you counted them?"

"Now look here, my knight in shining armor," Rosilda said as she handed Gustav the beet-stained ax he'd lost. "I know how many wee ones I've got, and none of them are in the belly of a troll. Perhaps if you'd taken a second to stop and think before you—"

Rosilda paused and stepped closer to Gustav. "Wait a minute," she said with a grin. "I know who you are. You're the prince from that Rapunzel story."

At that point, the children swarmed around Gustav, oohing and ahing. He said nothing.

"Yeah, I'm sure it's you," Rosilda said. "Prince Charming himself."

"My name is Gustav."

"I've been to the royal castle, you know," she said. "I've *seen* you there."

Gustav looked stern. "No, you're thinking of my brother. He's Charming. I'm Prince Gustav. Gustav the Mighty."

At that, a small boy and a small girl each started

climbing up one of Gustav's arms.

"Okay, Your Highness," Rosilda said. "Why don't you open up your royal wallet and pay us for the damage you've done to our farm?"

"I carry no gold with me," Gustav said, with a child sitting on each shoulder pulling at his hair. "But I'll tell the royal treasurer to send you some money."

He tried to walk away before the woman pried any further into his least favorite topic, but was slowed down by two more children, one sitting on each of his feet, hugging his heavy, fur-lined boots.

"Tell me one thing, Your Highness," Rosilda called to him. "Why didn't you get a ladder?"

That question *again*? It was more than Gustav could bear. He shook off the children, who all dropped, giggling, into the dirt. "Pah!" was all he offered in response.

"When you get back to your castle, why don't you tell that Lyrical Leif that he needs to write some new material?" Rosilda said with a smirk. "It's been months now, and I'm gettin' tired of hearing about how that sweet girl saved your life."

"For your information, that weaselly song-spitter hasn't shown his face around Castle Sturmhagen in weeks," Gustav snarled. "And I say, good riddance!"

He abruptly turned his back on Rosilda and hopped onto his dark brown warhorse. He planned to speed off and kick up a cloud of dust at this annoying woman, but before he could spur the horse on, a newcomer approached the farm. This fellow was also on horseback, riding a light tan mare. He was hunched awkwardly in the saddle and moving very slowly. The rider stopped and looked up when he reached the farmyard gate. Gustav, Rosilda, and the children all stared at the stranger's very odd attire: a dusty white suit, decked with gold trim and tassels.

"Hello," the man said with a weary smile. "This might sound a bit strange, but are any of you familiar with the tale of Rapunzel? She's a girl with really long hair, and—"

The delighted children bounced around and pointed at Gustav. "Oh," said the stranger. "You know the story?"

Rosilda chuckled. "He *is* the story. That's Prince Charming, right there."

The stranger's eyes widened, and he sat upright. "Really? You're joking. No? Oh, that's wonderful. You don't know how terrible this last week has been. I came all the way from Harmonia. I've been riding all over, not getting nearly enough sleep, stopping at every village and farm I could find. I'm practically starving—you wouldn't believe the

things that pass for scones in some of these places. I have had to sleep at inns where they obviously don't change sheets between guests; I have washed my face in the same water that fish *do things* in. I'm sorry; I'm rambling. The point is: I've gone through all of this in hopes of finding someone who could point me in Rapunzel's direction. And now I've run into *you*. You, of all people. And it's even more amazing than you think, because *I'm* Prince Charming, too!"

Gustav narrowed his eyes. "You're a crazy man."

"No, I'm sorry, I'm just a little excited. You see, my name is Frederic. But I'm also a Prince Charming. I'm from the Cinderella story." He flashed a broad smile and offered his hand to Gustav. Gustav didn't take it; he had no idea what this lunatic was talking about, and he certainly didn't trust him. The children, on the other hand, applauded wildly at the mention of Cinderella's name. Frederic gave them a quick salute.

"Okay, let me start over," Frederic said to Gustav. "I'm looking for my fiancée, Ella—that's her real name. She left Harmonia about a week ago. All I know is that she was going to Sturmhagen to find Rapunzel. So, if you could be so kind as to lead me to Rapunzel . . ."

"Follow me," Gustav said, and started his horse off into the field.

“Oh, fantastic. So how far away is she?”

“I’m not taking you to Rapunzel,” Gustav said. “I want to speak to you out of earshot of this rabble.” And with that, he was off.

“Oh,” said Frederic. “Um, good-bye, children!” He waved to the farmer and her family, and then accidentally walked his horse in a circle three times before getting the animal to follow Gustav down the road.

“Humph,” Rosilda grumbled. “And these are the guys everybody wants to marry? I don’t get it.”

The two men trotted along the meadow-lined dirt road in silence for a while, until Frederic finally spoke. “Soooo . . . You mentioned something back there about *not* taking me to Rapunzel.”

“That’s right,” said Gustav. “I’m not taking you to Rapunzel.”

“And why is that?”

Feeling they were far enough from the farm, Gustav brought his horse to a stop. “Look,” he said seriously, “are you really the prince from that other story?”

“Yes,” said Frederic as he struggled to line his horse up beside Gustav’s. “Are you really Rapunzel’s prince?”

Gustav huffed. “I’m not *her* prince, but yes, I am the

one from that dumb song. I can't take you to Rapunzel, because she ran off somewhere."

"Oh." Frederic looked crestfallen. "So we have something else in common."

"I didn't want that farmer woman and her little imps to hear that Rapunzel was gone," Gustav said. He glared at Frederic. "And if *you* tell anyone, Fancy Man, you'll regret it."

"I won't," Frederic replied. "But if it's such a big secret, I'm curious as to why you decided to tell me at all."

Gustav honestly wasn't sure why he'd chosen to confide in this ridiculous stranger. Maybe he figured that if there was anyone in the world who could possibly understand him, it would be another of the poor fools cursed to be Prince Charming. But could this guy really even be a prince? He looked like a deranged doorman. *My brothers would eat this guy for lunch*, Gustav thought. *But then again, if my brothers would hate him, maybe he's not so bad.*

"What happened to your woman?" Gustav asked.

"Ella left because she thought I was boring," Frederic said. "But you don't look boring at all. So I'm guessing that wasn't *your* problem."

