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The School for Good and Evil #4: Quests for Glory

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First Edition



For Ally and Brendan



IN THE FOREST PRIMEVAL
A SCHOOL FOR GOOD AND EVIL
TWO TOWERS LIKE TWIN HEADS
ONE FOR THE PURE
ONE FOR THE WICKED
TRY TO ESCAPE YOU'LL ALWAYS FAIL
THE ONLY WAY OUT IS
THROUGH A FAIRY TALE





PART I



The Almost Queen

When you spend most of your life planning your Ever After with a girl, it feels strange to be planning your wedding to a boy.

A boy who'd been avoiding Agatha for months.

She couldn't sleep, dread brewing in her stomach. Her mind flurried with all the things left to do before the big day, but that wasn't the real reason she was still awake. No, it was something else: a memory of the boy she was about to marry . . . a memory she couldn't bear to think about. . . .

Tedros, stained with tears and slung over a man's shoulder. Tedros unleashing



a primal scream, so pained and shattering that sometimes Agatha could hear nothing else—

She rolled over, burying her head under a pillow.

It had been six months since that day: the day of the coronation.

She hadn't slept well since.

Agatha felt Reaper tossing tetchily at the foot of the bed, her restlessness keeping him up. Agatha sighed, feeling sorry for him, and tried to focus on her breaths. Little by little, her mind began to ease. She was always better when she was doing something to help someone else, even if it was falling asleep to spare her bald, mashed-up cat. . . . If only she could do something to help her prince too, Agatha thought. Together they always managed to work things out—

Click.

Her heart stopped.

The door.

She listened closely, hearing Reaper's soft snores and the sound of the latch creaking open.

Agatha pretended to sleep as her hand inched forward, probing for the knife on her night table.

She'd kept the knife there ever since she'd arrived at Camelot. She had to—Tedros earned enemies here long before he'd come to take his place as king. Even if these enemies were in jail now, they had spies everywhere, desperate to kill him and his future queen. . . .

And now the door to her chamber was opening.

No one was allowed in her hall at this hour. No one was allowed in her *wing*.

Moonlight spilled onto her back through the cracked-open door. Her breaths shallowed as she heard footsteps muffle against the marble floor. A shadow crept up her neck, stretching onto the bedsheets.

Agatha gripped the knife harder.

Slowly a weight sank into the mattress behind her.

Hold, she told herself.

The weight grew heavier. Closer.

Hold.

She could hear its breath.

Hold.

The shadow reached for her—

Now.

With a gasp, Agatha swiveled, swinging the knife for the intruder's neck before he seized her wrist and pinned her to the bed, the knife a millimeter from his throat.

Agatha panted with terror as she and the intruder stared into the wide whites of each other's eyes.

In the dark, it was all she could see of him, but now she felt the heat of his skin and smelled his fresh, dewy sweat, and all the fear seeped out of her body. Bit by bit, she let him pry the knife away before he exhaled and dropped into the pillow beside her. It all happened so fast, so softly, that Reaper never stirred.

She waited for him to speak or pull her to his chest or tell

her why he'd been avoiding her all this time. Instead he just curled into a ball against her, whimpering like a tired dog.

Agatha stroked his silky hair, mopping up the sweat on his temples with her fingertips, and let him snuffle into her nightgown.

She'd never seen him cry. Not like this, so scared and defeated.

But as she held him, his breaths settled, his body surrendering to her touch, and he glanced up at her with the faintest of smiles. . . .

Then his smile vanished.

Someone was watching them. A tall, turbaned woman looming in the doorway, her gleaming teeth gnashed tight.

And just like that, Tedros was gone as quick as he came.

Splinters of August sun streamed through the window onto the chandelier, refracting light into Agatha's eyes.

Blinking groggily, she could see missing crystals in the chandelier, covered in cobwebs like an old gravestone.

She hugged her pillow to her chest. It still smelled like him. Reaper slithered up from the foot of the bed, sniffing at the pillow, poised to slash it to shreds, before Agatha shot him a look. Her cat slunk back to the foot of the bed. *He's improving at least*, Agatha thought; the first night in the castle, he'd peed in Tedros' shoe.

Voices echoed in her wing. She wouldn't be alone much longer.

Agatha sat up in her baggy black nightgown, peering at

her room. It was three times the size of her old house in Gavaldon, with dusty gem-crusted mirrors, a sagging settee, and a two-hundred-year-old desk of ivory and bone. Clutching her pillow like a life raft, she soaked in the quiet coming off the cracked marble tiles dyed robin's-egg blue and the matching walls inlaid with mottled gold flowers. The queen's chamber was like everything at Camelot: royal from afar, tarnished up close. This applied to her too—she was living in the queen's quarters but she wasn't even queen yet.

The wedding was still two months away.

A wedding that was making her uneasier each day.

Once upon a time, Agatha had imagined she'd live happily ever after with Sophie in Gavaldon. The two of them would be proud owners of a cottage in town, where they'd have tea and toast each morning, then jaunt off to Mr. Deauville's Storybook Shop, now the A&S Bookshop, since she and Sophie would take it over once the old man died. After work, she'd help pick herbs and flowers that Sophie would use to make her beauty creams, before they'd visit Agatha's mother on Graves Hill for dinners of lamb-brain stew and lizard quiche (steamed prunes and cucumbers for Sophie, of course). How ordinary their life would be together. How *happy*. Friendship was all they needed.

Agatha squeezed the pillow harder. *How things change.*

Now her mother was dead, Sophie was Dean of Evil at a magical school, and Agatha was marrying King Arthur's son.

No one was more excited about the wedding than Sophie, who'd sent letter after letter from her faraway castle with

sketches of dresses and cakes and china that she insisted Agatha use for her big day. (*“Dear Aggie, I haven’t heard back from you about the chiffon veil swatches I sent. Or the proposed canapés. Really, darling, if you don’t want my help just tell me. . . .”*)

Agatha could see these letters piled on the desk, coated in spidery trails of dust. Every day she told herself she would answer them, but she never did. And the worst part was she didn’t know why.

Footsteps grew louder outside her room.

Agatha’s stomach churned.

It’d been this way for six months. She felt more and more anxious while Tedros grew more and more withdrawn. Last night was the closest they’d come to speaking about what happened on coronation day and neither of them had even said a word. She knew he was embarrassed . . . devastated . . . ashamed. . . . But she couldn’t help him if he didn’t talk to her. And he couldn’t talk to her if he was never *with* her.

More voices now. More footsteps.

Mouth dry, Agatha snatched the glass of water from her night table. Empty. So was the pitcher.

Reaper slid off the bed, prowling towards the faded double doors.

She needed time alone with Tedros. Time where they weren’t living separate lives. Time where they could be honest and intimate with each other like they used to be. Time where they could be *themselves* again—

The doors crashed open and four maids paraded in, each wearing the same draping robe in a different shade of

pastel—peach, pistachio, grapefruit, rose—as if they were a box of mixed macarons. They were led by a tall, tan woman in lavender with dark, smoky eyes, shiny red lipstick, and wild black hair barely cooped by a turban. She carried a leather-bound notebook in one hand and in the other, a feather-pen so long it looked like a whip.

“Breakfast with the wedding florist at seven in the Blue Tower Dining Room; then meetings with tailor candidates in twenty-minute intervals to decide who should stitch the wedding linens; then an interview with the *Camelot Courier* for their Wedding Preview Edition. At nine, you’ll visit the Camelot Zoo to pick the official wedding doves; they have several species, each a varying shade of white. . . .”

Agatha could barely listen, because Peach and Pistachio had hoisted her out of bed and were already scrubbing her with scalding towels, while Grapefruit shoved a toothbrush in her mouth and Rose smeared her face with an array of potions, like Sophie used to do, only without Sophie’s charisma or humor.

“Then a signing of *The Tale of Sophie and Agatha* at Books & Crannies to raise funds for the castle’s plumbing renovation,” the lavender woman continued in a crisp, posh accent, “followed by a lunch fundraiser at the Spansel Club, where you’ll read a storybook to children of rich patrons whose donations will repair the drawbridge. . . .”

“Um, Lady Gremlaine? Is there time for me to see Tedros today?” muffled Agatha beneath a blue gown the women were tugging over her. “We haven’t had a meal alone in ages—”

“After lunch, you’ll begin waltz lessons to prepare for your wedding dance, then etiquette training so you don’t make a mess of yourself at the wedding feast, and finally, history class about the triumphs and disasters of royal weddings past so that yours might end in the annals of the first rather than the last,” Lady Gremlaine finished.

Agatha gritted her teeth as her maids fussed with her hair and makeup like the nymphs in the Groom Room used to. “Dancing, etiquette, history . . . it’s the School for Good all over again. Only at school, I actually had time with my prince.”

