

Miss Prince

By

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Tannbourne

Miss Prince

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There are a great many people without whom this book would not have made it into print.

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Oh and... regarding the story... It's STILL not my fault. Fairytales, folklore, games, films and indeed literature are really like that.

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SOME DRAGON-SLAYING REQUIRED

'I'll get a job', she'd thought. 'Earn my own ticket,' she'd thought. Lucinda's parents had agreed that it was a good idea. 'It'll teach you some responsibility,' they'd said.

Lucinda was currently staring down a dragon, dressed as a man, on only her first day in gainful employment. She suspected her parents would *not* think it such a good idea if they knew.

It had seemed innocent enough. There was an ad in the newsagent's window;

'Young person wanted for part time job
General Assistant
Must be available on weekends.'

'General assistant', that was a good one. What it hadn't said was 'some dragon-slaying required'. Sara had said that was because it would put people off.

It would probably have put Lucinda off too, but not much. Her goal in life was to do pretty much everything, ever, and something like dragon-slaying was not an everyday occurrence. Lucinda was all about not-everyday occurrences, and caused them to occur quite frequently. She had been causing one quite loudly some weeks before, when her mother burst into the room, to see what the horrible crash had been.

"You're blue," were the first words out of her mouth as she took in the scene of desolation. Lucinda was lying on her back halfway off the bed, covered in books and trinkets that had fallen off the now tilted bookcase, which was wedged between the wall and her bed. She was clutching a camera in one hand. "You're actually blue." Something slid off the bookshelf and made a sad tinkling sound. "WHY are you blue, dare I ask?"

"I'm all right thanks, no need to help me up," Lucinda complained, shedding books and jewellery as she righted herself. "I've only fallen off a bookshelf and got nearly buried alive, I'm *perfectly* fine."

"And why were you climbing the bookcase?" Lucinda's mother asked, ignoring her daughter's complaint. "That camera better not be broken, we need that!"

"It's fine, I kept hold of it when I fell," Lucinda replied. "And I wasn't climbing the bookcase, I was trying to put the camera on top of it at a good angle. But as I was adjusting the tripod, I slipped and grabbed it, so it fell over."

"What on Earth did you want to put the camera up there for? There's plenty of other places to put it, aren't there? Honestly, I don't know where you get these funny ideas from," her mother continued, picking her way around the debris and pushing the bookcase back up against the wall. "You're all right then, are you?" she added, finally.

"Yeah, just a bit sore," Lucinda said, pulling a face at the bookcase. "And *annoyed!* I'm supposed to have my bit filmed for today, I promised!"

"Do I even want to know? Who did you promise?" her mother asked suspiciously as she joined Lucinda in picking up the books and shoving them back on the shelves. "Because I *know* this isn't for homework." Lucinda

was dressed in some stylishly tattered jeans, and a similarly abused white blouse. At least, it *had* been white; now it was stained with blue where Lucinda had touched it. Her face, arms and bare feet were covered in face paint. She was also wearing a belt with an oversized gold buckle and small chains hanging from it. The whole thing was topped off by a spiky blue and white wig. She looked like a fashionista zombie.

“Anna, my friend from the U.S.,” Lucinda explained. “We’re filming our own opening sequence. For a series we made up. We have to start practising *now* or we’ll never be good enough.”

“Ah. That Japanese stuff again, no doubt,” her mother tutted and shook her head. “Do Japanese mums have this much trouble cleaning blue off their bedsheets, too?”

“It’s practice for a contest that’s coming up next summer!” Lucinda continued, annoyed that her prompt had been ignored. “There’s this huge convention and we all want to go and enter the big contest there,” she explained. “We’re all going to film our own bits of the video in England, and Wales, and New Zealand, and last of all we’re gonna film the main bits together at Anna’s house in Georgia!”

“Oh, do you send it through the internet?” Lucinda’s mother asked, interested despite herself.

“Well, yeah, but we’re going to film most of it near Anna’s house. ‘Cause we all need to dance together and stuff,” Lucinda replied.

“All together?” her mother repeated, baffled. “How are you going to do that if you’re in different countries?”

“We won’t be, that’s the point,” Lucinda explained patiently. “We’re going to all meet up and film the main bit

at Anna's. All us friends, from different parts of the world in our own little bits filmed at home and then BAM! All of a sudden we're all together in America! It's going to be amazing! There's some cool prizes, but really we just want to say we did it." Lucinda's mother ran the sentence through her head a few times moving her lips as she tried to comprehend what had just been said.

"Let me get this straight. You're going to *actually go* to America to meet these internet friends of yours?" she said finally, her eyes widening in disbelief. "And how are you going to get there? How do you think you're going to be able to *afford* it?"

"Well . . . I was hoping," Lucinda mumbled, "I was hoping that you and Dad would pay . . ." She'd been dreading this moment for two weeks now, since Anna had told her about the contest. "I mean, not all of it!" she added quickly, seeing her mother's expression. "I'm going to get a job!"

"A job, indeed!" her mother retorted. "I should hope so, too! Do you know how expensive plane tickets are? You'll never do it. And you're going to be going abroad all alone!"

"Yes. I looked it up," Lucinda replied sulkily. Why were parents always like this? "And I won't be alone. My friends will meet me at the airport. I'll be staying with them."

"And these friends of yours are genuine, are they?" Her mother was now in full scolding mode. "Have you even met them? What about this Anna? Do her parents know about this plan of yours?"

"Anna's parents know all about it and I've known them online for *ages*. A few years. They're not weirdoes!" Lucinda protested. "We use a webcam half the time, I've

seen them and everything! Anyway, one of them is Pens. You know, Andrew," she added for clarification. 'Pens' was Lucinda's best friend from her old town. Her mother couldn't object to him, she'd half-raised the boy; he used to be round for dinner every other day. Until they'd moved last month, that is. Lucinda missed him terribly. She felt like he might as well live in America. Money was tight and her parents complained if she asked for money to go and see him. His family was no better off.

"We'll see what your father thinks about this," Lucinda's mother announced. "You make sure this mess is cleaned up before he gets home! Right?" Lucinda nodded solemnly and began to tidy up. Her mother strode out, muttering to herself about planes and teenagers and cursing cartoons.

After a little while, a voice said, "Is she gone?"

"Yeah. Dad's probably going to yell at me, too," Lucinda addressed this to her laptop, which was sitting on her writing desk in the corner.

"My Mom yelled at me as well," her laptop replied sympathetically. "We're still gonna try and do it, right?" Lucinda nodded. There was a pause. "Did you nod, Cinders? I can't see you."

"I nodded, I nodded!" replied 'Cinders', giving the mess a look of distaste and sitting in front of the laptop. "Ugh, I got paint everywhere, look!"

"Oh man, you did!" replied the brown-haired girl on the screen, peering closely into her own monitor. "Is that gonna come out?"

"It better! Now I'm saving up for plane tickets, I can't be buying new tops all the time!"

Lucinda pulled off the wig she was wearing. It was a

cheap one that she'd bought in a post-Halloween sale last year. Her own hair was long and red; it was currently tied up in a bun and covered with a hair net. She pulled off the net and took out her hair bands, letting it unravel itself down to the middle of her back.

"I wish my hair did that," Anna remarked. "I wouldn't need a wig then."