"Boring? Ha! No, it's far worse than that. Rapunzel is off *helping* people," Gustav spat. (He simply could not

entertain the possibility that his behavior had something to do with Rapunzel's departure.)

"I don't understand," Frederic said. "Helping people is bad?"

"You know the story, right?"

Frederic nodded.

"So you know about the bit with the briar patch?"

"Was it really her tears that restored your sight?" Frederic asked.

"Who knows?" Gustav mumbled. "But *she's* convinced she saved me. And once that song started going around, it got worse. She was the brave heroine with magical tears. And what was I? I was the jerk who got beaten by an old lady and rescued by a girl. Anyway, she believes she can heal people, so she went off to spread goodness around the world or some nonsense like that. And I'm left here with a reputation to fix. . . ."

"I'm really sorry to hear—"

"Hold your words," Gustav cut him off. It suddenly hit him that this bizarre man in the silly suit might be offering exactly what he needed—the opportunity for a heroic deed. "This Cinderella person you're looking for—she's in some kind of danger? She needs help?"

"Well, not that I know of," Frederic replied.

“She’s in danger,” Gustav stated matter-of-factly. He saw Frederic flinch at the word “danger”; it should be easy enough to convince him that his girlfriend needed rescuing.

“Sturmhagen is no place for amateur adventurers,” he went on. “There are monsters at every turn.”

“Tigers?” Frederic asked in a barely audible whisper.

“Sure, why not? We’ve got everything else,” Gustav answered. “You know, I saved that farm family from a troll right before you showed up.”

“Are you serious?” Frederic asked, biting his thumbnail.

“Deadly serious,” Gustav said. “Was the girl armed?”

Frederic shook his head.

Gustav tried to stifle his excitement.

“I never step foot outside without my ax,” he said, motioning to the huge weapon that was now strapped to his back. Frederic got a glimpse of the big blade—still dripping with red—and nearly fell off his horse.

“No one’s safe in these woods without a weapon,” Gustav said. “What was she wearing?”

“A blue dress, I think.”

“A dress?” Gustav scoffed. “Look at me. *This* is how you prepare for Sturmhagen.” Gleaming armor plates covered his shoulders. Strapped to his upper arms, wrists, and legs

were more metal guards, all lined with heavy fur trim. His torso was draped with a fur-lined tunic. Underneath that, more armor. And his tall iron boots looked strong enough to kick their way through a solid wall.

“I don’t even think I could walk in all that,” Frederic said.

“If that girl’s been out here by herself for a week already, we’d better move fast. Her life is probably being threatened as we speak.”

“Oh, my,” Frederic said. “Well, um, will you, um, will you—”

“Yes, I will save your woman,” Gustav declared. “Come! We’re off!”

And with that, Gustav galloped down the road toward the dark, dense forest.

“Please don’t go so fast!” Frederic called as he followed in a sloppy zigzag. “This saddle really chafes!”

3



PRINCE CHARMING CLAIMS HE IS NOT AFRAID OF OLD LADIES

Over the years, Frederic had met his fair share of other princes. None of them were anything like this prince of Sturmhagen. Gustav was so gruff. He had no patience, no manners, and ridiculously poor communication skills. Frederic could only presume the man's flamenco dancing was just as awkward. He wasn't at all surprised that Gustav hadn't been able to hold on to his relationship with Rapunzel. But considering his own fiancée had run off, who was he to judge?

As the two princes rode across the countryside in search of Ella, Frederic began to grow frustrated with Gustav. For one thing, the big man always insisted they camp outside. Anytime Frederic suggested they look for an inn,

Gustav would respond with, “Bah!” Or sometimes, “Pah!” Or even, “Pffft!”

Every night, Gustav would contentedly sprawl out on bare grass, and then mock Frederic for attempting to curl up on a trio of spread-out handkerchiefs.

“Cleanliness, Gustav,” Frederic would say defensively. “I’m doing what I can in the name of cleanliness.” *Dirt*, of course, ranked fourth on King Wilberforce’s list of “Enemies of the Nobleman,” just below *nose hair*, but above *hiccups*.

As the days rolled by, Frederic also began to doubt Gustav’s skills as a tracker. He watched Gustav sniff the air, cup his hand to his ear to “listen to the wind,” and occasionally dismount from his horse to nibble the edge of a leaf. He couldn’t imagine how any of that would help them locate Ella.

And in reality, none of it would. Gustav had no idea what he was doing.

Eventually, Gustav took them off-road, into the thickest stretches of Sturmhagen’s pine forests, where the trees were so tall they blocked almost all sunlight. Every flutter of a bird or skitter of a mouse made Frederic flinch and drop his reins. The path was nearly nonexistent, and he and Gustav had to squeeze their horses between trees

to get by. More than once, Gustav pushed aside a large branch and let it snap back into Frederic's face.

Hours later, they finally spotted shafts of daylight ahead. "Aha," Gustav said. He stopped his horse and hopped down. "Now I know where we are."

"Now?" Frederic asked. "You mean we've been lost all this time?"

"Look there," Gustav said, pointing out into a small clearing beyond the trees, where they could see a solitary stone structure. "Zaubera's tower."

"Zaubera? Is that the witch?"

"No, she's some *other* old lady who has a tower in the woods," Gustav quipped sarcastically as he rolled his eyes.

"*This* is where you led me?" Frederic asked in disbelief. "To one of the most dangerous places in Sturmhagen? *And* the one place Ella is guaranteed *not* to be? This is the tower Rapunzel *escaped* from. Why in the world would Ella come *here* to look for her?"

Gustav ignored his protests. "Let's check it out," he said, and stepped out into the clearing.

Frederic grabbed the bigger man's arm and yanked him back into the trees. "What if the witch is there?" Frederic asked.

"Witch, are you there?" Gustav called out. He paused

for a second, listening for a response. “She’s not there. Let’s go.” He stepped into the clearing, and Frederic pulled him back once more.

“Wait,” Frederic said. “This witch—Zauberer—she’s pretty powerful, right?”

“She’s an old lady,” Gustav tossed off. “I’m not afraid of old ladies. Are you?”

“Ones who can pick me up and throw me, yes.”

“Look,” Gustav said. “Here’s all you need to know about Zauberer.”