Lady Gremlaine raised her eyes to Agatha. She snapped her book shut so sharply a gemstone fell out of the mirror. “Well, since you have no further questions, your chambermaids here will see that you get to your breakfast on time,” she said, turning for the door. “The king needs me by his side every possible moment—”

“I’d like to see Tedros today,” Agatha insisted. “Please add it to my schedule.”

Lady Gremlaine stopped cold and turned, her lips a tight red slash. The chambermaids subtly backed away from Agatha.

“I’d say you saw more than enough of him last night. Against the *rules*,” said Lady Gremlaine. “A king cannot be alone in your room before the wedding.”

“Tedros should have the right to see me whenever he wishes,” said Agatha. “I am his queen.”

“Not yet, Princess,” said Lady Gremlaine coolly.

“I will be after the wedding,” Agatha challenged, “which I spend all my time planning like some brainless biddy when I’d

rather be with Tedros, helping him run the kingdom of which he is now king. And seeing that you're Chief Steward in service to the king *and* future queen, surely that's something you can arrange."

"I see," said Lady Gremlaine, moving towards Agatha. "The castle is crumbling, your king wears a crown still in dispute, you have spies plotting to kill you, the former queen and her traitorous knight have been in hiding since the coronation, and the *Royal Rot*, a rogue publication intent on overthrowing the monarchy, calls you, amongst other things, 'a gilded celebrity from an amateur fairy tale destined to bring more shame to Tedros than his own mother once did.'"

Lady Gremlaine smiled, lording over Agatha. "And here you are, still pining for your days at school and a little kissy-time in the hall with the Class Captain."

"No. That's not it at all. I want to *help* him," Agatha retorted, enduring the onslaught of her steward's perfume. "I'm fully aware of the problems we face, but Tedros and I are supposed to be a team—"

"Then why hasn't he ever asked to see *you*?" said Lady Gremlaine.

Agatha flinched.

"In fact, except for his momentary lapse last night, which he assured me will never happen again, the king hasn't mentioned your name once," Lady Gremlaine added.

Agatha said nothing.

"You see, I'm afraid King Tedros has better things to do, trying to bring Camelot out of *shame* in time for the wedding,"

Lady Gremlaine went on. “A wedding that must be so magnificent, so memorable, so *inspiring* that it will erase all doubts that rose from that humiliating coronation. And it is a wedding that, per thousands of years of tradition, is up to the future queen to plan. That’s your job. That’s how you can *help* your king.” She leaned in, her nose almost touching Agatha’s. “But if you would like me to tell King Tedros that you find your responsibilities beneath you and that you have questioned every one of our decisions, down to the colors of your wardrobe, the importance of baths, and your choice of footwear, and now, on top of that, would like him to interrupt his urgent efforts to prove his place as king so he can make you feel part of a *team* . . . then by all means, Princess. Let’s see what he has to say.”

Agatha swallowed, her neck rashing red. Her eyes drifted down to her clumps. “No . . . that’s okay. I’m sure I’ll see him tomorrow,” she said softly, looking back up.

But Lady Gremlaine was gone and all that was left were her pastel minions, ready to whisk the princess to a breakfast she would have no time to eat.

Halfway through the day, Agatha was about to turn runaway bride.

She’d endured weeks of this with a forced smile—the same deadly dull routine of inspecting a thousand place-cards and cakes and candles and centerpieces, even though they all looked the same to her and she’d be happy marrying Tedros in a bat

cave (she'd prefer it actually; no room for guests). Interspersed with all this tedium were appearances for "Camelot Beautiful," a queen-led campaign to raise funds for the broken-down castle that had been left to blight after King Arthur had died. Agatha believed in the cause wholeheartedly and had a high tolerance for nonsense—she was friends with Sophie after all—but Lady Gremlaine seemed determined to humiliate her with each day's schedule, whether making her sing the anthem at the Woods Rugby Cup (even the Camelot team covered their ears) or ride a bull at the Spring Fair (it bucked her into a mound of poo) or kiss the highest bidder in a Smooch-the-Princess auction (a toothless hoodlum who Lady Gremlaine insisted had won fair and square).

Guinevere had warned Agatha to expect resistance from her new warden. Lady Gremlaine had been Chief Steward when Guinevere was Arthur's wife, until she and Guinevere had a falling-out and Guinevere had her dismissed. But after Guinevere's disappearance and Arthur's death, his Council of Advisors took over Camelot since Tedros wasn't yet sixteen—and these advisors brought Lady Gremlaine *back*. Now with Guinevere returned to the castle, surely Gremlaine would be prickling to exert control over Guinevere's son and his new queen. Even worse, the old fusspot couldn't be fired until Tedros' coronation was sealed.

Knowing this, Agatha had tried to befriend her steward, but Lady Gremlaine hated her at first sight. Agatha had no idea why, but clearly the woman didn't want her marrying

Camelot's king. It was as if Lady Gremlaine thought if she just tried hard enough, Agatha would give up her groom before the wedding.

I'd sooner die, Agatha vowed.

So for the last six months, she'd woken up each morning ready for the fight.

But today was the day that broke her.

First there was the florist, who shoved Agatha's face in so many effluvious bouquets over the course of an hour that she'd left red-eyed and nose dripping. Next there were the six tailors who showed her dozens of linens that looked exactly the same. Then came the reporter from the *Camelot Courier*, a miserably cheerful young girl named Bettina, who arrived sucking a red lollipop.

"Lady Gremlaine already scripted all your answers, so let's have an off-the-record chat for *fun*," she diddled, before launching into an array of startlingly personal questions about Agatha's relationship with Tedros: "What does he wear when he sleeps?" "Does he have a nickname for you?" "Do you ever catch him looking at other girls?"

"No," Agatha said to the last, about to add, "especially not fart bubbles like you," but she held her tongue through nearly an hour of this before she'd had enough.

"So do you and Tedros want children?" Bettina wisped.

"Why? Are you looking for parents?" Agatha snapped.

The meeting was over after that.

She nearly lost her temper again at the Spansel Club fundraiser when she had to read *The Lion and the Snake*, a famous

Camelot storybook, to rich, bratty children, who kept interrupting her because they already knew the story. Now in her carriage after picking wedding doves at the zoo, Agatha slumped over in her sweaty gown, thinking of the waltz and etiquette lessons ahead, and sucked back tears.

“The king hasn’t mentioned your name once,” Lady Grem-laine echoed.

She’d tried to pretend that the meddling bat had lied. But Agatha knew she hadn’t.

Even when Agatha had run into Tedros in the castle these past few months, he’d tell her how pretty she looked or prattle something inane about the weather or ask her if she was comfortable in her quarters before shuttling away like a spooked squirrel. Last night in her room was the first time she’d seen him without a flushed, plastic smile on his face that told her not to ask how he was doing because he was doing just fine.

But he wasn’t fine, of course. And she didn’t know how to help him.

Agatha dabbed at her eyes. She had come to Camelot for Tedros. To be *his* queen. To stand by him in his finest and darkest hours. But instead they were both alone, fending for themselves.

It was clear he needed her. That’s why he’d crawled into her arms last night. So why couldn’t he just admit it? She knew deep down it wasn’t her fault. But she still couldn’t help feeling rejected and hurt.

Reaper curled up in her lap, reminding her he was there.

She rubbed his bald head. “If only we could go back to our graveyard before we ever thought about boys.”

Reaper spat in agreement.

Agatha gazed out the window of her blue-and-gold carriage as it rolled into Maker’s Market, the main thoroughfare of Camelot City. Given the conditions of its roads, her driver normally avoided it and took the longer route back to the castle, but they were already running late for her wedding waltz lesson and she didn’t want to make a poor impression on her new teacher. Dirt kicked up around the carriage from unpaved streets, clouding her view of the bright-colored tents, each carrying a flag with Camelot’s crest: two eagles, flanking the sword Excalibur on a blue shield.

But as the dust cleared, Agatha noticed a stark divide between the rich villagers in expensive coats and jewels as they shopped along the main street and the thousands of grimy, skeletal peasants living in crumbling shanties in the alley-ways adjoining the market. Royal guards patrolled these slums, forcefully blocking any peasants who drew too close to wealthy patrons entering or leaving the tents. Agatha slid down her window to get a better view, but her driver rapped his horsewhip on the glass—

“Lay low, milady,” he said.

