



M.A. LARSON

Pennyroyal Academy

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For Hannah, for everything

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IF I'M STILL in this forest by nightfall, I'll never leave it again.

The girl's eyes darted through the misty pines. The air was wet, though it wasn't exactly raining. Everywhere she turned she found dull gray shadows, and her mind put monsters in all of them. The only sound was her own frantic breath. No birdsong. No tumbling water. Nothing.

A leafy tendril snaked up from the undergrowth and began to slither around her ankle. She tore her leg free and raced into the mist, her bare feet crackling through a carpet of dead leaves and fallen needles. Towering trees swayed overhead like mossy giants, and the small patches of sky she could see were black with clouds. Night was coming. And so were the things that lurked in the fog.

As she hurdled over a rotting stump, a heart-sized dragon scale necklace bounced against her chest. A matted drape of spiders' webs covered her body, her only protection against the elements. The rest of her was streaked with mud. She had been lost in this forest for three days. Had seen and heard things that still didn't seem real—a weathered thighbone so thick and long it could only have belonged to a giant; the deafening thunder of thrumming wings and the shadow of an enormous dragonfly passing above the canopy. Three days lost and she knew, one way or another, there would not be a fourth—

CRACK! The girl jumped at the sound, then heard the popping crackle of splitting wood somewhere above. She wheeled just in time to see the hairy branch of a beech tree swooping down. It slammed into her, knocking her over the edge of a hill. She tumbled through moldy black sludge to the bottom where she collided with a pine trunk. She eased herself up, rolling her shoulder to be sure her arm wasn't broken.

The first day, the day she had left home, she had taken a savage beating from the trees. Her father had always warned her to stay out of enchanted forests, but she was still taken aback by the trees' ferocity. She had slowly begun to learn their moods and patterns, and before long was able to anticipate their attacks. She tried to avoid beeches especially, as they seemed the most malicious.

Today it wasn't the trees that frightened her. The sun and moon and stars had all gone, along with chirping birds and skittering goblins. In their place, the clouds and mist, and the distinct feeling that something else was out there.

But what?

She listened, silent and still, though all she heard was wind shivering through leaves. As she stood, her emerald-green eyes narrowed. There, faintly visible through the dusk, was a distant pinpoint of

light. The window of a cottage.

~~She had always been cautious, much more so than her sister, but once she saw that light, she ran for it.~~ The cottage was small, its timbers frayed and soggy. This was the first shelter she had seen since leaving home, and yet something inside her screamed to turn back and run and then run some more.

Would I rather be out here when the sun is gone, or inside?

She ignored her instincts and edged to the window, grabbing hold of the sill. Clumps of rot crumbled off in her hands. She wiped them away, then leaned in again.

Firelight washed across her face, and her stomach roared. At the far side of the room, a thick, brown liquid bubbled over the rim of a cauldron, sizzling on the embers. She couldn't see anything else, but that was enough. Her hunger drove her to the door, but as she clutched the handle, panic swarmed up through the soles of her feet like a million wasps.

Something's not right here—

A wolf's lonesome howl echoed down from the mountains, and she knew she had no choice. She gave the door a hard shove, but it didn't budge. She threw her shoulder into it and finally it barked open.

"Hello?" she said with a small, shaking voice. There was no answer, only the soft pop of the fire. The floorboards screamed as she stepped inside and shouldered the door shut with a resonant thud.

The cottage was warm and tidy. Beneath the lone window sat a wooden table, where waterflies buzzed around a pile of blackish-red slop. Next to that were a rusted hand-crank machine and several neat stacks of multicolored candies. A chill ran down her arms.

In the corner, beyond the hearth, next to the open door of a small bedchamber, stood a large cage, orange with rust and age. It was just the right size to hold a person. Next to it, a small pile of children's shoes spilled across the floor.

She turned to run, but the door that had just been so solidly stuck now hung open. And outside, footsteps crackled through the leaves.