Zauberer was possibly the most powerful witch in the world. She hadn’t always been, though. There was a time when she wasn’t even evil. Zauberer was just a farmer woman living by herself in the small town of Jorgsborg. She was a dabbler in the magical arts, just as every member of her family had been for generations. But she never used her talents to do anything more than grow the tastiest turnips the world had ever seen. Still, the magic freaked out her neighbors. Despite her many attempts to befriend her fellow Jorgsborgians, Zauberer was always ignored—or worse, mocked. One particular group of local children used to stand at the edge of her property and call her names like “worm lips” and “hedgehog hair.” Discouraged, Zauberer

gave up and retreated to her cottage to live the life of a hermit.

Then came the fateful day when one of the local hunters managed to capture one of Sturmhagen's giant, fire-breathing beavers. The man brought the creature back to town to show off his catch—big mistake. The beaver broke loose and went on a rampage, setting nearly every home in Jorgsborg ablaze. As the fire raged out of control around her, Zaubera projected a magical force field around her farm, keeping herself and her home safe from the flames. But she noticed a trio of children trapped by the flames, the same children who insulted her daily. Zaubera dropped the shield around her home and protected the children instead. She lost everything she'd worked for, but, she thought, at least the townspeople would finally appreciate her.

Suddenly, a hero arrived. The armored Sir Lindgren galloped into town on his white stallion and quickly slew the beaver. He then rode up to Zaubera and told her to release the children. Confused, she dropped her shield. Sir Lindgren scooped up the kids and rode away.

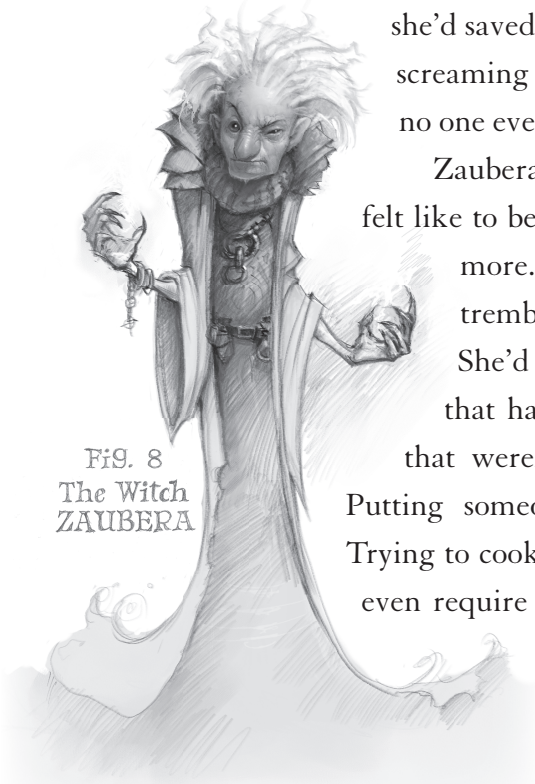
As the town began to rebuild and people returned to their homes, the townsfolk didn't thank Zaubera. In fact, they shunned her more than ever. And then she caught wind of a new bard song, "The Ballad of the Knight

and the Beaver,” in which the hero knight not only slays the beast but rescues three children from the clutches of a wicked witch. It was at that point that something in Zauber snapped.

Fine, she thought. *If they want a villain, that's what I'll give them.* She got her gnarled hands on some ancient spell books and taught herself some dark magic. Then she wreaked havoc on the town. She used fireballs to blast down every cottage that had been rebuilt. She tore up gardens with sorcerous winds. She shot bolts of mystical lightning at the very children whose lives she'd saved earlier, sending them running, screaming and crying. Everyone fled. And no one ever returned to Jorgsborg.

Zauber had gotten a taste of what it felt like to be truly feared. And she wanted more. The whole world should be trembling in fear of her, she thought. She'd heard about other witches that had become notorious for deeds that weren't even remotely impressive. Putting someone to sleep? So unoriginal. Trying to cook a couple of kids? That didn't even require magic! No, Zauber deserved

FIG. 8
The Witch
ZAUBERA



to be more infamous than all of them. She needed word of her wickedness to spread across the kingdoms. And for that, she couldn't rely on a few sizzled kids. She'd need to go big. She'd need to get the notice of the bards.

On the day she caught a wandering peasant swiping some turnips from her newly replanted garden, she came up with the perfect plan. Instead of simply frying the man where he stood, Zaubera offered to let him go in exchange for his young daughter. The peasant was surprisingly quick to agree to this (he was not a very good dad), and that was how Zaubera ended up with Rapunzel. The witch locked the girl away in an impenetrable tower and then waited gleefully for some heroes to try to rescue the fair maiden. She knew they would come. Heroes just can't stay away when they hear about a person in danger; heroes crave the glory that gets heaped upon them when they pull off a rescue. Oh, how Zaubera hated heroes. And when some stupid heroes showed up to storm her tower, she planned to blast them into nothingness; the levels of pain and destruction she would cause would simply be too great for the bards to overlook.

But no one came. Rapunzel's father never sent anyone to try to get his daughter back. He never even told anyone she was gone. Like I said, he was a very bad father. He just

sat home and enjoyed his stolen turnips.

Years went by, during which Zaubera was stuck with a prisoner she never really wanted. But the witch used the time wisely, learning every terrible magic spell she could—a spell to bind her enemies, a spell to grant her superhuman strength, even a thesaurus spell to help her think up new and creative ways to insult people. Before long, she was a master of dark magic. Then, one day, out of the blue, she got the rescue attempt she was hoping for. Sort of.

One of the lunkhead princes of Sturmhagen tried to attack her, and she made quick work of him. But the fool had come alone; there was no one to share the story of how Zaubera had destroyed the prince. No one except Rapunzel, that is. Desperate for fame, Zaubera set Rapunzel free to tell her tale. She never considered the possibility that the longhaired lass would save that near-dead lunkhead and become the hero of her own story.

After “The Song of Rapunzel” became popular—the song in which the bards made the witch sound incompetent by implying that Rapunzel *escaped* on her own—Zaubera was more determined than ever to prove her wickedness to the world. She also now had a vendetta against heroes *and* bards.

The witch spent weeks concocting her Supreme

Scheme for Infamy. Instead of kidnapping one prisoner this time, she was going to kidnap five. And she was going after captives that people would actually miss and *want back*, prisoners that the world's heroes would be climbing over one another for the chance to rescue: She was going to snatch the bards themselves.