Agatha pushed the window back up. When she first rode into her new kingdom six months ago, she’d seen the same slum cities smack in the middle of Camelot. As Tedros explained then, his father had led Camelot to a golden age, where every citizen improved his or her fortune. But upon

Arthur's death, his advisors had allied with the rich, passing shady laws to reclaim land and wealth from the middle-class, plunging them into poverty. Tedros had vowed to undo these laws and resettle those without homes, but in the past half-year, the divide between rich and poor had only gotten worse. Why hadn't he succeeded? Had he not seen how far his father's legacy had fallen? How could he let his own kingdom languish like this? If *she* was king—

Agatha exhaled. But she wasn't, was she. She wasn't even queen yet. And from the way Tedros acted last night, he was clearly frustrated too. He was managing Camelot by himself and had no one to help him: not her, not his father, not his mother, not Lancelot, not even Merlin, the last three of who'd been gone for the past six months—

SPLAT! A black, mashed hunk of food hit the window. Agatha spun to see a filthy peasant yell, "SO-CALLED KING AND HIS ALMOST QUEEN!"

Suddenly, others in the slum cities spotted her carriage and globbed onto the chant—"SO-CALLED KING AND HIS ALMOST QUEEN!"—while pelting her vehicle with food, shoes, and handfuls of dirt. Her driver beat the horses harder, racing them out of the market.

Blood boiling, Agatha wanted to leap out of the carriage and tell those goons that none of this was her or Tedros' fault—not the slum cities, not the coronation, not a once-legendary kingdom gone to shambles—

How would that help anything? Agatha scolded herself. If she were starving in the streets, wouldn't she blame herself and

Tedros too? They were the ones in power now, even if they hadn't caused the kingdom's fall. The poor and suffering had no time for the past, only for progress. But this wasn't school anymore, where progress could be charted with rankings and a scoreboard. This was real life and despite the dismal results thus far, they were two teenagers trying to be good leaders.

Or Tedros was, surely.

She was on her way to dancing lessons.

Agatha sulked as the carriage rumbled up the hill towards the bone-white gates of Camelot, which the royal guards pulled open for their arrival. It didn't matter that the gates were streaked with rust or the towers ahead faded by weather and soot. Camelot Castle was still a magnificent sight, built into jagged gray cliffs over the Savage Sea. Under the August sun, the white spires took on a liquid sheen, capped with rounded blue turrets that speared through low-flying clouds.

The carriage stopped short of a gap in the cliffs, leading to the castle's entrance.

"Drawbridge is still broken from the coronation, milady," the driver sighed, pulling into a carriage house at the edge of the cliff. "We'll have to use the ropes to cross."

Agatha barreled out of the carriage herself before the driver could open her door. *Enough whining*, she thought, as she wobbled along the unsteady rope bridge that even honored guests had to use until the embarrassing drawbridge problem could be fixed. Tedros wasn't haggling over when they would have time alone. Tedros wasn't hounding her about being a team. Tedros was working for his *people*, like she should be.

Maybe Lady Gremlaine was right, Agatha confessed. Maybe she should stop obsessing over what she couldn't do as queen and start focusing on the one thing she could. Indeed, a wedding filled with love and beauty and intention might be just the way to restore the kingdom's faith in them after the coronation. A wedding could show everyone that Camelot's best days were to come . . . that her and Tedros' Ever After had brought them here for a reason . . . that they could find a happy ending not just as King and Queen, but for the people too, even those who'd lost hope. . . .

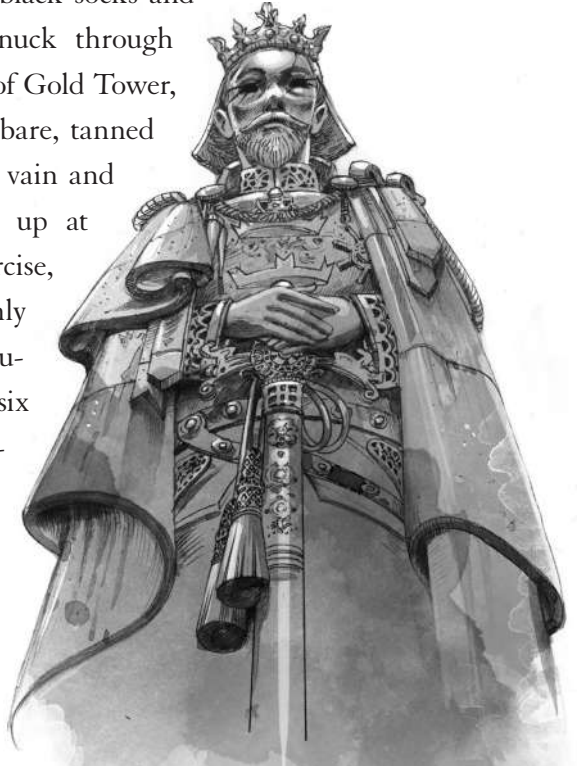
Head held high, Agatha marched back into the castle, eager for her wedding lessons now and determined to do her very best.

That is, until she found out who was teaching them.

How Not to Throw a Coronation

Though he had no time for himself, no time for Agatha, no time at all, Tedros refused to get soft.

In his knee-length black socks and cut-off breeches, he snuck through the dark, muggy halls of Gold Tower, a towel slung over his bare, tanned chest. He knew it was vain and obsessive, this getting up at half past four to exercise, but it felt like the only thing left he could actually control. Because at six on the dot, Lady Grem-laine and four male stewards would barge into his room and from



that moment until he slogged back into bed at night, he was no longer in charge of his own life.

He passed Agatha's room, tempted to slip in and wake her up, but he'd gotten in trouble for that last night and he didn't need any more trouble. His kingdom was already on the verge of revolt. That's why he'd ceded Lady Gremlaine total control over the castle. As Arthur's once-steward, she was a known face and gave people faith that the new king would be well-managed. But there was another reason he'd let Gremlaine keep him on a tight leash, one he could never say out loud.

Tedros didn't trust himself as king.

He needed someone like Lady Gremlaine who could watch his every move, who would check his every decision. If he'd only listened to her at the coronation, none of this would have happened. But he was listening to her now. Because if there was one thing he knew, it was that there could be no more mistakes.

Last night had already been a serious blunder. Lady Gremlaine had warned him not to repeat his father's errors and let a girl interfere with his duties as king. Tedros took this warning seriously. Up until yesterday, he'd done well to concentrate on his tasks and let Agatha concentrate on hers, even if it meant he'd had more freedom to see Agatha at school than he did now as king in his own castle. But then he'd gone and snuck into her room dead-tired, defenses down, and acted like a sniveling child. Tedros cringed, replaying the moment in his head. He'd brought Agatha to Camelot away from everyone and

everything she knew, and he wanted her to feel safe and taken care of. He couldn't let her see how weak and scared he was. He couldn't let her see that all he wanted to do was run away with her. To hold her tight and shut the world out.

But that's exactly what he had done last night.

And for the fleeting relief he'd found in her arms, he left his future queen anxious and worried for him and his steward angry and disappointed.

Stop acting like a boy, Tedros chastised himself. *Act like a king*.

So today he let Agatha sleep, even if it left a big black hole in his heart.

Tedros scuttled through the hall's colossal gold passage and soaring arches, sweat sopping his wavy blond hair, his breeches sticking to his thighs. He couldn't remember the castle ever feeling this stifling. Two mice darted past him into a hole in the plaster. A procession of ants wove around the friezes of famous knights on the wall, now damaged and missing limbs. When his father and mother were king and queen, this hall used to be minty clean, even in the August doldrums. Now it smelled like dead cat.

Down three flights he went, socks slippery on dull gold stone, before he hustled through the Gymnasium, a lavish collection of training equipment surrounded by weapons and armor from Camelot's history, enclosed in glass cases. One would assume this was Tedros' destination, but instead he scurried right through, his pure blue eyes pinned to the dusty floor, trying not to look at the large glass case in the center of

the room . . . the one case that happened to be empty. Its placard read:



He was still thinking about that large, empty case when he arrived at King's Cove, a sunken bathing pool in the bowels of the castle. When he was a young prince, this manmade grotto had flowering vines around tall piles of rock and a steaming-hot waterfall. The balmy water once shimmered with a thousand purple and pink lights from fairies who tended the pool in exchange for safe shelter at Camelot. Tedros remembered his mornings here as a child, racing the fairies around his father's statue at the center of the pool, his tiny opponents lighting up the water like fireworks.

King's Cove was different now. The pool was dark and cold, the water algae-green. The plants were dead, the waterfall a drip, drip, drip. The fairies were gone too, banished from the castle by Arthur after Guinevere and Merlin had both abandoned him, destroying Arthur's faith in magic.

Tedros looked down at the kettlebells he'd stolen from the gym and stashed by the pool, along with a sad, lowly rope he'd tied to the ceiling to practice climbing.

He couldn't exercise in that other room. Not if he had to be near that empty case and think about where the sword was now.

Slowly, his eyes rose to his father's statue in the murky pool,

caked with moss and dirt—King Arthur, Excalibur in hand, staring down at him.