She looked for another way out, but it was too late, so she dove under the table and hugged her legs to her chest. A thick drip of red slid through the slats of the table and plopped on the floor at her feet.

Oh please oh please oh please . . .

A pair of muddy riding boots clomped across the floorboards, shoved along by an old woman draped in layer upon layer of decaying black robes. The door slammed shut behind them, though no one was there to slam it.

The girl's blood ran cold. She was trapped.

The old woman, hunched and bent like a river, shoved her prisoner into the cage and rattled the latch home. He was around the girl's same age, and wore a dark gray leather doublet embroidered in burgundy. His dark hair was in knots from countless hours on horseback, and his arms were bound behind his back. The cage was too small for him to stand, so he threw his shoulder into the door. The frail metal clanged, but held fast.

His captor went to the cauldron to stir her bubbling broth, which hissed against the flames like a chorus of angry snakes. "Now then, what have I done with my jars?" Her voice was full of contradictions, soft and sweet, but with a knife-edge of menace. "It's been so long since I had a heart to put in them. *Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh . . .*" She leaned her ladle against the stone gently, like a kindly grandmother might, then shuffled into the bedchamber.

Now! Now! NOW!

But the girl sat frozen in place, watching as the boy strained and writhed against his bonds. He leaned back to give the door a solid kick, and that's when he saw her.

"*Hey!*" he hissed, jerking his head toward the latch. Tears welled in her eyes, and she suddenly felt as though she might faint. "*I know you're scared, but open this cage and you'll leave here alive. I*

swear it.”

She pulled her legs tighter, clinging to them like the last jagged stone before a waterfall. But as her tears fell and her heart thumped in her chest, she noticed something in his eyes that calmed her. He wasn't afraid. When he said he could keep her alive, he believed it.

Somehow, before her own fear could stop her, she began to scoot forward. Each creak of the floorboards made her want to scream and run for the door, but she kept her eyes fixed on his and crept closer and closer to the cage.

“Hurry!” he whispered.

Her trembling fingers reached for the latch. She tried to work it free as gently as she could, but the metal had become violently angry over the ages. It screamed open.

“What's this?”

The girl wheeled and fell back against the cage. She had never seen a witch before, but there could be little doubt that that was what stood before her now. The witch didn't move, just stared at her with milky yellow eyes and a wide, toothless grin. Her skin was the color of a worm after three days' rain, and it drooped from her bones like a melted candle.

“Open the latch!” shouted the boy, slamming his shoulder against the door.

But the witch's gaze paralyzed the girl. The hag's eyes bored straight into her own, slicing through her brain and down her throat. The girl gasped for air as the witch stared deeper, deeper, straight for her heart. She was choking on hate, anguish, fear . . . the feeling that she had already seen the sun for the last time without even realizing it. The witch was *inside* her—

“RUN!” shouted the boy as the cage door finally crashed open.

The girl snapped free of the witch's gaze. All that choking awfulness slid out of her throat and she could breathe once more. The dragon scale whipped round to her back as she sprinted for the door. She threw it open and burst out into the night. The blackness of the woods and the swirling fog made it seem like the witch was everywhere at once. Even in the open forest, the girl was trapped.

“Over here!” The boy stood next to a massive white horse that glowed in the moonlight like a ghost.

“What? On that?”

“These are her woods! We'll never make it on foot!”

She grimaced, but knew she would have to trust him. As she raced to the horse, the flickering firelight inside the cottage was suddenly extinguished. Smoky blackness, darker than the night, wafted from the door.

“Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh . . .” The cackle was no longer that of a feeble old lady. It had morphed into something elemental and terrifying.

The girl swung onto the horse's back. Beneath the smooth white needles of hair she could feel sweat and muscle and knew the boy was right: this was their only chance of escape. She reached down and grabbed the rope binding his arms, hauling him facedown across the horse's backside. Black smoke billowed from the door, and the cackling reverberated through the forest like it was coming from the fog itself.