"No you don't. It's a pain to comb every morning. And it makes it really hard to put wigs on without them looking dumb," Lucinda complained, "and this red hair of mine comes with freckles, you know. You wouldn't like them." Lucinda had quite a few freckles. She felt that up and coming famous people – she wasn't entirely sure what she was going to be famous *for* yet, but she was determined to be famous for *something* – shouldn't have a boat-load of freckles.

"Don't they say that if you have a lot of freckles you're less likely to get cancer?" Anna replied.

"No idea," Lucinda shook her head. "Not sure if I care."

"I'm pretty sure you'd care if you had cancer," Anna replied, forgiving her friend's flippant attitude. One was allowed to say stupid things one didn't mean when one had just had one's dreams crushed by one's parents. "Look, it's okay. Even if they say no . . . we'll figure something out. I'll get my parents to pay for your ticket and you can bring the money with you and pay me back." Lucinda shook her head again.

"My Dad is going to kill me," she pouted. "Cinders doesn't get to go to the ball, Anna. And I don't see any fairy godmothers around, do you?"

"I think it's a good idea," said her father, settling down to read his paper with a cup of tea. "If she can get the money, that is." Both Lucinda and her mother were dumbfounded.

"But George, she's only fifteen!" her mother protested.

"It's about time she got a job and started paying for own things then, isn't it?" her father replied. "It might teach her some responsibility."

"Well. I suppose so," her mother conceded, "but what if she doesn't get enough money for this plane ticket? What if these friends of hers change their minds?"

"If she doesn't get the money then she can't go," her father answered, putting up a hand to stop Lucinda from objecting, "and if these friends change their minds, then she'll have earned some money she can spend on something else. Sound fair?"

"All right then," her mother agreed grudgingly. "But we're sticking to that, you hear me Lulu? You don't get enough money for your ticket and you're not going, end of argument. We don't have a few hundred pounds going spare to bail you out." Lucinda nodded. She was feeling so happy and light headed that she even let 'Lulu' pass.

"Dad, can I have that paper?" Lucinda asked.

"No," he replied, pointedly turning a page and adjusting his glasses. "I'd suggest asking around in shops rather than looking in the newspaper. Or maybe you could try putting the internet to good use for once." Lucinda went off upstairs to her room. She wasn't quite out of earshot when she heard her mother ask crossly;

"What did you go and tell her that for? What if she actually does it?"

"Oh, you know what she's like, Maria," her father

replied, shrugging. "It's one hare-brained scheme after another. She'll get bored and come up with something else."

"What if she doesn't? What if she actually buys a ticket to Australia or wherever?"

"Then we'll have to buy her a lot of sunblock," he answered simply. "You know how easily she burns." Lucinda crept up the final few steps with a grin on her face.

Lucinda's initial happiness at being allowed to save up for the ticket faded quickly. There just weren't any jobs about, and those that were she wasn't old enough for. She was getting worried. She had almost a year to save up, but she knew she needed to order the ticket well in advance. It was nearly the end of the summer holidays already and goodness knows how long it would take to actually save up.

The days and weeks crept on . . .

It had been a month and Lucinda was getting desperate. She'd lost count of how many C.V.s she'd handed out, all to no avail. She wandered around town, trying to find shops she hadn't already asked at. It was hot out, and although she begrudged spending money right now, it was no good. She really, really needed a drink. She headed for the nearest newsagents and bought herself a can of cola. Cracking it open, she took a swig and eyed the adverts pasted on the inside of the window.

'PlayStation 3 for sale, £200ono' she read. She had no idea what 'ono' was supposed to mean. She always read it as 'oh no' as in 'Oh no, I have to sell this cheap'. She considered if she had anything worth selling that would

help her raise the money. No chance. What she mostly spent her money on were wigs and materials for costumes and they weren't very saleable.

The next one read 'Lost cat, reward'. There was a picture of a white cat, looking smugly at the camera. Lucinda was sure she'd seen the cat pottering around somewhere, so the ad must be old . . . or the cat was pulling a fast one on its owners.

'Do you need a plumber?' That one was so badly sun-bleached that she could barely read it. Lucinda wondered just how long it had been there. Years, it looked like.

Finally an ad caught her eye. Similar to the plumbing one, it looked old. But it was strange, it was as if it had been made old. The pale, brownish paper seemed hand made and had a 'slightly singed' quality. It was ripped along the edges as if torn off something, and written in barely readable, spidery hand writing. It put Lucinda strongly in mind of a treasure map. Yet, the words seemed perfectly ordinary;

'Young person wanted for part time job
General Assistant
Must be available on weekends.'

Lucinda blinked. A job she could do? Finally, after a whole month of looking? Something was going to be wrong. The job was going to be gone already, or they wanted someone older, or it was an awful job. But she could always try. She might be just the person they were looking for. And right now she was prepared to do very nearly anything. She went into the shop and asked the man at the counter.

“You want to take a look at what ad now?” he said, giving her a puzzled look.

“The really old-looking one?” she asked.

“About plumbing?” the shopkeeper replied. “I'd be surprised if the guy who wrote that is even still alive, to be honest. It was up there when I started here . . . oh, ages and ages ago now. I dunno why the boss hasn't taken it down.”

“No, the really old looking one, with the handwriting?” Lucinda insisted.

“I don't remember one like that.” He frowned and squinted at the window. “Knock yourself out. If I didn't see it, someone probably put it up without paying, so you can even take it if you want.” Lucinda thanked the man and took the advert from out of the window. It really did look like a treasure map - there was even a little map scribbled on the back, showing where she should go to apply, complete with an X.

Lucinda peered down the alley indicated on the map. She was sure it couldn't be right, but the map was pretty clear. What kind of business could be down an alley like this? Lucinda had never heard anything good about alleys, and she made her way carefully along the dingy little passage, ready to flee at the first sign of nasty men, rabid animals or possibly even monsters. But all she found was a well-kept skip and a rusty, peeling fire escape that had once been a vivid red. Pasted under the 'Fire Exit: Do Not Block' sign was another notice, reading 'Rent-a-Leg'. It had once said something else, but rust had obscured the rest.

There was no bell or other means of announcing her presence, so she tried knocking. When no-one answered, she took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

The room inside was quite large, and dominated by a reception desk. It was a huge, circular, mahogany desk with, in theory, a person seated in the middle, however, for some unfathomable reason, there was no chair. Thus, the unfortunate receptionist had to actually sit on the desk itself and put up with constantly hitting their head on the various shells and horns hanging around it. Some of them seemed to be ringing, and it sounded like they each made a different noise.

The receptionist was perched on the far side of the desk, in the centre. She had a huge, pink conch wedged between her cheek and her shoulder. She was quite tall, with dark skin and black hair, tied in a loose bun at the back of her head. She was wearing a red, Chinese-style dress, at odds with her Arabic appearance. Lucinda wasn't sure if she was imagining it in the gloom, but it looked like she had pointy ears. She glanced up at Lucinda, gave her an annoyed look and continued speaking rapidly into the conch shell.

“Yes, yes I know,” she shifted uncomfortably on the mahogany desk, “we've put an ad out.” She brushed a strand of black hair out of her eyes, causing the conch to wobble. “Look, I'm sorry, I know you need one, but we just don't have any right now. I could always come and do it myself? No? You'll just have to wait then, I'm afraid.”