Only he wasn't staring. At least not anymore. His eyes were gone, violently gouged out, leaving two big black holes.

Tedros endured a wave of guilt, more intense than the one he'd felt in the gym.

He'd done it.

He'd carved out his own father's eyes.

Because he couldn't bear the old king looking at him after what happened at the coronation.

I'll fix it, Father, he vowed. I'll fix everything.

Tedros tossed his towel onto the mildewed floor and dove into the pool, thoughts wiped out by the harsh, stabbing cold.

Six months before, the day of the coronation had been brilliant and warm.

Tedros was utterly spent after everything that had happened leading up to it—reconciling with his mother, fighting a war against an Evil School Master, and making an all-night ride from school to Camelot in time for him to be crowned king the next day.

And yet, despite feeling like a sore, sleepless zombie, he couldn't stop smiling. After so many false starts and twists and turns, he'd finally found his Ever After. He was the ruler of the most legendary kingdom in the Woods. He'd have Agatha by his side forever. His mother (and Lancelot) would live with them in the castle. For the first time since he was a child, he had a full family again—and soon a queen to share it with.

Any one of those would be a wonderful enough gift on this, his sixteenth birthday. But the best present of all? Sophie, his old friend-enemy-princess-witch, had been appointed Dean at the School for Evil far far away, where she'd remain at a safe distance from him and Agatha. Which meant no more Sophie thuggery, no more Sophie skullduggery for the rest of their lives. (He'd learned from experience that he and that girl couldn't be in the same place without killing each other, kissing each other, or a lot of people ending up dead.)

"Hmm, can't Merlin do a spell to make this smell better?" Tedros said in front of his bedroom mirror, sniffing at his father's old robes. "This thing is rancid."

"Whole *castle* is rancid," groused Lancelot, gnawing on a slab of dried beef. "And I haven't seen Merlin since he hopped out of the carriage in Maidenvale. Said he'd meet us at the castle. Should be here by now."

"Merlin runs on his own time," Guinevere sighed, sitting next to Lancelot on her son's bed.

"He'll be here soon. Can't possibly miss my coronation," Tedros said, holding his nose. "Maybe if we spritz this with a little cologne—"

"It's a coronation gown, Teddy. You only have to wear it once," said his mother. "Besides, I don't smell anything except whatever it is Lance raided from the pantry."

"Oh be serious, Gwen," Lancelot growled, smacking at the bedsheets and spawning a dust storm. "What *happened* to this place?"

"Don't worry. Agatha and I will fix everything," Tedros

declared, combing his hair. “We knew what we were coming back to. Dad’s advisors let the castle go to waste and lined their pockets with the kingdom’s taxes. Would’ve loved to have seen their faces when Lance threw them in the dungeons.”

“Oddly calm, to be honest. As if they expected it—or at least knew better than to fight,” Lance said, with a loud belch. “Insisted I don’t have the authority to jail them until Tedros is king. Told them to sod off.”

“They’re right,” Guinevere clipped. “And if you can’t eat like a proper human, I’ll have the kitchen put you on a vegetable diet.”

Tedros and Lancelot gaped at her.

“They’re *right*?” Tedros asked incredulously.

“*Vegetables*?” Lancelot blurted, mouth full.

“Until your coronation as king is official, the Council of Advisors appointed by Arthur has full authority to decide who runs Camelot,” Guinevere explained. “But in a few hours you *will* be king and it’s not like there’s a rival with a claim to the throne they can summon out of thin air. That’s why the guards didn’t stop Lance from jailing them.”

Reassured, Tedros went back to assessing his reflection.

“Darling, enough with the mirror. You look beautiful,” his mother said. “Meanwhile, poor Agatha is getting ready by herself and surely needs a lady’s help. Why don’t I go to her and leave you here with Lan—”

“Agatha’s fine,” Tedros said, picking at an annoying pimple near his mouth. *God, I’m almost as bad as Sophie*, he thought.

But he was about to have an entire kingdom judging him. Who wouldn't be self-conscious? "Besides, it's my birthday," he added, "and I want to spend time with my mother."

He saw his mother blush, still unused to him being nice to her.

"Sounds more like Little King's afraid of being alone with me," Lancelot cracked.

"Call me 'little' again and I'll run you through," Tedros flared, tapping Excalibur on his waist. "No one on earth would choose to be alone with you anyway."

"Except your mother. Likes our alone time just fine," said Lancelot tartly.

"Oh good lord," Guinevere mumbled.

"In any case, Agatha has that strange steward woman helping her get ready, the one who greeted us when we arrived last night and reeks of perfume," said Tedros, checking his teeth. "Wanted to help me get ready but I said I had you two. Didn't seem happy about it."

"What's the story there, Gwen? Looked about as thrilled to see you as you did her," said Lancelot.

"There is no story. She was my steward until after Tedros was born. I had her dismissed. Now she's back," Guinevere said curtly.

"Well, clearly something happened between you two—"

"Nothing happened."

"Then why are you making the same face about her as you made around Millie?"

“Who’s Millie?” Tedros asked.

“A horny goat that used to chase your mother around the farm,” Lancelot said.

Guinevere kicked him.

“God, you two had a lot of free time out there,” Tedros muttered into the mirror.

“Lady Gremlaine is irrelevant,” said Guinevere, sobering. “A steward only has responsibility over a prince until his coronation. After you seal your coronation, you’re in charge and can remove Lady Gremlaine from the castle once and for all.”

“So what does that mean, ‘seal my coronation’? I repeat a few vows and give a speech?” Tedros asked, finally tired of looking at himself. He plopped on a sooty armchair next to the bed.

His mother frowned. “You said you knew what happened at a coronation.”

“That you didn’t need a ‘lecture’ from us,” sniped Lancelot.

“Well, is there something special about the speech I should know about?” Tedros said impatiently.

“There is no speech, you twit,” Lancelot retorted.

Tedros blinked. “Then when do I introduce you two as part of my royal court?”

His mother and Lancelot exchanged looks. “Um, Teddy, I don’t think that’s a good move—”

“It’s the right move and the right move *is* the Good move,” said Tedros. “It’s been years since what happened between you two and Dad. I’m sure the people have moved on.”

Lancelot drew a breath. “Tedros, it’s not that simple. You’re not thinking about all the—”

“If we live in fear, we’ll never get anything done,” said Tedros, cutting him off. “I’ll tell this Gremlaine woman to seat you on the stage next to me.”

“I’m sure that will go over well,” his mother said cryptically.

Lancelot gave her another curious look, but Guinevere didn’t elaborate.

Tedros let the point go. From his one interaction with Lady Gremlaine, he was confident his new steward would abide by his wishes.

“So if there’s no speech, then what is there?” he asked, reclining against the chair.

“The chaplain will swear you in and make you repeat your vows in front of the kingdom,” his mother said. “Then you have to complete a ceremonial test.”

Tedros’ eyes widened. “Like those written tests we had in Good Deeds class?”

“You really are clueless,” Lancelot grouched. “It’s a test of your father’s choosing, written in his will and revealed at the coronation.”

“Pfft, Dad told me about that. That’s not a ‘test,’” Tedros scoffed. “It’s a token gesture. Said he’d never pick something I couldn’t do. That he’d pick something to make me look as strong and commanding before my people as possible.”

“Make you look strong and commanding? That’s a test in itself,” Lancelot murmured.

Guinevere glared at him and moved next to her son.

“So I have to perform the test Dad left for me?” said Tedros.
“And then . . . I’m king.”

“Then you’re king,” his mother smiled, ruffling his hair.

Tedros smiled back, his heart light as a cloud (even though he’d have to comb his hair again).

“But first there’s dancing monkeys,” said Lancelot.

“Oh hush,” said Guinevere, chortling.

Tedros glanced between them. “Very funny.”

His mother was still laughing.

“Very *funny*,” Tedros repeated.

“Presenting the Mahaba Monkeys of Malabar Hills!” the courtier shouted.

A cannon blew confetti on the crowd and the people cheered, at least 50,000 of them, packed onto the hills beneath the castle. Per tradition, the drawbridge had been lowered, inviting citizens of Camelot onto royal grounds. They’d been crossing over since the morning to witness the coronation of King Arthur’s son and yet there were still thousands who wouldn’t fit, leaving them stranded on the drawbridge or below the cliffs, peering up at the castle balcony and the beautiful stone stage built for the occasion.