And that's exactly what she had spent the past few weeks doing. She didn't worry about anybody getting wise to her plan before she was ready—there was no communication between kingdoms. And without bards, who was going to tell the people that the bards were missing?

Sturmhagen, Harmonia, Erinthia, Avondell, and Sylvaria: When the heroes of these five kingdoms hear that I've got their beloved lute-pluckers, they'll come running, the witch thought. And when they arrive, they'll bear witness to the grandest display of evil power this world has ever seen. No one will ever ignore Zaubera again.

Of course, Gustav didn't tell any of that to Frederic—Gustav didn't know any of that. What Gustav said to Frederic was: "She's an old lady. End of story."

Gustav strolled cockily out into the clearing, with Frederic quivering behind him. As it turned out, someone had heard Gustav's shout after all. A girl's head popped

out of the tower's lone window, some sixty feet above the ground.

"Who's out there?" Ella shouted, as she looked down. She was stunned to see her fiancé. "Frederic, is that you? What are you doing here?"

"Ella!" Frederic squealed with delight. "Oh, my goodness. It's you! I, uh, I came to find you."

"You did?" Ella said. "Wow. You did. You're really here."

Okay, this is it, Frederic thought. *Time to show her what you've got.* "It's the all-new me, Ella. I've slept on dirt. I'm ready for adventure now."

Frederic couldn't see Gustav behind him, but he could *feel* his eyes rolling.

"How'd you get up there?" Frederic called.

"It's a long story," Ella said.

It's not really a long story. Here it is:

Ella rode into Sturmhagen (it took her two days to cover the distance Frederic traveled in a week) and visited a village where she hoped to gather some information about Rapunzel.

"Do any of you happen to know Rapunzel?" she asked a group of townsfolk strolling down the street, and then

tried (unnecessarily) to jog their memories by singing a few bars. “Listen, dear hearts, to the tale I must share; the tale of a girl with very long hair. . . .”

Zauberer, out on the prowl, slunk by just at that moment, pondering a cleverly theatrical way to spread news of the bards’ kidnappings. It might be a poetic touch, she thought, to snatch a passing minstrel and use him or her to *sing* about the crime.

And when Zauberer saw some loudmouth in a dress singing to a crowd on a street corner, she figured she’d found her minstrel. Only it was really Ella. As soon as the crowd dispersed, the witch sidled up to her.

“Get your facts straight, you chuckleheaded throat-warbler!” Zauberer spat. She then trapped Ella—who was utterly baffled—in a binding spell and took her back to the tower.

See, it wasn’t that long.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Ella said. “Please, go get help before the witch comes back.”

“No, we’re not leaving without you!” Frederic yelled.

“Who’s that with you?” Ella asked.

“Oh, this is Rapunzel’s prince. He helped me find you. And he can get you down. He’s got experience with this.”

He turned to Gustav and asked him quietly, "How do we get her down?"

Gustav walked to the base of the tower, looked to the window above, and yelled, "Cinderella, let down your hair!"

Ella looked perplexed. "But it only comes to my shoulders!"

Gustav walked back to Frederic and shrugged. "That's all I've got. I'm out of ideas."

Frederic was befuddled. "Well, there must be *some* way up there. I mean, *she* got up there." He called up to Ella, "How did you get up there?"

Ella glimpsed something out of the corner of her eye. "Run! She's coming!"

Frederic and Gustav darted under the cover of the nearby trees. They saw a tall, thin woman draped in red and gray rags emerge into the clearing. Her pale skin was creased and lined, and tufts of white hair shot from her head in random directions.

"Zauberer?" Frederic asked.

Gustav nodded. "Let's watch and see how she gets up there."

With a voice like broken bagpipes, the witch yelled up to Ella in the tower. "I could have sworn I heard you

talking to someone, dearie. When I get up there, I had better find you alone.” Then she turned toward the woods and called out, “Reese!”

Soon there was a loud rumble. Branches shook and leaves fell as a man taller than the tower itself muscled his way through the trees and stomped into the clearing. The giant reached Zaubera in one enormous step, then knelt and placed his hand on the ground, palm up, for the witch to climb onto. He easily lifted the old woman up to the tower window, and she stepped inside.

“Well,” said Frederic. “We can’t get in *that* way.”

That was when Gustav went berserk. He whipped out his big, double-bladed ax and ran into the clearing with a long, thundering shout of “Stuuuuuuuurm-haaaaaay-gennnnnnn!” The giant, dumbfounded, simply stood and stared. So did Frederic.

Gustav slammed his ax into Reese’s humongous shin. With a bellow of pain, the giant grabbed his injured right leg and began hopping up and down on his left foot. The ground trembled with every hop, causing Gustav to tumble over himself. He dropped his weapon as he fell, and the heavy ax blade plunked down into the loamy soil. From the trees, Frederic watched in horror as his companion crawled to retrieve the weapon, unaware that he was

directly in the shadow of the giant's enormous right foot. Gustav was about to be squashed like a bug.

Think! Frederic told himself. *What would Sir Bertram the Dainty do?* The answer came to him. In *The Case of the Ill-Mannered Milkmaid*, Sir Bertram had to get the attention of a governess who was about to use the wrong kind of wineglass. Frederic could use the same tactic here. Eight years of yodeling lessons were about to pay off. Frederic cupped his hands to his mouth and let out a long: “Yodel-odel-odel-odel-ay-hee-hooooooo!”

It worked. Nothing annoyed Gustav more than yodeling. As soon as he heard the trilly alpine melody, he glanced angrily at Frederic—who was frantically gesturing upward. Gustav dove out of the way just as the giant's big bare foot smashed down—and landed directly on the lost battle-ax.

“Yow!” Reese bellowed, hopping in pain once again. Only this time, he couldn't keep his balance. The giant staggered backward and collapsed into the stone tower.



FIG. 9
Reese, the
GIANT

“Uh-oh,” Reese moaned. The entire structure wobbled, and huge chunks of stone began to shower down.

“Oh, no,” said Gustav as the tower collapsed into a pile of stone and clouds of dust. Another failure. And this time there would be a song about how he not only didn’t rescue the girl, but actually *killed* her by accident.