Lucinda was almost certain she was in the wrong place. If it wasn't bad enough she'd had to take a fire escape up to the entrance, the strangeness of the office wasn't helping at all. Apart from the desk and its collection of paraphernalia, the place was shadowy, as though darkness had gathered in the corners, like dust. The receptionist's attitude wasn't great for her composure either, not that Lucinda could blame her.

It's not that receptionists aren't nice people. It's just that they're receptionists. And it's a receptionist's basic job to organise everything and deal with a lot of other people's problems. This in turn causes them problems, which means they're highly unlikely to want to deal with your problems, especially if you're some kid who seems to have wandered blindly into their office.

The woman, who must have had a sixth sense for timid introductions, said abruptly into the shell;

"Just a minute sir, I'll have to put you on hold." She yanked at it, causing its cord to lengthen considerably, pulled a small radio from under the desk, switched it on and plonked them both next to each other on the far side of the counter. "Yes?" she said pointedly as Lucinda had opened her mouth to speak.

"Er . . ." Lucinda had been cut off before she even began, so she just held up the card from the newsagents in self defence.

"I've got all day, don't worry about me," the woman raised her voice as two more shells started ringing. She gave Lucinda a smile that said clearly 'You don't'.

"Er . . ." Lucinda tried not to wither under the stare. "I've come about this job . . ." She waved the card again. "I saw it in the newsagents." The woman stared at the card like she'd never seen it before. She took it and read it carefully. Then she flipped it over and scrutinised the back.

"This is your advert isn't it?" Lucinda asked, just in case she really hadn't seen it before. The receptionist looked from the card to Lucinda and gave her a critical stare.

"Yes, it is," she replied simply, looking Lucinda up and down. She folded one arm across her chest and rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

“Only-” Lucinda started, desperate to end the silent examination. She was immediately hushed into silence.

“There’s been a mistake,” the woman said, suddenly brandishing a finger.

“Oh, well in that case I’ll just-” Lucinda started.

“Shh-!” The woman waved her finger again. “I’m thinking.” She paced around in the middle of the desk, difficult as it was. Suddenly she stopped and fixed Lucinda with a piercing look. “Are you going to run off and get married?” she demanded.

“What?” Lucinda blurted out, surprised.

“You speak English, right? It’s a simple question. Are you going to run off and get married?” she repeated sternly.

“No!” Lucinda replied, shocked. “I don’t even have a boyfriend!”

“Fabulous!” the woman clapped her hands together and swung herself right over the desk, so she could get out.

“Oi, Freya!” she shouted down a corridor to her left. “Come and take over for a minute, will you?”

“No problem,” a muffled voice replied.

“You!” she pointed at Lucinda. “Don’t move.” She waited for Lucinda to nod. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she said, and strode off purposefully down the corridor.

As she left, what was presumably a woman, but looked more like an enormous, walking fur coat came in and swung itself over the desk, giving Lucinda a brief view of the most enormous, fluffy, high-heeled boots she had ever seen. The woman was also wearing a huge, furry, white hat, and only her eyes were visible behind a woolly, lavender scarf that was wrapped around her face and neck.

She nodded and waved a white-gloved hand at Lucinda as she picked up the conch and carried on the

receptionist's work. She called up an impression of polar bears - really fashion conscious ones.

Just as she realised she was staring, someone tapped Lucinda on the shoulder, making her jump. It was the receptionist. She'd been even less than a minute. It was like she didn't even have time for Time.

"Here, put these on." The woman threw Lucinda some gaudy looking clothes. "Over what you're wearing is fine." Lucinda pulled on a red vest with puffy sleeves, gold edging and matching shorts. It looked even more ridiculous over her shirt and jeans than it would without. "Right, hold this." A sword was shoved into Lucinda's hand, then she was once more subjected to an unnerving inspection.

"So, you say you definitely won't run off and get married?" the woman asked again.

"Yes! I mean, no!" Lucinda corrected herself quickly. "I won't get married."

"Not even if a handsome prince sweeps you off your feet and offers you half his kingdom?"

"Nope. Not even then," Lucinda replied, figuring there was no point in changing her mind now, even if she didn't know what she'd be changing it from. "I don't think that's very likely though."

"You'd be surprised," the woman replied. "And I'm putting that in your contract, you understand. Run off and get married and you're fired. Even think about it and you're fired."

"OK. Wait, so-" Lucinda paused for a second.

"Yes, you're hired," the woman confirmed. "You start tomorrow at nine o' clock sharp. Be on time or don't bother turning up ever again."

"Nine o' clock, right. Oh, and thank you very much!" Lucinda replied, remembering her manners. Talking to this

woman was like trying to stand on a ball; it was hard to keep your balance.

“And cut your hair,” the woman commanded, “about yea short.” She held her hand flat just above her ear.

“What?! Why?” Lucinda blurted out. She liked her hair, despite the freckles and the wig problems that came with it.

“Do you want the job or not?” the woman asked matter-of-factly.

“Yes! Yes I do!” Lucinda wasn't giving up now after looking for all that time. And it appeared to involve dressing up, one of her favourite things. She couldn't ask for better than that. “I'll cut it.”

“Good girl!” the woman replied, patting her on the shoulder. “Welcome to the team!” She looked Lucinda up and down one last time and then added, “I suppose you've got to look like a girl sometimes . . . maybe you should cut it to here instead.” She held her hand about an inch below her ear this time. “That should do it.”

“Thank you,” Lucinda replied gratefully. “Oh and, what's your name?” She now had a lot of questions and it seemed as good a place as any to start.

“You don't want to know,” the woman replied darkly. “It's terrible.”

“It can't be any worse than mine,” Lucinda said.

“Can't it?” The receptionist raised an eyebrow. “Why, what's yours?”

“Lucinda.”

“That is pretty bad,” the woman replied. “Puts me in mind of something that's far too frilly for its own good. We shall have to do something about it.” She wrinkled her nose. “Mine's Saharaleia.”

“Sahala-?” Lucinda tried.

“Saharaleia,” Saharaleia repeated, “Saharaleia Phedora Cornelia Stollenheim.”

“Gosh.”

“Call me Sara,” she said, holding up a warning finger. “Or else.” Lucinda nodded. “Well then . . .” Sara asked, “what do your friends call you?”

“Cinders,” Lucinda replied, wondering if Sara would make anything of it.

“Well Cinders, I should push off if I were you. The hairdressers will all be closing soon I should think.” Lucinda turned to go, but then stopped.

“Er, isn’t there anything I should know about the job?” she asked tentatively.

“You’re going to be rescuing princesses, other damsels in distress, overthrowing evil overlords, doing kings a great service, that sort of thing,” Sara replied breezily. “Pretty standard stuff.”

“Oh,” Lucinda frowned, while she thought it over. “Is this an acting job?”

“A bit,” Sara explained. “You’re going to have to act like a prince. Normally I hire real ones of course, but then they go and get married. I put the ‘no marriage’ thing in their contracts, but they just don’t care. Don’t need to, once they’ve got a wife and a kingdom to call their own.” She scowled at this apparent treachery. “And for some reason, once you’re a king you sit around and do nothing except get tricked by people and offer half your kingdom and her hand in marriage for the rescue of whatever daughter has been kidnapped this time.”

“What, really?” Lucinda asked, unable to believe her luck.

“Yes, really,” Sara replied, sounding irritated.