Sitting onstage, however, Tedros knew full well it wasn’t stone. It was cheap, rickety wood, masked with paint that made it look like stone and it creaked hideously under the weight of his father’s throne. Even worse, hot wax dripped onto his sweltering robes from wobbly candelabras they’d nicked from the

castle chapel to save on ceremonial torches. Still, he'd kept his mouth shut: Camelot was broke and splurging on a coronation would be irresponsible. But now, watching hapless performers from neighboring realms, he was beginning to lose patience. First there was a fire-eater from Jaunt Jolie who accidentally set her dress aflame; then a tone-deaf chanteuse from Foxwood who forgot the lyrics to "God Save the King"; then two portly young brothers from Avonlea who fell off a flying trapeze into the crowd . . .

And now apes.

"If they weren't trying so hard, I'd think they were mocking me," Tedros grumbled, itching under his robes.

"I'm afraid the more skilled acts were out of budget," Lady Gremlaine said from her seat beside him, sipping at a goblet of sparkling water. "We did pay for the monkeys, however. They were your father's favorite."

Tedros peered downstage at the six monkeys in red sequined fedoras, scratching their privates and wagging their bums out of synch.

"Was this before or after he started drinking," Tedros said.

Lady Gremlaine didn't laugh.

Agatha would have, he thought peevishly. Not only that, but for a woman who'd been determined to spend time with him, Lady Gremlaine didn't seem to like him much.

When they first met last night, he'd assumed she thought him handsome and charming and would do anything he asked. But now that they were seated together, she kept throwing

him skeptical looks any time he spoke as if he had the brain of an oyster. It was undermining his confidence right when he needed it most.

“I don’t understand why Agatha can’t sit here with me,” he said, squinting at the royal gallery below on the lawn where she was just a shadow, cooped up with the dukes, counts, and other titled nobles. “Or my mother for that matter.”

Lady Gremlaine straightened her turban. “Agatha is not your queen yet. After you’re married, she can join you at official events. As for your mother, given her and Lancelot’s ignominious flight from the castle, I thought it best to keep them out of sight and withhold news of their return until a more appropriate time.”

Tedros followed her eyes to a white scrim curtaining off the balcony behind them. Through the scrim, he could see his mother and Lancelot watching the ceremony with a few maids and kitchen boys.

“It’s a wonder news hasn’t leaked,” Lady Gremlaine added. “Lancelot made a spectacle throwing those advisors into the castle jail last night.”

“Who cares if it had leaked?” Tedros countered. “The sooner we tell the people my mother and Lance have returned the better.”

“Once you are crowned king, you can make your own decisions.”

“It’s just stupid having my own mother confined like a leper while I sit here with you,” Tedros badgered, glancing up at a cloud blocking the sun. “As if you’re my queen or something.”

Lady Gremlaine pursed her lips.

“When Merlin gets here, give him your seat, as he’ll be my *real* advisor once I’m king,” Tedros piled on.

“Merlin won’t breach the gates of Camelot. After he deserted your father, Arthur had him banned from the kingdom,” said Lady Gremlaine.

Tedros gave her a bewildered look. Neither Merlin nor his father had ever told him that.

“Well, Arthur also put a death warrant on my mother’s head and she’s very much alive,” Tedros said brusquely. “I don’t follow an ex-king’s edict and neither does Merlin, even if it was my father’s.”

“Then why isn’t Merlin *here*?” Lady Gremlaine challenged.

Tedros bristled, wondering the same thing. “He’ll be here. You’ll see.”

He has to be, the prince thought. The idea of ruling Camelot without Merlin was unfathomable.

“I wouldn’t bet on it. Defying banishment is punished by death,” said Lady Gremlaine crisply.

Tedros snorted. “If you think you can execute Merlin while I’m king you’re as clueless as those monkeys.”

A sequined hat hit him in the face and he swiveled to see the chimps in a violent brawl, pummeling each other as the crowd tittered.

“Is this really the *best* we can do?” Tedros moaned. “Who planned this idiocy?”

“I did,” said Lady Gremlaine.

“Well, let’s hope you’re not planning the wedding.”

“The wedding is planned entirely by the future queen,” Lady Gremlaine said, her face a cold mask. “I hope she is capable.”

“That’s a bet I’m willing to take,” said Tedros defiantly, trying not to frown.

Agatha: the *wedding planner*? Hadn’t she dressed as a bride for Halloween? If it were up to her, they’d marry at midnight in a boneyard, with that satanic cat presiding. . . .

She’ll be fine, he thought. Agatha always found a way. She’d no doubt share his opinion of Lady Gremlaine and his determination to prove her wrong. Plus, once Agatha saw how he handled his coronation, with royal decorum and integrity, she’d follow his example for the wedding. Soon Lady Grim-face would be eating her words.

A long while later, after the monkeys had been soothed with a vat of banana pudding and dragged from the stage, Tedros took his place before Camelot’s chaplain, perilously old, with a bright red nose and wiry hair growing out of his ears. The chaplain put his hand on Tedros’ back and guided him to the front of the stage, overlooking the teeming hills.

On cue, the sun broke out from behind the cloud, spilling onto the young prince.

An awed hush fell over the crowd.

Tedros could see the legions gazing up at him with wide-eyed hope: the boy who vanquished the School Master . . . the boy who saved the Ever kingdoms . . . the boy who would make Camelot great again.

“I’m king of *all* these people?” Tedros rasped, the weight of

responsibility finally hitting him.

“Oh, oh, your father asked the same thing, lad! Fear is a very good sign,” the old chaplain said, hacking a laugh. “And luckily, no one can hear us from way up here.”

The chaplain turned to a skinny, red-haired altar boy, who carefully handed him a jeweled box. The chaplain opened it. Sunlight ricocheted through five spires like a web of gold, eliciting gasps from the mob. Tedros gazed down at King Arthur’s crown, the five-pointed fleur-de-lis, each with a diamond in the center.

Once, when he was six, he’d stolen it from his father’s bed table and worn it to his lessons with Merlin, insisting the wizard bow and call him King. He assumed Merlin would put an end to his mischief—but instead the wizard obeyed his command, bowing eminently and addressing him as Your Majesty, all the way through math and astronomy and vocabulary and history. Perhaps the old wizard would have let him be king forever . . . but soon the young prince removed his crown and sheepishly returned it to his father’s table. For it was too heavy for his soft little head.

Now, ten years later, the chaplain held out the very same crown. “Repeat after me, young prince. The words might sound a bit funny, given it’s an oath that harkens back two thousand years. But words aren’t what make a king. That fear you feel is all you need. Fear means you know this crown has a history and future far bigger than you. Fear means you are ready, dear Tedros: ready to quest for glory.”

Legs quivering, Tedros repeated the chaplain’s oath.

“By thy Lord, on wrest that Godes doth place on my head, I swear to uphold the honor of Camelot against all foel. I swear to be a beacon in the darknell to thy enlightened realm . . .”

Like the old man warned, he tripped over the strange syllables and sounds, without knowing what he was saying. And yet, somewhere in his heart he did. His eyes welled up, the moment getting to him. Just a few years ago, he was a first-year boy at the School for Good and Evil, full of bluster and insecurity.

Now the boy would be a king.

A husband.

And someday a father.

Tedros made a silent prayer: that he would do Good as all three, just like the man who had made him. A man who he loved and missed every single day of his life. A man he'd give anything to touch one last time.

The chaplain placed the crown upon Tedros' head and tears streamed down the young king's cheeks while the crowd roared a passionate ovation that lasted long after he'd managed to get his emotions under control.

The chaplain patted his shoulder. “And now to seal the coronation and officially make you king, you must complete the ceremonial tes—”

“Do you mind if I say a few words first?” he asked the chaplain. “To my people, I mean.”

The chaplain furrowed. “It is a bit unusual to speak before the proceedings are complete, especially since no one will hear you.”

Something fell from above, right into the folds of Tedros'

oversized robe: a small five-pointed white star, like the ones Merlin used to lay in tribute at his father's tomb in Avalon.

"Strange," Tedros said, studying it closely. "Why would one of these be . . ."

His voice instantly amplified for miles.

The crowd gaped in astonishment, as did the chaplain, but Tedros knew full well where such sorcery had come from.

He looked up into the big blue sky and smiled. "Thanks, M," he whispered.

Then he put the magic star on his shoulder so it would broadcast him far and wide.

"Felt funny looking down at all of you without saying hello," he spoke, his voice resounding over the cliffs. "So, um, hello! I'm Tedros. And welcome to the . . . show."

Crickets.

"Right. You know who I am. Same boy who used to stand here and fidget when my father gave speeches. Just older now. And hopefully a bit better looking."

A ripple of laughter.

Tedros smiled, feeling the warmth of the crowd. They *wanted* to hear from him. They wanted him to do well.

He searched for Agatha below, but the sun washed out the faces. He was so used to having his princess by his side when it mattered. But after all they'd been through, he could feel her inside him even when they were apart. What would she tell him to say?

The same thing she always told him to say: the truth about what he was feeling.