“Ella!” Frederic screamed. *This is my fault*, he thought. *Ella is gone, all because I tried to be something I’m not. I should have listened to my father.*

But as the giant sat up and brushed away the loose bricks and stones that littered the clearing, he revealed an astonishing sight. Inside a shimmering green bubble of energy, the witch stood completely unharmed. And Ella was draped over her bony shoulder, alive and kicking hard.

“A magic shield,” Gustav said. Frederic nearly fainted with relief.

“Reese, you big oaf! Look what you did!” Zaubera hissed.

Reese pointed a huge finger at the princes. “It was their fault.”

The witch turned to see whom Reese was talking about, but Frederic had already hustled Gustav back into the trees. Hiding under a gorse bush, the two princes listened to Zaubera.

“Don't tell me you're blaming the bunnies, Reese,” the witch said.

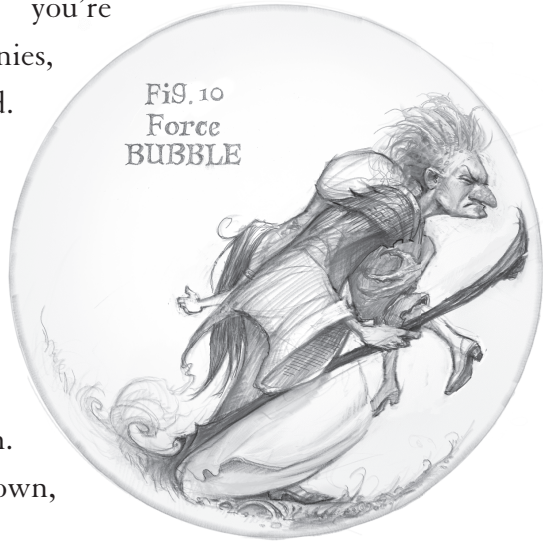
“No, ma'am,” the giant said. “It was a couple of men. They were trying to get the girl.”

Gustav popped up out of the bush. “Put Cinderella down, old lady!”

Frederic leapt up onto Gustav's back and yanked him back down into the shrubbery.

“See?” Reese said, feeling vindicated. “Should I smash them?”

“Never mind those buffoons, Reese,” Zaubera said as her thin, colorless lips curled into a smile. “Did you hear what they just called our prisoner here?” The witch grabbed a handful of Ella's hair and looked her in the eyes. “Well, look at this,” Zaubera chuckled. “Forget the singing ransom-grams, Reese. I've got a genuine celebrity for a hostage. Cinderella. This is going to require a much more spectacular announcement. Ooh, this is going to be fun.”



Ella glared back at her, unwilling to show the witch any fear.

“But what if the heroes follow us, ma’am?” Reese asked.

“Hero, singular,” Zaubera replied. “One of them is a complete coward. And yes, the hero will follow us. That’s what heroes do. We’ll just be ready for him. When we catch him and his sidekick, you can grind their bones into bread. Now come.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the giant intoned in his booming voice. “But bread made from bones sounds awful, you know.”

“I didn’t hire you to be a meal planner, Reese,” grated the witch. “Start walking.”

“All right,” the giant rumbled. “Have you ever tried it? Bone bread, I mean. I can’t imagine it tastes good. And you’d still need flour, no?”

“Shut up, Reese.”

“My foot hurts.”

“Try wearing shoes, imbecile.”

After a couple of minutes, their voices and Reese’s thundering footsteps could no longer be heard. The princes crawled from under the gorse bush. Out of habit, Frederic tried to dust off his soiled and torn suit but quickly realized it was a lost cause.

“Okay, let’s go,” Gustav said.

“Go where?” Frederic asked.

“You want your woman back, right?” Gustav said. “We’re following them.”

“No,” said Frederic. “We’re not. I am not going anywhere with you. You nearly got Ella killed. You would have died yourself, if I hadn’t done something.”

“You yodeled,” Gustav snarled with contempt.

“At least I did *something*,” Frederic returned. “How could you not have noticed those horribly callused toes looming above you?”

Gustav brought his face very near Frederic’s, close enough for Frederic to feel his breath. “Are you telling me I’m not a good enough hero for you?”

Frederic tried very hard not to blink.

“Are you saying that I can’t do this?” Gustav hissed. “That I can’t rescue someone? That you—Mr. Silky White Pants and Fancy Golden Dingle-Dangles—are better than me?” His forehead touched Frederic’s.

“No,” Frederic muttered. He was only slightly less afraid of Gustav than he was of the giant. “I’m not saying that at all. Of course I need your help.”

Gustav inched back.

“You did find Ella, after all,” Frederic went on. “I’m sorry I underestimated you there. But this isn’t just about

finding a missing person anymore; this is a rescue mission. And a dangerous one, considering there's a witch *and* a giant involved. So maybe the two of us aren't enough. Maybe we could use a little extra help. Another set of hands, maybe. That's all."

Gustav thought about this for a moment. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to have another swordsman at my side," he said.

"Someone with a little more experience in rescuing people from witches and monsters, perhaps?" Frederic offered.

"Ha!" Gustav laughed. "Who are you going to get? That guy from 'Sleeping Beauty'?"



PRINCE CHARMING LOSES SOME FANS

Liam never doubted that he was a hero. If anything, he was a little too sure of it. You can't really blame him, though; people had been treating him like a demigod ever since he was a young child. The adulation began shortly after the birth of Princess Briar Rose, the daughter of the king and queen of Avondell. In a rare instance of international communication, they announced that they were looking for a suitable prince to whom she could be engaged. When the princess came of age, she would marry this prince, forever joining her kingdom with his.

As it so happened, the kingdom of Avondell sat upon a seemingly endless chain of gold mines. Whichever nation managed to hook up with Avondell would become super

rich. Gareth, the king of Erinthia, which sat just across the border (and therefore just out of reach of Avondell's gold), wanted in on that. The treasure-hungry King Gareth suggested his then three-year-old son, Liam, as a worthy future husband for Princess Briar. Unfortunately, lots of other countries were itching for a shot at Avondell's gold as well, and the competition for Briar Rose's tiny hand was fierce. Little princes from around the world lined up to present themselves before the royal couple of Avondell—and each seemed to have a special skill. There was a tap-dancing toddler from Valerium and a baby from Svenlandia whose parents claimed he could “speak dolphin.” A four-year-old from Jangleheim absolutely rocked on the flügelhorn. And a five-year-old prince from Sturmhagen (one of Gustav's brothers) demonstrated his ability to kick a chicken forty yards.