“I . . . I don’t think I know how to do any of that

stuff,” said Lucinda slowly. She really didn't want to lose the job now. It sounded perfect. She didn't want to come across as dishonest, though. “Am I going to be able to do this?”

“Oh, don't you worry your pretty little head.” Sara flashed her a brittle smile. “We've got excellent on-the-job training.”

Lucinda arrived home feeling a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Her head seemed to feel especially light now that she'd had her hair cut, too. She still had no idea what she was really going to be doing. But it involved costumes, and that was O.K. by her. It must be some kind of acting job. Or a promotional thing, where she'd have to dress up and hand out leaflets. Well she could do that easily.

“Guess who's got a job?” she told her mother as soon as she saw her, beaming. Her mother looked startled.

“You never have!” she exclaimed. Then she noticed her daughter's hair. “You've cut your hair! What've you cut your hair for?”

“It's for the job,” Lucinda explained. “I'm a prince.”

“Ri-ight,” her mother answered suspiciously. “That's a job these days, is it?”

“Apparently,” Lucinda shrugged. “I think it's acting or something like that.”

“Oh, acting,” her mother sighed with relief. “That should suit you down to the ground, then.”

Lucinda was up bright and early. She'd woken up at about 5am and couldn't get back to sleep because she kept

having dreams that she was late and Sara had turned out to be a witch and cursed her legs to fall off and other silly things. By the time she was really awake, she was highly dubious of reality in general, and kept pinching herself.

Her first day at work did not help in the slightest.

As soon as she arrived, Sara shoved the red clothes from yesterday at her and told her to get changed in a little office to the side. In addition to the red outfit, she'd also been provided with brown, knee-high boots, some long, leather gloves and a short, maroon cape.

"I thought about what you said yesterday and I think you have a point," Sara announced as Lucinda appeared from the makeshift changing room.

"Oh?" Lucinda was apprehensive. She tried to remember any points she'd made.

"Are you going to be able to do this?" Sara wondered out loud. Lucinda inwardly cursed her own honesty. Was Sara having second thoughts about hiring her? "I'd like to know that, too. So I'm going to give you a few tests. Three is the standard number. They're all really basic, run-of-the-mill tasks that come up all the time. If you can't even do them, you've got no business working here. Understood?" Lucinda nodded solemnly. "Good. Come with me."

Sara led Lucinda down an odd corridor full of doors. That is, even more full of doors than corridors usually are. It was more door than wall, and it seemed to go on and on. Sara stopped abruptly.

"I thought I'd start you off with something simple," she announced. "So today you're going to fight a dragon. Just remember not to get married," she added sternly, opening the door.

"I'm sorry?" Lucinda asked, not believing her ears and absolutely positive that not getting married was not what she was going to be worrying about.

"Don't worry, Gerda will look after you. She's a valkyrie, so you'll be fine I'm sure. Have a good day!" she said brightly, indicating that Lucinda should step through the door, which she did. "I'd leave it open, but I don't want to risk getting ash all over the hallway." There was a click as the door closed. Lucinda turned to ask what she meant by that, but Sara was gone. The door was gone. In fact, the whole building was gone. Lucinda found herself in a green meadow, being rapidly approached and shouted at by what first appeared to be a ball of metal on legs. As it got closer, Lucinda could make out it was a large woman in armour. There was a screech, and Lucinda looked up and saw a huge, green bird diving towards her, aiming for the yelling woman. It was carrying something blue, which it dropped on the ground as it swooped down low. The woman ducked and it flew up again. Lucinda stared in horror at it. It was huge, scaly and bright green, with leathery, bat-like wings. It had three horns on its lizard-like head. It was most definitely not a bird.

"Don't just stand there like a lemon!" the woman shouted at her, finally in hearing distance. "Get in there!" It swooped down to worry at the blue thing it had dropped, which, Lucinda realised with alarm, was a girl.

"Is that a dragon?!" Lucinda shouted back. "An actual, real dragon?!"

"Well it's not the bloomin' tooth fairy, is it?" the woman yelled. "Get it!"

Lucinda ran at the dragon without really thinking. This couldn't possibly be happening. The woman in armour

had said it was real and it looked real but it couldn't possibly be real – could it? The dragon decided she was a threat; it turned round and hissed at her, giving her an excellent view of all its razor sharp teeth. It was real all right.

“Gerda, valkyrie, pleased to make your acquaintance!” the woman yelled.

“What do I do?!” Lucinda shouted, unsure if she should go for the dragon or the girl.

“What do you mean what do you do?” Gerda replied. “Get it!”

“But how do I do that?!” Lucinda yelled.

“Just get it!” Gerda yelled back, as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

“That is not a helpful instruction!” Lucinda screamed, as the dragon took a snap at her sword, driving her backwards. ‘Excellent on-the-job training’ Sara had said. That must translate to English as ‘being yelled at by Gerda’.

“What’s the matter with you, gi- boy?!” she bellowed, as the dragon almost tripped Lucinda with a swish from its tail as it turned around. “It’s only a dragon, for crying out loud! I could have skewered it and fatally wounded several other nightmarish beasts by now! Come on, show ‘im who’s boss!”

“That’s easy for you to say!” Lucinda yelled back. She’d lost her composure already. She was convinced that the only reason she wasn’t dead was that the dragon seemed to be far more interested in the valkyrie than her, and it was increasingly irate at the way Lucinda was constantly dodging around to its back. It twisted itself around, first one way, then another, trying to keep them both in view. It hissed and spat fire at Lucinda. She ducked and felt the heat frazzle her hair. This was definitely not an

acting job.

“Helpful tip: Dragons breathe fire!” Gerda bellowed, almost cheerfully. “Watch out for that!”

Gerda was one of nature’s yellers. As the fight continued, Lucinda was yelled at for dodging, yelled at for not dodging, yelled at for trying to hit it, yelled at for not hitting it, yelled at for being almost burned, yelled at for falling over and yelled at for being a girl. She’d been called ‘a great pansy’ more times than she was willing to count. Gerda was one of those people who thought screaming at you that you were doing things wrong would somehow get you to do them right. Instead of say, explaining how to actually do it.

The dragon snarled threateningly and stamped around, trying to menace them both, whilst its hostage, a blonde princess who had quickly gotten out of the way once Lucinda had arrived, sat arranging her skirts a short distance away and looking bored. It was as if someone fighting a dragon was something she saw every day. She probably did. She was wearing a silky blue dress and more sparkly jewellery than Lucinda had seen in her life.

The dragon finally picked a target, and that target was Lucinda. It took a swipe at her, which she managed to dodge. But it was largely hissing and trying to bite the point of her sword as she waved it around. It was dawning on Lucinda that all it really wanted was for her to go away and leave it alone. It wasn't really attacking her, it was just trying to send her off. She backed away a little, lowering her sword. The dragon eyed her for several agonising seconds, before deciding she was no longer a threat and turning towards the bored princess. Gerda screamed a string of curse words, adding;

“Stop it, stop it before it takes off again!” Panicking,

Lucinda ran forward and tried to block it from getting to the princess.

“Bad dragon, shoo!” she shouted hopelessly, waving her arms about. This appeared to be the last straw. It reared up, and took a deep breath. This was no warning shot.

“What are you doing, you great pansy!” Gerda shouted, flinging her own sword to the ground in frustration. “Stab ‘im!” Lucinda, having finally received an order she could actually follow, did as she was told, and managed to catch the dragon on its webbed toes as it rose up. She cut right through one of the webs.