Only he was never very good at that.

Tedros took a deep breath.

“When I was a boy standing up here with my dad, Good and Evil seemed so black and white,” he said, his voice steady-ing. “But of all the things I learned at school, one lesson proved the most important: no one knows what is good or bad until after the story is written. No one knows if a happy ending will last or if a happy ending is happy at all. The only thing we have is the moment we are in and what we choose to do with it.

“And so here we are at *this* moment. A moment where riding into Camelot doesn’t feel the same as it used to when I was a boy. We aren’t the shining kingdom by which all others are measured anymore. The streets are dirty, the people are hungry, and I can feel a rot at our core. Even the king’s chamber smells a bit moldy.

“Part of it is neglect, of course,” Tedros went on, “and those responsible have been removed from power and punished. But that won’t fix our problems. Even if we could bring back my father, King Arthur couldn’t make things the way they were. The Woods have been changed forever by an Evil School Master. And though he is dead now, the line between Good and Evil has blurred. Enemies disguise as friends and friends as enemies. Look at our own Camelot, decayed from the *inside*.”

The masses were rapt as they listened, their bodies like trees in a windless forest.

“I may be young. I may be untested. But I trust my instincts,” Tedros declared, confidence growing. “Instincts that helped me find my way back to you even when I had Evil’s

sword at my heart and an axe at my neck. Instincts that helped me choose the greatest of all princesses, soon to be your queen.”

Everyone followed his eyes to the royal gallery, where the nobles stepped back, revealing Agatha in the sun’s spotlight.

Tedros smiled, expecting applause.

He didn’t get it.

The crowd took in her pallid, ghostly face, buggy brown eyes, and witchy black helmet of hair and then seemed to look around her, as if she was a stand-in for the great princess Tedros was speaking of, as if they couldn’t believe that *this* was the Agatha whose fairy tale had grown so famous throughout the Endless Woods. . . . But then they saw the diadem on her head—the same tiara Arthur once bestowed upon his own wife—and their postures stiffened, a soft murmur building.

“Together, Agatha and I have faced down terrible villains and found our happy ending,” said Tedros. “But after a fairy tale comes real life. This is no longer my and Agatha’s story, written by the Storian. This is the story of our kingdom, which we must all write together. A history and future you are now a part of, even those who doubted my father, even those who doubt me. Today we turn the page.”

He took a deep breath. “And to prove that this is indeed the beginning of a new Camelot, my first act as your king is to present two members of my royal court. Two people who know our kingdom better than anyone and will protect it with love and courage.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Lady Gremlaine leap out of her seat—

In a flash, Tedros tomahawked Excalibur across the stage, slashing open the scrim over the castle balcony, before the sword planted blade-first in the balcony's archway.

"Presenting my mother, Queen Guinevere, and our greatest knight, Sir Lancelot!"

Tedros beamed down at the crowd, believing full-heartedly that since he'd learned to forgive Guinevere and Lancelot, his people would do the same.

But now there was a collective wide-eyed gape as if they'd all stopped breathing, and a cold, deathly silence.

"Come, Mother. Come Lance," Tedros prodded, hurrying over to his mother and yanking at her hand—

Gobsmacked, Guinevere stumbled over the fallen scrim, losing a shoe and almost face-planting before Lancelot caught her and glared daggers at Tedros. "What the hell are you doing!"

"Sit down!" Tedros hissed, shoving his one-shoed mother into his throne and Lancelot into Lady Gremlaine's seat, while Lady Gremlaine gawped in horror.

Something in the crowd changed too. Tedros felt it in his gut: the way the once warm, hopeful air had turned wary upon his unveiling of Agatha and now had become menacing and tense. Sweat pooled beneath his crown.

His heart had told him welcoming back his mother and Lancelot was the right thing to do . . . the *Good* thing . . .

Did I make a mistake?

He swallowed his doubt. No going back now.

"Let's get to the test," Tedros pressured the chaplain, eager

to seal this coronation and get his mother and Agatha inside.

“Yes—uh—of course,” the chaplain stammered, his eyes darting to Guinevere and the knight as he fumbled a faded parchment card from his robes. “Uh, hear ye, hear ye. As all prior kings, King Arthur Pendragon conceived this test to prove his successor be worthy of—”

Tedros ripped the card from his hands and read it out loud, his voice booming through the magic star:

“To seal his coronation, the future King of Camelot must pull Excalibur from an ordinary stone, as I once did.”

“Wow. That’s easy,” he blurted, voice echoing.

He hadn’t meant for the crowd to hear that.

“CAN SOMEONE FIND ME A STONE?” Tedros puffed, glancing uselessly around the stage.

Lancelot shifted in his chair, which made the stage creak so loudly the audience’s eyes went to him.

“Preferably one that isn’t made out of wood,” the knight said.

A ruckus echoed behind him and everyone turned to see the red-haired altar boy careen through the fallen scrim onto the stage, having tripped on Guinevere’s shoe. “Sorry! That’s my cue!” he squawked, dragging an iron anvil behind him. “Behold! The stone from which King Arthur once pulled Excali—”

The heavy anvil splintered the wooden platform. The edge of the stage imploded and the anvil plummeted straight through the hole like a cannonball, down to a cliff, where it bounced off the rock and fell into the ocean.

“This is going well,” said Lancelot.

Tedros scorched pink.

His mother’s eyes were glued to her one shoe. Lady Grem-laine wasn’t on the stage anymore. And he couldn’t even *look* in Agatha’s direction. He’d wanted the coronation to show her what kind of king he’d be. Instead, she was probably as mortified as he was.

“Merlin . . . some help?” he peeped desperately, glancing upwards.

A pigeon pooped, just missing his head.

“*Enough*,” Tedros boiled, jaw clenching. “To seal the coronation, I have to pull a sword from a stone? Well, the sword’s in one right now!”

He stamped to the back of the stage and the once-curtained-off castle balcony, where Excalibur was still lodged blade-first into the stone archway.

“So if I pull my sword out of *this* stone, it’s done, right? We can all go home,” he barked at the chaplain.

“Well, I don’t believe your father meant—”

“IS IT DONE OR IS IT NOT,” Tedros bullied.

The chaplain quailed. “Oh, yes . . . I suppose. . . .”

Tedros grabbed the hilt, practically screeching into the star on his shoulder, deafening the crowd: “Then in the name of my father, my kingdom, and my people, I hereby accept my place as Leader, Protector, and King of Camelot!”

He pulled at the sword.

It didn’t move.

“Huh?”

Tedros jerked harder. Still didn't budge.

He could hear the restless mob shifting.

Putting his foot on the wall, he pried at the blade with all of his strength, his biceps straining against his skin—

Nope. Nothing.

Tedros was sweating now. He pulled right, left, front, back, trying to make the sword slide, but with each pull it seemed to bury harder into the stone. It didn't make sense. Excalibur wasn't wedged that deep and the archway's stone was loamy and weak. Why wasn't it moving?

People in the crowd were clutching each other, pointing at him open-mouthed. They knew what was happening. They knew after promising to save them as king, he was failing the first test that would *make* him king, a test that shouldn't have been a test at all—

“Merlin . . .,” he pleaded, but the sky was clear overhead, the white star on his shoulder lost and gone.

He couldn't breathe, his wet grip on the hilt making his pulls shallow and frantic. His crown skewed on his head. His coronation gown ripped at the seams—

Please, he begged, heaving at the sword. *Please!*

Lancelot ran up. “Just yank the damn thing out!” he said, helping him jostle the hilt—

Tedros shoved him away. “It's *my* test—I have to do it—”

But he pushed Lancelot too hard, who knocked backwards straight into the chaplain, upending the old man over the balcony. His priestly gown caught on the railing, leaving him dangling upside down, robes over his head, exposed save for

his saggy pantaloons. Gold coins showered out of his pockets onto the crowd, causing a stampede for them as the chaplain howled. The altar boy ran to help his master, only to plunge through the hole in the stage left by the lost anvil.

Paralyzed, Tedros scanned the scene: Lancelot hoisting the chaplain over a balcony; Guinevere lurching to rescue a squealing altar boy hanging off a beam; his kingdom's people punching each other for a handful of coins . . .

And six monkeys straddling a sword stuck in stone, slathering it with banana pudding, and sliding up and down the blade.

Tedros dropped to his knees.

"IT'S THEM!" a woman bellowed down below, pointing at Lancelot and Guinevere. "THEY'VE CURSED US! THEY'VE CURSED CAMELOT!"

"RIGHT FROM THE BEGINNING!" an old man yelled.

"WHY'D YOU THINK ARTHUR WANTED 'EM DEAD!" his wife shouted.

"TRAITORS!" a young boy heckled.

"FINKS!"