Afraid that little Liam wouldn't stand out in the crowd, his father resorted to trickery. Just as Liam toddled out in front of the king and queen of Avondell, two masked assassins burst into the throne room. They were actually actors hired by Gareth, and each wore a cinnamon stick—young Liam's favorite treat—tied around his boot. The two “assassins” positioned themselves between the preschool prince and the royal couple—and as soon as

Liam excitedly grabbed at the cinnamon sticks on their legs, the actors proved how good they were at their craft. As the boy pulled and tugged at the sweets, the actors threw themselves around and howled in pain. They spun, flipped, and smashed into each other. To the rulers of Avondell it looked as if the three-year-old was beating the grown men senseless. When the royal guards reached the scene of the “fight,” little Liam was standing over two seemingly unconscious assassins, slurping happily on a cinnamon stick.

After that, there was no question as to which prince would be selected to wed Briar Rose. The king of Erinthia took his son home in triumph. The boy was treated to awards, parades, and festivals held in his honor. The two actors, by the way, were unable to prove their innocence and were locked away in an Avondellian dungeon for life, but King Gareth didn't worry about that: He was going to be rich (well, *richer*—he *was* already a king).

Young Prince Liam thrived on all the attention, though he was unsure of exactly why he was getting it.

“Why does everybody love me so much?” he asked his father.

King Gareth didn't want to tell his son the truth—that, for the most part, the people of Erinthia were as greedy

as their king was, and they cherished Liam because they knew he would someday make their nation unbelievably wealthy by marrying into the Avondell fortune. Instead he told his son, “Because you’re a hero.”

That was all Liam needed to hear. From that point on, he devoted himself to being a one-man army, on call to rescue anyone in need. And he was really good at it. He had strength, courage, agility, and natural skill with a sword. He even looked the part: tall and lean, with caramel-toned skin, bright green eyes, and lustrous, black hair that appeared permanently windswept.

Here’s what a typical day for Liam might be like: Breakfast; foil a burglary; lunch; rescue lost children from ferocious wolves; serve as guest of honor at ribbon-cutting ceremony for new blacksmith shop; dinner; carry frail grandmother from burning building; healthy snack; bed.

Of course, Liam never realized it was all unnecessary, that he could have lolled about in a hammock all day, sipping juice from a coconut, and his people *still* would have idolized him—which

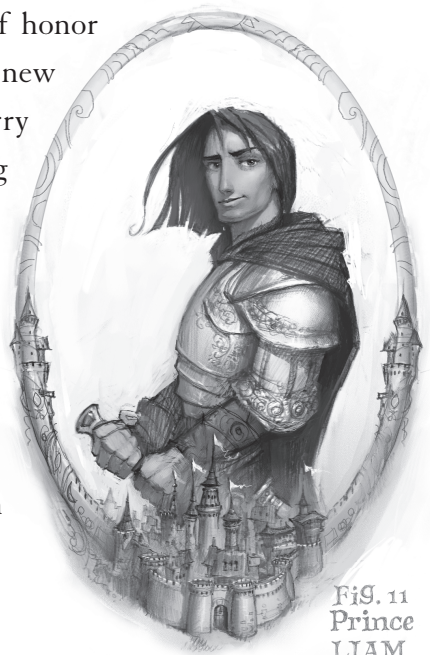


FIG. 11
Prince
LIAM

was fortunate, because Liam's reputation as a hero meant everything to him.

The one time Liam wasn't around to stop a crime—when the legendary Sword of Erinthia, a priceless heirloom, was stolen from its display case in the royal museum—he prepared himself for the worst. He assumed the unending stream of praise and admiration would quickly dry up, so he gathered the citizenry to apologize to them all publicly. He was shocked to see that people arrived carrying signs that read, *WE HEART LIAM*. Somebody had even carved a butter sculpture of him. Seriously, they didn't care about the heroics.

At least, they didn't until the Sleeping Beauty incident. If Liam hadn't come to the rescue there, the royal wedding would have been at risk. When an evil fairy put Princess Briar Rose—and all the people of Avondell—under a spell that would have kept them asleep for a hundred years, you'd better believe the people of Erinthia wanted Liam to head over there and save the day. Which he did, of course.

Liam tracked down the bad fairy, snuck up on her, and held her by the wings until she revealed that kissing Briar Rose would break the curse. Once he had the information he needed, Liam nobly released his foe. The fairy repaid this kindness by transforming herself into an enormous

toothy demon and trying to bite Liam's head off. After a long-drawn-out battle featuring backflips, body slams, karate chops, and even a few good horse kicks, he won the day by running the fairy-beast through with his sword.

One quick peck on the lips later, Briar Rose and her entire kingdom were eyes-open and celebrating.

The weeks that followed were among the happiest of Liam's life. He was treated to parties and processions in both kingdoms, and a seemingly endless stream of awards and gifts. The only sore spot came when minstrels began spreading "The Tale of the Sleeping Beauty" far and wide. Liam had never been much of a fan of Erinthia's royal songsmith, Tyrese the Tuneful—the man seemed too obsessed with singing about bad guys ("The Ballad of the Bandit King," "The Giant Goes A-Smashing," "The Bandit King Rides Again," etc.) to bother writing songs about any of Liam's heroic exploits. And now that he finally had, he managed to leave Liam's name out of the story entirely. The prince was seriously irked but took solace in all the adoration he got from his hometown crowd.

After the hullabaloo finally died down, it occurred to Liam that he had never really spoken to Briar Rose other than to say, "Good morning. You can consider yourself rescued." He was curious to know more about her. So he

did something extremely rare: He sent her a note. Even more shocking, he suggested they meet. In person. Two people from different kingdoms—who are engaged to be married—seeing and talking to each other. Crazy, I know.

Liam sent a message suggesting that he and Briar meet in the Avondellian royal gardens and spend some getting-to-know-you time together. He was surprised when the princess's reply came back reading, "What's to learn? I know your name. I know where you live. Just be there on the wedding day."