“Let's go!” grunted the boy, but the girl was transfixed by the figure floating out of the cottage. The witch's body had distorted into something monstrous, long-limbed and inhuman. Her tattered robes billowed smoke. The skin around her mouth began to crack and split as her smile grew ever wider.

“Take the reins and go!”

The girl wrenched her eyes away. Straps of leather tack dangled from the horse's head and neck. She didn't know what any of it was, so she gripped the mane instead. With her other arm twisted behind her, she clutched the rope around the boy's hands.

“Ride,” she whispered, and they lunged away into the night. Every muscle in her body clamped down as she felt the horse’s power beneath her. Her fingers clutched the mane so tightly, the knuckles had already gone white. As the horse sailed across uneven ground, each stride threatened to break her grip.

“I can’t do it!” she screamed over the thunder of hooves. “I can’t!”

“Please . . .” was all the boy could muster. His midsection slammed repeatedly against the horse, forcing the air from his lungs. He couldn’t draw breath.

The girl closed her eyes and ground her teeth. *I will not let go. The horse or the rope may slip free but on my father I will not let go.* She glanced back, and what she saw made her gasp.

The witch, a billowing, spectral fiend, swooped through the trees like an enormous owl. Waves of frigid air swept up from behind as her bony fingers reached forward.

The horse leapt a fallen tree. The landing nearly ripped the mane from the girl’s fingers. Her legs, pinned tightly around the horse’s shoulders, felt frail and insignificant. Her entire body hurt, but the truly ferocious pain was in the fingers holding the boy’s binding. It sawed deeper into her raw skin with each stride. *I can’t hold on . . . It’s all coming loose . . .*

“Water . . .” he croaked.

She scanned the darkness until something in the distance caught her eye. The pale reflection of moonlight on water. A river.

She jerked the mane, steering the horse toward it. The boy’s weight pulled the rope to the final joints of her fingers. She was going to lose him.

Suddenly, she released the mane and grabbed the boy’s vest just as the rope slipped from her fingers. Now her legs, locked around the horse’s neck, were the only thing keeping them both alive. She lay twisted along the horse’s back, and the headlong gallop was driving the leather saddle into her side. The boy was barely on the horse, and she had no way of knowing if he was alive or dead.

The bristles of the horse’s coat scraped farther down her legs. Lower . . . lower . . . nearly to the ankles. Behind them, a wall of pure terror rose up. The witch was enormous, wraithlike, her arms extending from a cloak of swirling smoke.

Then, in an instant, the girl lost all sense of gravity. Her body soared through the air. The boy was gone. The horse was gone. And in the next moment, her lungs filled with icy water. With shocking clarity, she realized she had made it to the river. As she began to panic for breath, she found the rippling moonlight beneath her. She righted herself and kicked toward it until her head popped into the crisp night air, and she coughed until her lungs were dry.

The witch had gone, hiding no doubt in the fog at the shoreline. On the opposite bank, where the air was clear and stars painted the sky, the white horse staggered out of the water.

She swam toward the bank until finally her feet touched the rough, slimy stones of the river bottom, then pulled herself ashore like some ancient creature, sobbing and gasping for breath.

I made it. A miracle’s happened and I’m still alive.

Her legs buckled and she dropped to the pebbly shore. She forced herself onto her back, filling her lungs with the night until her panic began to recede. As she lay there, astonished to be alive, a strange thought crossed her mind. This night sky, a pale swipe of purple-white across a black field of untold numbers of stars, was the single most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Crickets chirped rhythmically from the trees. The choking mold stench was gone. Somehow, she really was alive.

“Here . . .” came a weak voice from farther down the gurgling river. She sat up. The horse stood at the waterline nuzzling a dark figure. It was the boy, arms still bound behind him, lying facedown in the sand, his legs dangling in the current. She went to him, but her fingers were too stiff and sore to grip the crude knot. She tried pulling on the rope, and it suddenly crumbled away like it was a thousand years old.