From the masses exploded a murderous mob, climbing up the stage's beams towards Guinevere and Lancelot—

"GET THEM!"

"KILL THEM!"

But the beams couldn't support their weight and shattered like sticks, sending the remainder of the stage timbering down over the crowd, the candles igniting the wood and pooled wax

and detonating the stage like a fireball into the drawbridge. Shrieking villagers fled for their lives just as royal guards came smashing out the balcony windows, armed with swords and spears, led by Lady Gremlaine.

“TRAITORS!” the terrible cries echoed below. “MONSTERS!”

As people hurled things at the balcony, guards grabbed Guinevere and Lancelot and spirited them inside to safety, along with the others.

Only Tedros stayed behind, pulling and pulling at Excalibur, his bleeding hands slick with pudding, his face streaked with tears, before he suddenly felt the arms of men throw him over their shoulders—

“No! I can do it!” he choked, hands flailing for the sword. “*I can do it!*”

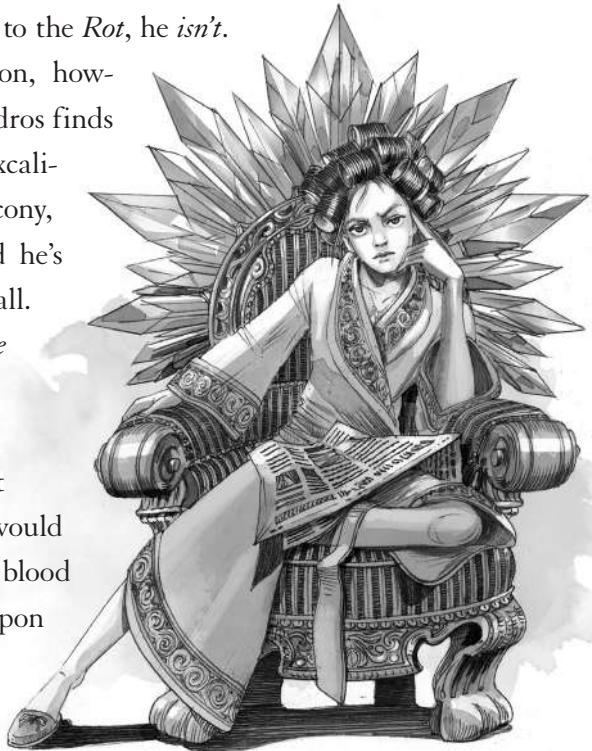
He screamed those words again and again, voice crumbling to rasps as they dragged him into the castle, until all that remained of Camelot’s Great Hope was a sobbing little boy, crown slid down over his eyes, hands stabbing wildly into the dark.

Flah-sé-dah

“So is he king or isn’t he?” Dean Sophie asked, nose buried in the *Royal Rot*. “According to the *Camelot Courier*, he is, but according to the *Rot*, he *isn’t*.”

What both agree on, however, is that once Tedros finds a way to pull Excalibur out of that balcony, then it’s settled and he’s king once and for all.

But if someone *else* were to pull Excalibur out before Teddy . . . well, it wouldn’t matter, would it, since only the blood of Arthur can sit upon



the throne . . . which means Tedros *is* king, now and forever, though it sounds like he's only a 'half-king' without respect or support . . . or a sword."

Draped in a plushy black bathrobe, Sophie leaned back, picking at the curlers in her blond hair as she scanned more articles:

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH
CORONATION MONKEYS!**

**AGATHA: LOYAL PRINCESS . . . OR WITCH WHO
CURSED THE CORONATION?**

**HORRO-NATION FALLOUT: IS LANCELOT
PLOTTING TO STEAL THE CROWN?**

"Six months later and it's all anyone still talks about," Sophie sighed, folding the newspaper and fingering a vial of gold liquid hanging from her necklace. "Poor, poor Teddy."

"If Teddy's so poor, why are you smiling," grunted Hort.

Sophie looked out at her shirtless, raven-haired friend and two first-year Neverboys in sleek black uniforms lugging a marble statue of her across newly refurbished Evil Hall. "Are you implying that I'm happy about my two best friends being the laughingstock of Camelot? Are you implying that I take secret *delight* in whatever strains this humiliation has put upon their relationship?"

"You stalked Tedros for three years, tried to marry a murderous sorcerer to make him jealous, then held the whole

Woods hostage when Tedros wouldn't kiss you," Hort said, rippled muscles shining as he slid Sophie's statue through the red-and-gold ballroom. Above him, a few Nevergirls teetered on ladders to hang a chandelier, each crystal shaped like an S. "Plus, you've been writing Agatha for months trying to hijack the wedding planning and she won't write you back and now you secretly want the wedding to bomb," he added. "So yeah, not really implying. More just saying it."

Sophie stared at him. "I want to be helpful to Aggie, Hort. She's far away in a whole new kingdom, preparing for the biggest day of her life, and I want to be there for her. Am I hurt she hasn't responded? A little, perhaps. But I'm not *mad*."

"When you're hurt, you *get* mad," said Hort. "You get so mad that you turn witchy and start wars and people die. Check the history textbook."

"Oh sweetie, that's the *past*," Sophie groaned, reclining against her glass throne, shaped like a five-pointed crown. "It's a new year now and I've moved on, just like our former classmates who are off in the Woods, pursuing their fairy-tale quests. Look . . ."

She slipped the lid off the vial attached to her necklace and turned the vial upside down, emptying the gold liquid. But instead of falling to the floor, the liquid suspended midair, creating the outline of a large square before it magically filled in with a magnificent three-dimensional map of the Endless Woods. Scattered across kingdoms near and far were dozens of brightly colored figurines, like an army of toy soldiers, each resembling a fourth-year student from the School for Good

and Evil and labeled with their name.

“And from the Quest Map, it looks like our friends are doing quite well,” said Sophie. “See, here’s Beatrix in Jaunt Jolie, fighting with Reena and Millicent as her sidekicks. . . . Here’s Ravan in Akgul, plundering the Iron Village with Drax as his henchman and Arachne as his mogrified newt. . . . Here’s Hester, Dot, and Anadil in Kyrgios on some ‘important’ mission they won’t tell me about, though it can’t be that important if they’re never in the same kingdom for more than a day. . . . And here’s Chaddick, off on Avalon Island by himself—mmm, strange; I thought he’d gone to Camelot to be Tedros’ knight. Why would he be in Avalon? Nothing but snow and tundra. No one even lives there. Well, except the Lady of the Lake, but she seals her castle’s gates to everyone except Merlin and Camelot’s king. . . . But it looks like Chaddick’s figure is *inside* her gates, doesn’t it? Maybe he’s flying over the island on a stymph or something. . . .”

“Blue means they’re winning their quest?” Hort asked.

“And red means they’re losing. That’s why *my* name is in blue,” preened Sophie, pointing to her figurine by the miniature school towers on the map. “My quest as Dean was to bring Evil into a new age, and clearly I’ve succeeded.”

“Well, my name’s in blue too,” said Hort, spotting his figure obscured by Sophie’s. “My students love me, I work out every night, and I’ve even started getting fan mail. Just the other day I got a note in a girl’s handwriting saying I was her favorite character from your story and that they didn’t make boys like me in Woods Beyond. Must be a Reader from your old town—”

“Or Castor playing a prank,” Sophie sniffed.

The puff went out of Hort’s chest. “Hey, wait a second. Isn’t it weird that every single name on this map is blue? Shouldn’t *someone* be losing their quest?”

“Ever since Clarissa gave me this map, we’ve been nothing but winners,” Sophie crowed. “So either I’m good luck or we’re a *very* talented group.”

“Or your map is broken, which would explain why it says Chaddick is inside the Lady of the Lake’s gates when that’s *impossible*,” said Hort. “Look, even Tedros and Agatha are in blue, which means, according to the Quest Map, they’re doing just fine.”

Sophie peered at him, then at Agatha’s and Tedros’ names in Camelot, just as blue as the others.

“That can’t be right,” she murmured. “How can Tedros be winning? I read Camelot’s papers every day. He’s the town fool! He’s a *disgrace!*”

She saw Hort smirking at her.

“Poor Teddy,” he said.

Sophie rose from her throne and sashayed past Hort. “Oh please, for all we know, Clarissa hexed his name to make him look good. Fairy godmothers love to cheat.” She swept her hand through the map, dispersing it to liquid and back into the vial on her neck. “And honestly, I can’t worry about a failed king and a princess who isn’t even queen and yet is somehow too busy to write her best *friend*. I have my school to run: 125 new Nevers who think Tedros and Agatha are old news and have their eyes on *me*. Plus, I have these pesky Readers we’ve

accepted, who don't have a clue. Why, on the very first day, a girl from Gavalton caved in an entire classroom. So my hands are quite full, thank you. And even if I could spare a thought for Tedros—or any boy, for that matter—it would be a wasted one. I'm completely happy on my own, unattached and untroubled by the vagaries of love. *Flah-sé-dah*, that's my new mantra: a blissful mélange of 'laissez-faire' and 'la-di-da.' Who needs the stress of love when there's important work to do? I prefer a *modest* life now, dedicated to my students."