Liam decided to try again. His messenger returned to Avondell with a new note in which Liam eloquently and passionately explained why it was so important for him and Briar to truly know and understand each other before they got married. This time the response was slightly more positive: "Whatever."

And so they met. Back when Liam had first seen the sleeping Briar Rose, he thought she was, indeed, a beauty (which made the whole kissing part somewhat easier). With pale white cheeks and thick, auburn curls that surrounded her head like an enormous, poufy halo, the princess had appeared soft and sweet, almost angelic. But as Liam walked into the rose garden that day and saw Briar standing with her hands on her hips, her brows arched,

and her lips twisted into a tight knot, he was taken aback. Something seemed much harsher about her. Liam tried to overlook it and approached her with a gentlemanly bow.

“Thanks for meeting with me,” he said. “With the wedding only a few days away, I’m looking forward to getting to know the real you.”

Catching him completely off guard, Briar put both hands against his chest and pushed him down onto a nearby bench. “Listen up, hero,” she barked. “Don’t think that just because you offed some witch, you can take charge here.”

“She was a fairy, not a witch,” he said, stunned by Briar’s forcefulness. “And I’m not sure what you’re upset about.”

“I know you’ve got a pretty high opinion of yourself,” Briar said. “But that’s not going to fly with me. My parents raised me to be a proper princess. That means I get what I want, when I want it. In this marriage, you work for me.”

Liam was flabbergasted. “I work for the people,” he said. “I offer my services wherever I’m needed.”

“The people! Ha!” Briar snorted, whipping her impressive mane of curly hair. “The *people* are here to shine my tiaras and cook my puddings. I had to spend my entire childhood in hiding because of that stupid witch—”

“Fairy.”

“— and now that I’m finally in my rightful place, I’m going to start living like the princess I was meant to be. If I want entertainment, someone will dance for me. If I am thirsty, someone will give me their jug of water. If I want a cake, someone will use their last ounce of flour to bake me one. Watch this.”

Briar reached down and messily yanked handfuls of rare orchids up out of their flower beds. She crumpled the priceless blooms between her fingers and threw the broken stems and petals down onto the cobblestone path. “You know who’s going to travel to the farthest reaches of Kom-Pai and fight off venomous snakes in order to find new orchids for me?” she asked with a wicked grin. “The people.”

Briar strolled up to Liam and flicked a loose flower petal into his face. “What’s the matter, hubby? Speechless?”

“Don’t call me hubby,” Liam said, with a note of disgust. Even with all the monster battles he’d fought and death traps he’d escaped, this conversation was the single



FIG. 12
Princess
BRIAR
ROSE

most unnerving experience he'd ever had. "You know, I'm not sure I want to marry you," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because you're mean."

"Wah, wah," she fake-cried. "Get a backbone, hero."

"Please tell me this is some sort of joke."

"You wanted the real me, you got it. Briar Rose doesn't censor herself for anyone."

"Then there's no point to any of this," Liam said sadly. "I can never love someone like you."

"That's where you're wrong, puppy. It's common knowledge that I'm your true love."

"According to whom?" Liam exclaimed. "The evil fairy who tried to kill us all? *She's* the one who said 'true love's kiss' would break the spell. But she also turned into a monster and tried to eat me. We're supposed to take *her* word for it?"

"Blah, blah, blah, blah," Briar mocked, opening and closing her hand like a puppet's mouth. "You and I are still getting married. Our parents arranged this years ago. And you're a real catch: You're well liked, you come from a respected family, and you're not too hard on the eyes. You're just the kind of guy I want sitting on a throne next to me to make people feel safe and unthreatened before I

turn their lives into nightmares.”

“I’ll never go along with this,” Liam insisted.

“It’s not like you have much of a choice in the matter. Face it, you’re stuck with me, Prince Charming.” Briar poked a finger into his chest with every syllable of *Prince-Charm-ing*, then sat down on a bench across from Liam and kicked her feet up onto a birdbath, knocking away a frightened wren as she did. “Now go peel me some kumquats.”

Liam walked away without a word, got on his horse, and headed back to Erinthia, where he gave word that he would be addressing the people that afternoon.

The citizens of Erinthia gathered by the thousands outside the royal palace, all eyes on the gold-trimmed marble balcony overhead, from which their prince would soon be addressing them. Applause broke out as a set of stained-glass doors opened wide and Liam strode out to greet the crowd. He wore a billowy blue tunic with black pants tucked into brown leather boots; there was a sword at his side, and a wine-colored cape fluttering behind him in the breeze. Before he spoke, Liam took a moment to gaze on the wildly enthusiastic audience below. *Who needs a wife*, he thought, *when I’ve got all these devoted fans?*

Liam's mother and father, Queen Gertrude and King Gareth, stepped out onto the balcony behind him. They were followed by Liam's twelve-year-old sister, Princess Lila, who ran up and gave Liam a quick smooch on the cheek before retreating to the back of the balcony. Lila, who wore her chestnut hair in loose, dangly ringlets and liked to roll up the sleeves on the elegant gowns her parents forced her to wear, might have been young, but she was Liam's closest confidante—and the only person in Erinthia who appreciated Liam for his actual good deeds. Yet even she didn't know why Liam had scheduled this appearance.

The king tapped Liam on the shoulder. "We are all eager to hear your big announcement," Gareth said, hoping that Liam had decided to honeymoon in Valerium as he and the queen had suggested. The lobster rolls were so good there this time of year. "I wanted to have Tyrese here to record it all, but no one seems to know where he is at the moment."

"Don't worry about the bard, Father," Liam said. "I'll make this quick."

He faced the crowd.

"People of Erinthia," the prince said. The din of voices below hushed. "Thank you for coming out today. And thank you for all the kindness you have shown me and my

family.” He gestured to his parents, and the crowd erupted into applause again. As soon as the noise died down, Liam continued.

“I’ve got some important news about the royal wedding.”

“Will there be cheesecake?” someone shouted.

“No, I’m sorry. No cheesecake. Actually—”

“Will you be taking your vows in a hot-air balloon?” another voice called out.

“No, of course not. Why would someone do that? So, about the wedding—”

“Will there be little sausages on toothpicks and a choice of dipping sauces?” yet another person yelled.

“No.”

“What about cheesecake?”