To her surprise, it let out a cry like a distressed chick, curled up into a ball and refused to move. Lucinda approached it cautiously. She poked it. It hissed and curled up even further.

“I-is it supposed to do that?” Lucinda asked, looking around for Gerda, who had picked up her sword and was running towards them. The princess came wandering up too, looking a little bewildered. “Is it all right?” Lucinda asked Gerda as the valkyrie caught up.

“Oh, it’s fine,” Gerda replied, waving her sword around. It seemed like Gerda could barely talk without waving her sword around, as though it had replaced half her body language. Lucinda stepped back a little, out of slicing range. “They’re right soft, are dragons. One little scratch and they think they’ve been killed!”

“Really?” Lucinda asked, giving it a cautious stroke. Its scales were hard and smooth, but oddly warm. She'd thought it would feel cold. Now that it wasn't spitting at her and trying to bite her, she was fascinated. She couldn't believe it was a real dragon. It uncurled its head, and she moved away hurriedly, but it just sulked at them all. It was

smaller than she would have expected too; about twice the size of a large horse.

“Oh yeah,” Gerda continued, patting the dragon on the nose. “Do y’know how that George bloke killed that dragon? It flew at him and he swung at it and nicked its wing,” she demonstrated, slicing through the air and of course, by waving her sword about, “so it landed, and do you know what it did? Just stood there, shivering. Then he tied it up, using a scarf the girl he'd rescued was wearin', led it to the town square, quiet as a lamb, then chopped the poor thing's head off. It's a pity, they really keep the other nasty stuff down. Harpies and the like, you know.”

“How horrible!” Lucinda screwed up her face in disgust. She looked at the sulking dragon. It was now lying with its head on its paws, like a scolded dog. She couldn't help but feel sorry for it. It had looked vicious before, but wouldn't any animal defend itself? Although it had been trying to carry off a princess-

“Horrible?” said the princess, pouting. “Isn't anyone going to ask if I'm unhurt?”

“No,” replied the valkyrie.

“Are you hurt?” asked Lucinda.

“I'm fine,” replied the princess sourly, indignant at her treatment so far. Both of them had completely ignored her up to this point, and princesses aren't accustomed to being ignored. Then she remembered who she was and who she was talking to and mentally switched gear. “I mean, Thank goodness you were here! Thank you so much, my hero, I am forever in your debt,” she said sweetly, flashing Lucinda a smile. “Noble prince, you have rescued me from this terrible beast!” she indicated the dragon, which had uncurled completely and was tentatively trying to nibble Gerda's sword. “Oh, I was ever so frightened!

You shall surely be greatly rewarded!" She paused for a moment as if she was looking at some internal script. "My father shall offer you half the kingdom and my hand in marriage," she finished coyly. Gerda sniggered.

The princess gave the valkyrie a dirty look before saying to Lucinda;

"Art thou not pleased, my prince?"

"Er, no?" Lucinda replied, looking completely baffled. Seeing the princess's expression darken again she explained, "I'm not allowed to get married. It's in my contract."

"That's right," Gerda chipped in gleefully. "It's in his contract," she added, adding extra weight to the 'his' and nudging Lucinda, who remembered that she was supposed to be a prince.

"What's so special about it being in his contract?" the princess asked, frowning suspiciously.

"Well it ain't in mine," Gerda cut in before Lucinda could answer. "I can run off and get married any time I like." She winked at Lucinda. "Of course, I'm already married, so that'd be a bit of a problem." Then she looked pointedly at the princess. "Well?"

"Well what?" the princess snapped back.

"You've been rescued, 'aven't you? What you standin' round here for?" Gerda jerked her head towards a village a short distance away. "Push off." The princess drew herself up and it looked as if she would argue. But instead she stuck her chin in the air, and with as much dignity as she could manage, turned and headed towards the village. Then Gerda seemed to remember something. "Oh, wait a minute."

"Yes?" the princess turned back, looking hopeful.

"Chuck it a couple of bangles and take your crown

off, for goodness sake!" the valkyrie chided. "Else you'll only get carried off again." The princess made a face and angrily took off three of the dozens of golden bangles she was wearing. She threw them at Gerda and then stormed off to the village, muttering to herself. The valkyrie watched her go and shook her head.

"She still hasn't took her crown off, like I said," she tutted. She threw the bangles to the dragon, who sniffed them, picked them up delicately in its teeth and trotted off happily, though limping a little.

"Will she be okay?" Lucinda asked, watching the princess stride away. "She looked really upset. Shouldn't you have told her I'm really a girl?" She looked from the princess to the departing dragon and back again. "Sara really wasn't kidding about rescuing princesses." Lucinda would have pinched herself, in case she was dreaming again, but she was bruised and sore from the fight, so that was a pretty good indication of reality as she saw it. "Why should she take her crown off?"

"You know magpies? They like shiny things, right?" Lucinda nodded. "Dragons is the same. They like gold, rubies, diamonds, anythin' sparkly." She thumbed in the princess's direction. "With the amount of jewellery she had on, it's no wonder she got carried off. And it was probably on purpose too, not her though, she looked like she couldn't find her bum with a map. Probably Daddy heard a dragon knocking about and said 'Daughter dearest, why don't you put on your best jewellery and go have a walk in the garden, go on, the bit in the middle where there's no cover'." Lucinda was shocked;

"But why?" she asked. "Why would anyone do it on purpose?"

"To get her married off, of course."

"Oh, come on," Lucinda shook her head in disbelief. "There's no way!"

"Look, kings don't want any unmarried daughters about, they only cause trouble," Gerda explained. "If they don't get cursed when they're born, then they're like a ticking wossname. Better to cause your own trouble than wait for something to 'appen. Pick your poison, as it were. Dragons ain't so bad, you ain't even seen one before, and you managed all right. Better to get 'er carried off by a dragon and rescued in short order than end up enragin' some fairy who curses you too. Givin' up half the kingdom is worth it."

"Wouldn't you end up with a lot of tiny kingdoms if you did that?" Lucinda asked, puzzled.

"Oh, you do," Gerda replied. "Most of the kingdoms you get round here are little more than a castle with a town attached. Leads to a lot of fightin', particularly at the point when someone ends up with 'alf a castle."

"I still don't see why you couldn't tell her I'm a girl, though," Lucinda asked, still pretty confused.

"Of course you can't tell people! If it gets out that there's a girl doin' a prince's job, all Nifelheim will let loose."

"But why though?" Lucinda insisted.

"'Cause of what just happened, that's why. Sara wouldn't 'alf get some earache! Not enough princes to go around, you see. Hearing there's fake princes about, everyone'd be up in arms."

"But wh--"

"You ask me why one more time, and I'll give you a right ding round the ear 'ole! Try waitin' 'til I've finished explainin', why don't you?" Gerda gave Lucinda a stern look. "It's traditional to 'ave lots of daughters, in large

numbers, sixes or twelves, each more lovely than the last and all that nonsense. But princes usually come in ones or threes. I'm sure you can do the maths."

"So there's really a shortage of princes?" Lucinda asked, picking up her sword and staggering as she put it back in the scabbard.