The boy, battered and weak, pushed himself over, too dazed to drag his legs free of the water. His teeth chattered, his whole body shuddering in the steady night breeze. “You must be . . . f-frozen solid . . .”

The girl, barefoot, sodden to the bone, and wearing only a thin covering of spiderwebs, said nothing.

“What . . . what’s your n-name?”

Her eyes fell to the rocks. “I don’t have one.”



THE GIRL STARED, not at the fire, but above it, where orange sparks wisped into the night sky to join the stars. The soft crackle of burning wood and the comforting smell of flame reminded her of home, somewhere that now seemed like one of the distant galaxies floating in the blackness above. She had always had an affinity for fire, though she had never quite learned to make one. Her father tried to teach her, and her sister could do it easily, but the best she could manage was a faint thread of smoke. Now that the tendons in her fingers had loosened, she picked up another branch and laid it on the pile, then watched as the fire claimed it.

“Has anyone told you you’re a delightful conversationalist?” said the boy, watching her through the fire with big, amused eyes. She didn’t respond. “No, I expect they haven’t.”

In the calm of the night, far from the border of the enchanted forest, the girl noticed something about her companion. The way only half his mouth smiled, the brightness in his eyes, the sense of constant amusement about him . . . It all added up to someone who very much enjoyed being alive, and all because he had had the good fortune to be born as himself.

“You can finish with the wood now. There are bandits out there.” He lifted a cast-iron skillet from the fire and slid two bubbling eggs onto a pewter plate, which he handed to her. She shoveled them into her mouth, so hungry that she didn’t even mind the quick scald as the yolks broke. With a chuck and a shake of his head, he took a few more out of a silk sack and cracked them into the pan. She had refused when he had offered her clothes, but food she could not resist.

“For your memoirs, my name is Remington. Of Brentano, in the Western Kingdoms.”

She licked the yolk from her fingers. He sighed, though the grin never left his face. His attempts to draw her out thus far had all ended this way. She hadn’t helped him clear brush or build the fire or even gather cordgrass for his horse. She just watched him with mild suspicion as he worked.

“Are there more like you?” she asked.

“Pardon?” he laughed. She looked to the fire in embarrassment. Her thoughts somehow seemed inferior next to the smooth polish of his words. His voice was deep and refined, and that, too, made her feel uncomfortable. “Are there more like me? Well, according to most girls I’ve met, no.” When she didn’t oblige him with a laugh, he softened his demeanor. “What were you doing out there by yourself anyway? Enchanted forests and barefoot girls don’t have a particularly warm history.”

She set her plate in the dirt and studied him. Could she trust him? She already had several times. And here she was, alive and filling her belly. Perhaps he had earned the right to be trusted again. She

reached into her tangled mass of webs, pulled out a rain-warped parchment, and handed it to him.

“I’m looking for her.”

He unfolded the parchment. It was a hand-painted notice depicting a girl in a golden dress standing before a castle in a heroic pose. In ornate script, it read:

Pennyroyal Academy

Seeking bold, courageous youths to become tomorrow’s princesses and knights

Blood restrictions lifted—Come one, come all!

“These bloody things are everywhere. They really are desperate, aren’t they? It’s not to say you wouldn’t make a fine princess, only that they’ve never recruited this aggressively before.”

“So you know her?”

“I . . . suppose you could say that. You’re really quite lucky I came along to rescue you—”

“Hang on, *you* rescued *me*?”

He fought away a smile, but was only partly successful. “We’ll ride to Marburg together. I’m headed to the Academy myself to train as a knight.”

She leapt to her feet, snatching the parchment from his hands. “You’re a knight?”

“No,” he said, looking at his suddenly empty fingers, “which is why I’m enlisting. Look, you’re not terribly gracious, are you?”