“I already said there’d be no cheesecake. Look, people, please let me—”

“Will you ride up the aisle on a unicorn?”

“There’s not going to be any wedding!” the prince blurted out. The entire crowd gasped in near unison, as did the king and queen. “I’m sorry. But that’s what I’ve called you all here to tell you. The wedding is off. Princess Briar Rose and I have discussed the matter, and we’ve decided that we’re better off just as friends.” No matter

how much he disliked Briar, he didn't want to bad-mouth her to his people.

As the citizenry murmured with agitation, the king skittered forward, next to his son, and addressed the crowd. "Ha-ha. Oh, that Liam. Your prince is just joshing with us all."

"No, Father, I'm not," said Liam. "I'm serious."

"I told you'd he'd eventually ruin everything," Queen Gertrude griped bitterly. "He was always too much of a Goody Two-shoes."

"Listen," said Liam. "Briar and I just aren't right for each other."

"But you love her!" the king shouted, his thick mustache fluttering as he spoke.

"No, I don't," Liam said plainly.

"You kissed her and broke the spell," the queen insisted. "True love's kiss!"

"I don't think that's how it worked," Liam said with a sigh. "I think anybody's kiss would have woken her. Besides, how could I love somebody I'd never met before?"

"Because that's just the way things work!" the king thundered. "You are marrying Briar Rose. It has been written!"

"By you," Liam said, beginning to get as angry as his

parents. “You decided everything when I was three years old. Did anybody ask *me* who I wanted to marry?”

“You don’t get a choice,” Gertrude snapped.

“Look: Father, Mother,” Liam whispered. “Have you spent any time with her? She’s not a nice person.”

“Do you think I care about that?” Gareth growled. “Her family is rich beyond imagination!”

Liam was startled by his father’s greedy admission. He leaned over the balcony railing and yelled out, “Sorry, people. No wedding!”

Before he knew it, the crowd was booing as loudly as they’d been cheering only a minute earlier. Shouts of “Our hero!” were replaced by jeers of “Traitor!” Liam had never known the people of Erinthia to be unhappy with him. It was like having a tank full of beloved pet goldfish suddenly turn into angry piranhas. He was confused and a bit frightened.

“You should be ashamed of yourself!” one woman cried.

“Some prince you are!” yelled one man.

“I wanted cheesecake!” wailed another.

Liam called down, “People, trust me. I am still the same hero you’ve always known, am I not?”

“No!” someone called out, and threw a shoe at the

prince. Soon other objects—canes, rocks, sandwiches—started hurtling up toward the balcony.

“Unbelievable,” Liam muttered. “It’s a riot.”

A tomato smashed into King Gareth’s face, leaving a splatter of red pulp in his wiry mustache. Gertrude struggled to wipe the mess from her husband’s ample facial hair. “Don’t hit *us!*” she scolded the angry crowd. “We *want* him to get married!”

Gertrude caught a stale dinner roll that came flying at her, and hurled it back down into the mob.

“Quick, come inside!” It was Liam’s sister. She grabbed him by the hand and pulled him inside the palace.

“Lila, do you know what’s going on?” he asked as the princess shut the ornate glass doors behind them. “I could always tell that our parents were excited about Avondell’s riches, but I still assumed . . .”

“Apparently the money is the *only* thing Mom and Dad care about,” she said. “I guess the same goes for all those people out there, too. I know they’ve been looking forward to a royal wedding for ages now, but . . . yikes.”

“I expected disappointment,” said Liam. “But for them to turn on me like this—”

“Look, as soon as things calm down, I’ll speak to everyone and try to smooth this out,” Lila said.

“Lila, please don’t take this the wrong way,” Liam said. “But you’re twelve.”

“I know,” Lila said slyly. “Which means I can hit my awkward phase at any moment. But right now, I’ve still got the ‘cute kid’ thing going for me. It’s great for winning people over. Believe me, it’s the only reason I still wear my hair in these annoying ringlets that Mom likes. Anyway, look, I’ll remind those people out there of all the amazing things you’ve done over the years. You’ve always been my hero. I’ll make sure you’re theirs again, too.”

Liam had never felt closer to his sister than in that moment.

“You might have a lot of work cut out for you,” Liam said. “And what about Mom and Dad? I really think they’re going to force me to marry Briar Rose against my will.”

“I’ll take care of them, too,” Lila said. “Don’t ask me how yet, because I’m not sure. I guess I’ve got to convince them that it would be worse to lose their son than to lose oodles and oodles of gold. It may take a while. In the meantime, you should take a vacation.”

“Vacation? Where?”

FIG. 13
Princess
LILA



“Outside the kingdom. Everybody in Erinthia seems pretty steamed at you right now. So, go someplace where the people only know you from the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ story.”

“Ha! *That* story. No one outside of Erinthia even realizes I’m the hero in that story—it doesn’t mention my name!”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Lila said. “You can just be Prince Charming for a while. Everybody *loves* Prince Charming. Go bask in that glory for a while.”

“What glory? Prince Charming isn’t a hero,” Liam grouched. “The only thing anybody thinks Prince Charming ever did is kiss a girl and wake her up. I deserve credit for a lot more than that.”

“Better to be loved for something lame than to be hated for no good reason, right?” Lila said.

Liam contemplated his sister’s advice. Lila was just a kid, but she was crafty. She’d gotten herself into—and out of—all sorts of scrapes in the past. And there was definitely a logic to her plan. Liam’s thought process was interrupted by a sudden bang as a roasted turkey crashed through the door, sending shards of glass and loose stuffing across the embroidered carpet.

“Someone out there has a very strong arm,” Liam said.

His sister pushed him toward a stairwell that led down to the palace cellars, and the two shared a quick embrace. “People will love you again, don’t worry,” she said. “Now, sneak out through the cook’s delivery entrance. I need to go rescue our greedy parents.”

She left Liam on the top step and rushed back toward the balcony.

“Thank you, sis,” Liam called. As he started down the stairs, he heard the princess yelling at the crowd of rioters outside: “All right, who threw the bird?”

Liam quietly sneaked through the cellars and into the royal stables. Since nearly everyone in the kingdom was out front by the balcony, there were no grooms or stable boys around to see him hop up onto his black stallion and take off through the palace yard’s back gates.