"Oh yeah. And it's made worse by deservin' poor girls, too." Lucinda waited patiently for her to explain. "You get some poor girl being treated badly by her step family, there's a ball at the local palace, but does the prince want to marry any of the eligible princesses thronging the hall, who would be an important political investment, oh no, he's got to marry the mysterious stranger who comes flouncing in late and then leaves her footwear where people can trip over 'em."

THE SECOND TEST

Gerda continued to complain about surplus princesses basically mucking things up for everybody all the way back to the office. Finally they came back through into the Rent-a-Leg building. Lucinda asked why it was called 'Rent-a-Leg' and was told that it wasn't. It was short for 'Rent-a-Legend', 'short for' in this case meaning 'the other letters are covered in rust'. The place was a honeycomb of corridors and little staircases and seemed to have a bad case of doors. There were doors absolutely everywhere; lining the corridors, at odd angles from the wall, there were some on the floor and Lucinda had even spotted one on the ceiling. There were doors within doors. And all of them went to different places. Lucinda was told by Gerda that she was not to go into any doors unsupervised, on pain of death, by order of Sara. Lucinda resolved to not even look at a door without permission. If Sara said 'on pain of death' Lucinda was willing to bet that she actually meant it. Sara looked up as they came into the office.

"And how was our first day?" she asked unnecessarily brightly. "I see you passed the first test." She was perched on the inside edge of the desk, doing some paperwork. It looked really uncomfortable. Maybe that was why she seemed so grumpy all the time.

"I did?" Lucinda frowned, feeling that there was a loop and she was out of it. "How can you tell?"

"You're still alive," Sara replied. Her nonchalance put Lucinda on edge.

"What exactly do you do here?" Lucinda asked, sounding more hostile than she had intended. "What kind

of company hires people to fight dragons?"

"We rent people out," Sara replied. "Story people. We make stories."

"You make stories?" Lucinda replied. Sara shrugged.

"Somebody has to. Better than just letting any old thing happen." She leaned forward. "Is there a problem?" she asked pointedly, giving her the kind of look that teachers give students who haven't done their homework and are waiting for their excuse. It said 'this had better be good'.

"I'll just be off then," Gerda announced. "I expect you've got stuff to discuss." She paused before adding, "She's a good 'un, this one, Sara. Don't be too . . . you, y'know? I'm off." She did a sort of salute with her sword and strolled off down the corridor.

"Not a problem as such, no," Lucinda answered, trying not to sound ticked off. She fixed Sara with a defiant stare. "But some warning would have been nice! It's just that I was expecting a job holding a sign or delivering newspapers, and suddenly I'm thrown in front of a dragon!"

"Sounds like there's a problem to me," Sara asked, licking the end of her pen and returning to her paperwork. "It's not like I didn't tell you what you were going to be doing yesterday."

"Well, yes, but I didn't think you were serious," Lucinda answered, feeling slightly guilty.

"Now you know better," Sara replied. "We make stories. Stuff that happens in stories is going to happen to you. And it won't all be nice. Stories aren't nice. You want a job delivering newspapers, you go and get one. I won't stop you." She looked back down at her paperwork. Lucinda waited. After a minute Sara looked back up. "Still

here, are you?" She gave her the teacher's look again. It looked like she was peering over a pair of invisible glasses.

"I can handle it," Lucinda said. 'I'm going to have to,' she thought to herself.

"When I say things won't be nice, I mean it," Sara replied. "You might be better cut out for newspapers. We aren't talking Mr. Bunny Goes to Market here." Lucinda hesitated.

"What sort of not nice stuff?"

"The kind that happens in stories," Sara replied tartly. "Worse than fighting dragons, certainly."

"Oh. Um." Was she really better suited to a normal job . . . ? This was the sort of thing she dreamed about, the sort of thing she sought out every day. She hadn't thought dragons were real up until today, but she'd always kind of hoped. Could she really give this up, knowing it was here? Yesterday she would have laughed at the idea of actually fighting monsters. But now it all seemed so . . . easy. It had been the easiest thing in the world to go from 'dragons aren't real' to 'dragons are real and I have to beat this one'. She couldn't walk away and do something normal knowing about Rent-a-Legend. She just couldn't. She wouldn't be Lucinda if she chose normal over this.

She thought about stories. Sure, bad things happened in stories. But she was going to be the hero. So that would be all right, wouldn't it? Bad things happened to heroes, but they always came out of it okay. Otherwise, where was the justice in the world? Especially a world with dragons in it.

"You can walk away right now," Sara continued, "I won't blame you."

"No," Lucinda replied. Somehow, she must keep the job, and not just because of the money. The money was a

pretty big motivator on its own. But something told her that this is where she was meant to be. "I'm not going to walk away." Sara gave her a good, long look.

"And you're sure?" Sara asked.

"Yes," Lucinda answered defiantly.

"Good," Sara smiled. "See you next week, then. Nine o' clock, Saturday." Lucinda nodded and walked towards the door, feeling odd. She wasn't sure if she was being bullied or if she'd just passed a test. Just as she had her hand on the doorknob, Sara spoke again;

"Cinders?"

"Yes?" Lucinda said, without turning round.

"Do you know why you got this job? Do you know how many people came here asking for it?"

"No." This time Lucinda did turn.

"Just you," Sara replied, quietly. She looked quite melancholy. "I had that paper specially enchanted so that only people who believed in stories could read it. You do believe in stories, don't you?" she asked. "Now that you've been in one, I mean." She fiddled with her pen.

"Sure?" Lucinda answered tentatively, caught off guard by such an odd question. Surely being in a story was even more reason to believe in them?

"Don't let me down, Cinders," Sara flashed her a sad smile, and returned to her paperwork. Lucinda let herself out.

She headed home feeling weird. She'd fought a dragon today. And won. But believe in stories? How was one supposed to believe in stories, exactly? She wondered what Sara had meant.

When she got home, she was accosted by her mother in the kitchen. Her father was reading the paper, as usual. He looked over the top of it, gave a snort of laughter on seeing her unusual attire and returned to the sports section.

"I hope they pay you enough, is all I can say," he remarked. Lucinda opened her mouth to retort, but realised that she had no idea what she was being paid and wisely shut it again. Her mother fussed and complained about 'the things they make young people do these days' and Lucinda was glad to retreat upstairs.

She immediately got onto her laptop and called Anna.

"What are you wearing? Is that for the video?" Anna asked her, peering at her screen, "'Cause if it is, you should've asked Pens first. He's designing all the costumes, you know."

"I know," Lucinda replied. "It's for work," she said, with a hint of pride.

"Oh man, you got a job?" Anna squealed and clapped her hands. "No way, where the heck do you work dressed like that?"

"It's like an acting job. Sort of." Lucinda scratched her head. It wasn't a lie, exactly. But she couldn't just outright say that it was a job fighting monsters and rescuing people. Even Anna would think she was crazy, and she wouldn't have blamed her.

"Anyway, congrats!" Anna gave her a double thumbs up. "Now you'll be able to get the money and we can all do this thing! Pens told me he has a job at a fast food place and don't ask me how, but Copper got a job in a fabric store. Like she even knows anything about that stuff. But it should be useful if she can get us cheap materials, though,"

Anna laughed. "Who knows, maybe she'll even learn something about sewing!"

"Yeah, I feel bad for Pens having to do most of the costume work," Lucinda agreed. She was quiet for a minute before adding, "You know, you really should stop lurking. I know you're there, you answered the conference call thingy!"