"Um, throwing a Dean's Dance the second week of school with the theme 'Night of a Thousand Sophies' where people have to dress up in outfits inspired by your fairy tale doesn't seem *modest* to me," said Hort, his Neverboy helpers murmuring assent as they polished the statue of Sophie in hooded robes, a crown of flowers upon her head. "Nor does taking half the Evil students out of class to decorate for it serve anyone but *you*," Hort added, surveying the ballroom filled with Nevergirls in chic leather dresses and high black boots and Neverboys in stylish leather coats and skinny black pants, all hard at work: hanging tapestries of Sophie's best moments as a student, polishing stained glass windows of Sophie's face, and scrubbing the marble floor branded with a red S circled by olive leaves and topped with a gold crown.

"And yet here you are, helping them," Sophie said, simpering at Hort.

"Yeah, so you'll take me to the dance."

"A Dean doesn't need a date to her own dance," Sophie bristled.

“But maybe she *wants* one,” said Hort, sweat dripping.

“What I want is for you to put on a shirt,” said Sophie, eyeing his sculpted torso.

“I seem to have lost it,” said Hort.

Sophie arched a brow. “Indeed.”

“Um, Professor?” a voice peeped.

Hort and Sophie turned.

Fifty first years blinked at them. “Someone’s knocking on the door,” a vampiric-looking girl wisped.

A barrage of loud raps echoed through the Hall.

Sophie waited until the knocking stopped. “Really? I don’t hear a thing.”

“By the way, I liked the castle better how it was before, when it was crumbly and dirty,” Hort said, rubbing out a stain on Sophie’s statue with his hand. “Everything’s too clean now. Like we’re trying to hide something.”

“Hogwash. How could anyone possibly prefer the *old* Evil,” Sophie pooh-poohed, glancing out the window at the renovated towers of Malice, Mischief, and Vice, lit up with red-and-gold paper lanterns. “Evil was so *dark* before. So morose and unattractive. No wonder we were always the losers. We *acted* like losers!”

“So Evil’s been around since the dawn of time, waiting for *you* to save it?” said Hort, stonefaced.

“Darling, if it wasn’t for me, Evil would have kept playing second fiddle to Good, dying in every story for no other reason than it made a tidier ending for the sweet, pretty Ever to win. But now look at us: new uniforms, new classes, new castle. . . .

A new *brand* of Evil. Which is why I've invited the students from Good to join our dance tonight. I want them to see Evil is no longer the ugly stepsister. Evil is young and glamorous and *en vogue*. Tonight isn't just a celebration; it's a flag in the sand. A flag that says: it's Evil's time now. And if we happen to bring a few Evers into our ranks along the way . . . well, then, *flah-sé-dah*."

She snapped her fingers—a scrawny, brown, rat-faced boy ran in from the wings and handed her a glass of green juice.

"Isn't that right, Bogden?" Sophie smiled, sipping her juice.

"*Flah-sé-dah*," he squeaked, fanning her with a palm frond.

Hort glared at the rat boy. "Why is *he* here?"

More loud knocks assaulted the Hall.

"Bogden of Woods Beyond?" said Sophie innocently, ignoring the knocks. "Didn't you have him in class, *Professor Hort*? You are our school's teacher of Evil history, are you not? Or do you make it a habit of not paying attention to the students you teach?"

Hort clenched his teeth. "First of all, I'm here to teach history as a last-minute *favor* to you since no one wanted a job where everybody who takes it ends up dead. Second, I shouldn't even be here since Lady Lesso assigned me a normal quest like everyone else, which means my little soldier on your magic map should be in Maidenvale, fighting dragons and elves and maybe even getting my own fairy tale. But instead I left my quest to help *you*—"

"As Dean, I have the right to modify your quest as I see fit," said Sophie.

“—and third, I know perfectly well who Bogden is,” Hort plowed on, “because he flunked my challenges and every other teacher’s the first week, which means he should have been expelled, since by your new rules, anyone who fails three challenges in a row is sent packing.”

“I know my rules, thank you. I just couldn’t bring myself to fail a fellow Reader,” Sophie sighed. “I too came from humble beginnings. I too craved a life better than Gavaldon’s, where I would have to churn butter and wash clothes and marry an obese man who expected me to obey him and you know . . . *cook*. It’s why I started accepting applications from Readers. They deserve to live out their fairy tales.”

“Then why have you been complaining about Readers the past two weeks?” Hort asked.

“Just that one Gavaldon Girl who destroyed a classroom and gives me the Evil eye every time she sees me. And not in a Good way. Bogden, on the other hand, treats me like a goddess,” Sophie said, beaming at the rat-faced boy. “So after his poor first week, I gave him the choice between being sent home or being my personal steward for the year. Looks a bit like the old you, doesn’t he, Hort? Before you started lifting weights to look like Tedros, I mean.”

Harder knocking now.

“If this is what you’re like as Dean, I can’t imagine what you’d have been like as Camelot’s *queen*,” said Hort.

“Pssh, no way,” Sophie said, lounging against her throne. “Presiding at court while people present their problems . . . that’s not me.”

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

“Oh, let them in, for heaven’s sake!” Sophie moaned.

Instantly Bogden snatched a rolled-up red carpet from behind Sophie’s throne and unfurled it across Evil Hall, shunting Nevers out of the way with catlike hisses before he flung open the doors with a courtier’s bow—

A gaggle of adults flurried down the carpet, waving wild arms and shouting so loudly that Sophie peeked around for a window to jump out of.

“You can’t yank students out of class willy-nilly!” Professor Bilius Manley yelled, pimply head flushing red.

“You can’t invite Evers into Evil castle without School Master approval!” scolded Professor Sheeba Sheeks, shaking her fists.

“You can’t turn the School Master’s tower into your own private residence!” said Yuba the Gnome, white beard twitching.

“YOU THINK THAT’S BAD? SHE MADE BATHS MANDATORY!” Castor the Dog bellowed. “FOR *TEACHERS* TOO.”

The others gasped.

Sophie cinched her bathrobe tighter, curlers bouncing like Christmas ornaments. “First of all, I can do whatever I want with our students since *I’m* Dean. Second, seeing there *is* no School Master, I could invite Evers to a tarheelled hootenanny if I felt like it and no one could stop me! Third, even if we have a fleet of new fairies watching the Storian, I felt more secure living beside it, given that the protection of the

enchanted pen is our school's top priority—”

“And this protection includes renovating the tower to be a five-star hotel?” Manley barked, pointing out the window at scaffolding encasing the School Master's spire. “The stymphs' construction on the tower has been going on for months and nearly suffocated us all with dust! We've had enough!”

Sophie glared. “You expected me to live in that old stone cell like Rafal once did? Without silk carpeting or a proper bathtub or 360-degree lighting?”

The teachers were speechless.

Wolf howls echoed in the hallway.

“I believe that's your cue to get back to teaching and mine to get ready for a Dean's Dance,” said Sophie, rising from her throne—

Evil Hall's doors flung open once more and Clarissa Dovey marched in, silver hair fraying from her high bun, beetle wings flapping on her green teacher's gown.

“If it is, in fact, a Dean's Dance, then one would assume I'm invited, since I am a *Dean*,” she said, gliding down the red carpet, a gold vial identical to Sophie's dangling around her neck. “Only I received no such invitation.”

“Tonight is a celebration of glamour, charisma, and hope. Despite the rather maleficent entrance, I'm afraid you'd feel quite out of place,” said Sophie coolly.

“And yet you invited *my* students,” said Dovey.

“Who have RSVPed in remarkable numbers,” said Sophie. “I can assure you that none of *my* first years would attend a dance in your castle. And if they did, the fusty old smell would

surely drive them away.”

Dean Dovey’s eyes flashed. “Oh, how the School Master will cook your goose.”

“Too bad there *is* no School Master,” Sophie purred.

Clarissa leaned in, eye to eye. “That will soon *change*.”

Sophie turned dead white.

The Dean of Good swept out of the Hall, Evil’s teachers following her, until the doors slammed behind them, shaking the chandelier. A clump of S crystals fell and shattered against Sophie’s glass throne.

She hardly noticed as Bogden picked shards out of her hair, her big, spooked pupils fixed on the door.

“New School M-M-Master?” she croaked.

She saw Hort, barechested against her statue, grinning like a weasel.

“*Flah-sé-dah*,” he sang.