She folded the parchment, scowling at him. He shook his head and took the skillet off the fire. He plated the eggs and prepared to eat, then, with a sigh, offered this serving to her as well. Her mother had told her from her earliest memories to steer clear of knights, just as her father had warned her against witches. Remington insisted he wasn’t a knight—yet—but even the mention of the word made her nervous. She kept a suspicious eye on him as she took the offered eggs and sat back down.

He stood and stretched, then walked to the tree where his horse was tied and started unclasp something from the saddle. He was tall and lean, with the effortless bearing of an athlete who trusted his body to always do what he asked. *And he intends to be a knight*, she thought. *I should have left him in that cage.*

“I’m quite happy to see someone like you enlisting,” he said. “The world is far too *unsettled* to be worrying about the color of one’s blood, don’t you think?” He brought back a small bedroll and tossed it to the dirt next to her. “It’s a bit damp, but the fire should sort that out.”

He collected the empty plates and set them in front of his horse to lick clean, though she had already done a good job of that. Then he took off his doublet and lay down on the other side of the fire, bunching it up beneath his head. “We ride at first light. Try to get some sleep.”

Surrounded by the steady song of crickets, she looked to the stars, confused and exhausted. Her eyes were raw. All she wanted was sleep. But now she was even less certain whether she should trust him. She glanced into the depthless black of the forest. Perhaps she should continue her journey alone . . .

“What if she finds us?” she said. She hadn’t meant to actually speak the words, but there they were. Remington propped himself onto an elbow and looked over at her. “I can’t do that again. Her eyes . . . It was like she was looking *inside* me.”

His smile was gone. He looked as earnest as he had in the cage. “That was a wood witch. They rarely leave the enchanted forest. Once we crossed that river, we were safe. Relatively speaking.” She looked away, embarrassed by what she had said, but also comforted by his words.

Within a few minutes, the crackle of the dying fire sent him to sleep and she was alone again. She found a flat sandstone boulder and perched in the dark, thinking. But every thought inevitably led straight back to that cottage. She was safe now, but didn't feel it. The fear echoed on.

She slipped the necklace over her head and studied it under the faint light of the rising moon. A coat of dried mud covered its convex side. She licked her thumb and rubbed it away. Underneath, a smear of dried black stained the scale from edge to edge. And something in that stain, a faint shimmer, caught her eye. She tilted the scale to catch the moonlight and it happened again. The stain itself seemed to be moving.

She lifted the necklace higher to catch the moon's beams and realized it wasn't just the illusion of movement. The stain was shimmering in the light like a vein of gold. And as she lowered it to her eye it began to swirl and pulse, the blackness moving faster and faster until she could see nothing else—

Suddenly she was plunging through an endless void. She couldn't breathe, couldn't tell up from down. The disorientation was so intense she began to feel ill.

Then, at the bottom of the sickening gyre, an image came into focus. It was the shore of a vast sea pink with low sun. Someone stood there amidst the crashing waves and scavenging birds. It was Remington. And he held her face in his hands.

"You are the one true Princess of Saudade. I would willingly give my life to see it so." He gently pulled her closer. She parted her lips . . .

Her stomach lurched and everything went black again, but the spiral quickly settled into another image. A crumbling tower in the midst of an endless forest, pelted with rain. A woman in a tunic dress of imperial violet was in great distress. Some unseen magic was forcing her to her knees, her eyes clenched in pain. The girl turned to find the source and a monstrous witch loomed behind her, face obscured beneath a cowled cloak. She stood no less than ten feet, and the sight of her filled the girl's heart with hopelessness and despair. A long, bony arm rose up, and the woman in violet screamed. The girl wanted to go to her, but found she couldn't move, could only watch as the witch forced the woman's head to the stone in a bow of forced subjugation.

The cloaked witch thrust her glaucous arms skyward and the air filled with witches. Hundreds of them, black robes flapping, dispatched to all corners of the land . . .