"And miss you girls gossiping about me?" came a third, male voice. Pens had no webcam, so there was no live feed, but there was an avatar of a boy with long, brown hair grinning back at them from his box instead. "Anyway, I wasn't here, Mum shouted me for something just as I picked up the call. Why, what did you say?"

"She says you're a terrible friend and she never liked you," Anna answered him, mockingly.

"Aww Cinders, I was gonna propose and everything!" he joked. "Hey, what did you do to your hair? I thought it was a wig, but it's not, huh?"

"Oh wow, me too. Gosh, I'm unobservant," Anna replied, hitting herself on the forehead.

"It's for work," Lucinda replied. "Hey guys . . . do you believe in stories?"

"What like, that mermaids are real and ghost stories and stuff?" Anna replied. "I guess some of them might be? I mean, scientists have only explored a bit of the ocean and you can't prove ghosts aren't real, right?"

"I think she means more like . . . that good should always win and the hero always gets the girl," Pens chipped in. "I guess so? It would be nice, but it doesn't always work out that way. All the guys with girlfriends around here are jerks, if you ask me," he complained. "They couldn't hero their way out of a paper bag!" The girls laughed;

"And you could?" they said in unison.

"Yeah, probably," Pens replied. "What kind of a question is that, anyway?"

"Oh, just something I was asked at work," Lucinda mused. "It seemed important . . ."

"It was probably one of those psychoanalysis questions, like what's your favourite colour and if you were an animal, what would it be and junk," Anna replied, shrugging. "I wouldn't take it too seriously. It's just a thing companies do."

"I guess so," Lucinda conceded.

"Seriously, don't worry about it," Anna reassured her. "Now, about this choreography, Pens-"

Lucinda spent most of the week being incredibly bored at school. She had made a few friends; Shu, a British-born Chinese girl, who seemed to know everyone on some level, had made her acquaintance, and she mostly hung out with her and her friends during class and break. But they didn't really share the same interests, and so her conversations with them were limited. Luckily she had Pens and the others to talk to after school about such things, although mostly how she was still getting the choreography wrong and how they weren't going to win the contest like that. It was great fun, but she couldn't wait until they could all be together.

When Saturday rolled around, Lucinda set off for the office early and arrived at about quarter to nine. She'd slept better this time around, but not much. Today at least,

she was prepared. More prepared than last week, at any rate. Now she knew dragons liked shiny things, but didn't like actual fighting much, and particularly now that she knew they actually existed, rescuing princesses should be a doddle. She put on her prince outfit with a new found confidence.

It didn't last long.

"Take that off," Sara commanded, indicating her prince costume. "You won't be needing it today."

"But it's all I brought," Lucinda replied, dismayed. "What will I be needing?"

"This." Sara slid a package wrapped in brown paper over the desk. "It was finally delivered last night. Just in time. It's for your next test."

"I have another test?" Lucinda asked nervously, unwrapping the paper. Inside was a set of green clothes, similar to her prince outfit, but not so gaudy. There was also a pair of brown trousers, and some soft, brown leather boots. They came almost up to her knees.

"I told you the other day, you'll have three," Sara explained. "It's traditional." Lucinda felt her stomach lurch. She hated tests. It was bad enough worrying about what monster she was going to have to fight without worrying that she was being graded on it as well.

"Is it going to be worse than a dragon?" Lucinda quailed at the thought. What if it was a hydra? Or a gorgon, that could turn her to stone? What if it was a giant, who could just step on her or . . . She could barely think the thought.

"Definitely worse," Sara replied. "Dragons are easy. Dragons are dumb. Show them something shiny and

they're no trouble. People aren't though. People are hard." That gave Lucinda a flicker of hope. It looked like she wasn't going to have to fight some terrifying beast she wasn't ready for today. "I didn't put that there for decoration," Sara scolded her, indicating the package of clothes. "Get dressed. They're waiting already."

"Who's waiting?" Lucinda paused as she lifted the package from the counter, looking baffled.

"The other eleven girls, of course," Sara replied.

Lucinda and the 'other eleven girls', all the same height, all in the same clothes and all, much to Lucinda's surprise, with the same hair had gathered in a forest. They were waiting for the leader girl and her father to explain why they were all here. Sara certainly hadn't. The girl and her father had walked around thanking them all for their participation and handing out equipment. Despite her identical apparel, the leader must have been a princess, because her father was clearly a king. Kings are hard to miss, especially when they're wearing crowns and ermine-trimmed robes.

Lucinda was worried. She'd been provided with a bow and arrows along with the hunter's costume, and hadn't the faintest idea how to use them. To take her mind of it, she tried to guess what sort of story this was. Given that all her companions looked the same, it was probably a clever ruse to trick somebody and win a bet or complete a terrible task. Perhaps they were going to cheat in a race. A really long race, if it needed twelve people. Or maybe someone had to pick their true love out of all these identical maidens. But then why were they dressed as men? It wasn't a big deal back home of course, but in stories it was always out of some dire need, and there

would be terrible consequences if they were discovered. With a jolt, she realised the nature of the second test. She mustn't be found out. Right. That seemed easy enough . . . she was rather a tomboy, so she didn't need to worry about acting horribly girly. But she didn't think she acted particularly like a man either . . . She was running various scenarios through her head, largely involving having to pretend to shave or bathe discreetly in a pool when finally, they were called to pay attention.

"I'm so glad you've all agreed to help my daughter," the king boomed. "She came to me a few weeks ago and she was most distraught. So I said, daughter, whatever you desire, I shall get for you," he paused and a confused look flitted across his face, "and she said 'I want eleven girls who look like me, and twelve sets of huntsmen's clothes!'" The princess nodded appreciatively. He continued, "That sounded like a damn funny request to me, but I did promise. Anyway, she's going to explain herself now, and I just hope all that trouble I went to was worth it, is all I can say."

"Dear comrades!" the princess began, "My fiancé promised to marry me when he became king, but now I hear he is engaged to another. This will not do!" There were murmurs of agreement from the girls. "We shall go to his palace, thus disguised, and shall enter his service as huntsmen! He shall not know us, though we be with him all the while! That should show him," she finished with an air of triumph. This met with some confusion.

"Er, dear," the king began, "are you sure this is the best course of action?"

"Yeah," agreed Lucinda, without thinking. "Isn't that a bit . . . a bit . . . crazy ex-girlfriend?"

"Well, that'll teach him for marrying someone else,

then won't it?" another girl argued.

"Indeed!" the princess stamped her foot. "If he doesn't want people sneaking into his palace in disguise, he shouldn't have left me to marry someone else when he'd already promised!"

"Yes dear, but isn't this a bit excessive?" the king persisted.

"Not in the slightest," the princess replied. "I want to see who this hussy is and what my future husband thinks he's up to. And of course I need a retinue. It's only proper." The king still looked unhappy. Lucinda could tell, because it was the face her father often wore when she was explaining why exactly she needed a long green wig and some tights with bats on and specifically why she needed him to pay for it now instead of saving up her pocket money. She could see his point though.

"Excuse me," she asked, putting her hand in the air. "Why don't you just go and ask this prince why he's marrying someone else? Maybe he's got a reasonable explanation?" There was silence as the group considered this idea. Some of them looked downright horrified, including the King;

"No, no that won't do," he replied, frowning at her. "That won't do at all. You can't just go around asking things." That was a new one on Lucinda.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because you just don't," the princess replied in place of her father. "You have to turn up for three nights in a row in three different dresses and give them to the false bride in exchange for sleeping outside the king's bedroom, or get a job working in the kitchens and keep sneaking gold into his soup, you can't just ask things. I mean, you just, you just don't."

The king nodded in agreement. "You're absolutely right, my dear, you're absolutely right." He laid his hand on her shoulder. "I mean, I was worried that maybe you just needed three huntsmen or six, or if it wouldn't work out better if you were a goose-girl, but, I'm sure you have a plan in mind and we shall see how it goes. And if anyone gets injured, you've got lots of spares, right?"

"That's right father," the princess agreed earnestly. "You must leave now, we must be on our way." When she was quite sure the king had gone, she called out to Lucinda, "You there! At the back! The dissenting girl, yes you!" Lucinda stood up straight and almost saluted;

"Yes?" she started.

"Good show!" The princess went to clap genteelly, but then decided it would be more manly to punch the air instead. "That was brilliant, I thought Daddy was going to stop the plan then, phew!" There was a brief round of applause. "Ha ha, can you imagine if you were serious though? 'Why don't we just ask?' Oh, you are a clever one! What's your name?"

"Lucinda," Lucinda answered meekly.

"Ugh, that won't do. Do think of a boy's name to go by," the princess commanded. "That goes for all of you. Anyway, glad to have you aboard. Let's be off!" she added, leading the way out of the forest.

On the way, the girls had a go at practising walking like men, talking like men, and suitable manly topics for conversation. Lucinda had no idea at all, since her idea of 'manly' topics was limited to football and Call of Duty, neither of which she knew anything about and neither of which they would have here. Pens liked almost the exact same stuff that she did. She was the sort of girl who didn't

get on with other girls, unless they themselves also didn't get on with girls. Her and Copper, an Australian friend of hers, had had a conversation on the topic, which had started off on the subject of Pens being the kind of boy who didn't hang out with other boys. As it was, the princess briefed them on the subject of hunting, which she had bothered to learn about by asking her father some questions. She could remember the information okay, but Lucinda had only ever fired a bow once, at a fair, and it had been a lot harder than it looked. Her arrow had gone about two feet, if that. Not that she was planning on hitting anything, but she was going to have to make it look like she was trying, surely?

It wasn't long before they arrived at the palace. The new king was quite happy to hire them all, and there was a short ceremony where they bowed to their new master and were presented with a token of their employment. There was a large lion sitting quietly right next to the king's throne. No-one even batted an eyelid at it. It was as if kings always had an untethered, man-eating beast next to them. Powerfully curious, she stayed behind a little as the other girls left for the courtyard leaving it and the king alone. She peeked around the doorway at it. She had the shock of her life.

It spoke.

"Dude," the lion said to the king in a mellow sort of tone, "those are girls, man." It had quite the wrong sort of voice for such an animal. It sounded like a hippie or a guru. Someone who had figured out the whole universe and was completely at peace with it. The king however, did not look at peace. He looked affronted.

“Oh come on, they’re so not,” he retorted. “They’re huntsmen, you can tell, by how they’re wearing huntsmen’s clothes. I mean, why would they be dressed like that if they were girls, right?”

“I’m telling you man . . . ” The lion shook his head as if he were laughing something off. “. . . they’re totally girls. Trust me.”

“Prove it then,” the king said huffily, crossing his arms. “Prove to me that they’re girls.”

“Hm . . . ” The lion closed his eyes. Lucinda realised she was holding her breath and let it out as quietly and slowly as she could. “How abooout . . . we spread peas on the floor?” he concluded after some deliberation.

“. . . Have you been at the catnip again?” the king said in an exasperated tone, raising both eyebrows. “How will that prove they’re girls?”

“Princesses can feel a pea through many layers of mattresses, right?” the lion observed. “So like, they can totally feel one through one boot, easy.” The king immediately spotted a flaw in this plan;

“What if they aren’t princesses?” he pointed out.

“The chances of them being princesses is pretty high, man,” the lion replied. “There’s like, twelve of them.” The king nodded thoughtfully.

“I’ll have a servant bring peas from the kitchen and call them back,” he said.

Lucinda crept away until she was sure she wouldn’t be heard and ran as fast as she could to the courtyard, where the girls were waiting. Panting, she hurriedly explained the situation. The princess nodded.

“Very well. Now then-” She stood up to address the others, “-are any of you also princesses?” Four of the girls put their hands up. “Now, I know we all have very sensitive

skin, but girls, you must step firmly on the peas. Just pretend they aren't there. We shall not be discovered."

The king called them back to the throne room, under the pretence that he wished to look upon his fine new employees once more. The girls stepped right over the peas without flinching. The lion appeared nonplussed.

"Such fine huntsmen you are!" the king exclaimed, putting the tiniest stress on the word men and throwing the lion a look as he did so.

"Is that all you wish of us, my liege?" the princess said, in one of the cringe-worthiest, fake, male voices Lucinda had ever heard.

"Yes, my dear huntsmen, that will be all," the king nodded graciously at them. Lucinda hung back once more.

"See?" the king told the lion smugly. "They didn't feel the peas, I told you they were men. Score one to me." Once more the lion looked thoughtful, insofar as a lion can.

"Somebody must have warned them, man," came his eventual reply. "You should like, give them another test."

The king scoffed. "Well this time, I'm picking the test," he answered haughtily. "Let's see . . . we should put spinning wheels at the side of the room there. Girls like spinning wheels. They'll be distracted by the spinning wheels and want to try them out. Men would never do that."

"That's sexist, man," the lion replied, sounding disappointed. "Just because girls do spinning a lot doesn't mean it's like, their hobby or something."

"Yes it does," The king replied. "Girls like spinning. They're always spinning straw into gold and all that. Or whatever you spin stuff from. I've never done it, because I'm not a girl. See? It's foolproof."

“Really, man?” the lion continued, obviously trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Maybe we should put some flowers on the spinning wheels, and some kittens, and like . . . what do modern ladies like . . . chocolate and some shoes,” he said, “and a pony. Girls like ponies, too.”

“Great idea, let's do that!” The king clapped his hands, while the lion rolled his eyes. “Footman!”

Once more Lucinda pelted to the courtyard to warn them of the plan, and once more the princess ordered the girls to ignore the trap. The king called for the huntsmen again. He really had had twelve spinning wheels brought out. He had also added flowers, chocolates, kittens, shoes and a very small pony, which was tethered to the last spinning wheel and was eating the other distractions in a gormless sort of way. The girls walked right past them and ignored them completely. The king sent them out again. Lucinda hung back once more.

“I told you so, dude. There's no way anyone would ignore all that stuff,” the lion said, looking up at the king in disdain, “girls or not. Someone warned them they were gonna be tested, I'm telling you, man.” The king looked over to the curious array of things on the other side of the throne room. The pony dislodged a fluffy white kitten from the top of a chocolate box and started to munch on the contents.

“I suppose so,” The king agreed grudgingly, “but I still don't think they're girls. I think you just don't like huntsmen. You never like my huntsmen.” The lion gave this due consideration;

“Call them back in here and I'll prove it to you once and for all,” he stated confidently.

“How do we stop them preparing for it, if they really are being warned?” the king asked.

“Trust me, man,” the lion replied, “they're not getting out of this one.”

* * *

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