The girl tore the scale from her eye. Her breath came fast and shallow, a stark contrast to the boy's rhythmic snores, the peaceful thrum of the crickets. It took her a moment to realize that what she had seen wasn't real. Still, the overwhelming feeling of dread lingered. Another wolf's howl echoed in the distance, reminding her that even though she had escaped the enchanted forest, the bad things of the world lurked everywhere.

She perched on the stone all through the night, watching the fire fade from orange to red to black. She tried to force her thoughts to her family, to her home, to anything but the monstrous witch and the unseen horrors lurking beneath that hood.

Finally, the sky grayed to a dim, sleepy blue, and the girl remembered something else from her vision. Not nearly as haunting, but equally as startling. She glanced at Remington, whose arms and legs sprawled everywhere like a giant had tossed him aside. *Why on earth would I want to kiss him? A sworn knight, or soon to be.*

"What, no breakfast? No tea? What have you been doing all morning?" She jerked her eyes away. She had been staring at him, and couldn't say how long, but now he was awake. He sat up, his face slow and sleepy. She looked away again when she found her eyes resting comfortably on his lips.

Remington made quick work of camp, and they rode hard through the morning. Now that she need not worry about the trees trying to kill her, the forest became monotonous, the ride quite exhausting. She clung to his waist, struggling to fight off the sleep that hadn't come the night before.

As the sun rose behind the dim green canopy, the air grew thinner in her lungs. They had been

climbing gradually throughout the morning, sometimes up long, slow inclines coated with bracken, other times along steep switchbacks of crumbling basanite or limestone. But nowhere in their journey had the pines cleared enough to give a sense of where they actually were. Finally, after a valiant fight, her eyes fell closed. She drifted for what could have been minutes or hours, never really sleeping, always aware of the crunch of leaves under the horse's hooves.

"Ah, there she is. Pretty as I left her," said Remington. The girl opened her eyes, but couldn't make sense of what lay before her.

They were in high forest country that ended abruptly at a sheer drop. Beyond that, the world fell away into a deep valley feathered with millions of pines and firs. A thin, crooked ridge formed a natural bridge to another mountain forest, splitting the valley in two. The horse stepped onto the narrow trail, but the girl didn't even notice the vertiginous cliffs on either side of her. Because there, at the far end of the ridge, an immense fortress of stone seemed to grow out of the mountain itself. Walls of bone-white limestone, forty feet tall and marred by moss and water stains, encased towering spires where brilliant purple banners danced in the wind. Every surface was topped with battlements as jagged as the ridges of a dragon's back. Beyond the majestic kingdom, another sea of black-green forest rolled away to the ends of the world.

"What is that?" she said, her voice dry and feeble.

"Marburg, jewel of the mountain kingdoms."

Eventually, they reached the end of the trail. The horse stopped at a stony ledge that fell thousands of feet to an unseen bottom. Remington waved an arm, signaling someone in the gatehouse. A tremendous crack echoed across the twin valleys and an enormous wooden bridge began to lower across the chasm. Its timbers groaned under their own weight until it slammed to the ground. *This is how a mouse must feel in the home of a giant.*

The horse clopped onto the drawbridge. Now there was nothing beneath them but open sky and, after a very long drop, a sudden end. Two massive pine doors began to creak apart, broken shafts of arrows still lodged in them from foregone wars, and a previously unknown part of the world opened up before the girl's eyes.

The kingdom, Marburg he had called it, was alive. Ragged-clothed peasants crisscrossed bustling streets. Merchants shouted prices and counteroffers. Mothers chased filthy children who chased even filthier pigs. Woodsmen hauled giant logs. Stoic guardsmen in glinting silver armor stood watch, the spears piercing high into the air. Music poured from unseen windows. And the smells! Burning wood and freshly cut grass and mud and flowers and roasted duck. White plaster structures latticed by dark brown timbers jutted up on either side of the high street, and thatched-roofed cottages squatted down near the mud.

Everywhere she looked, the girl was keenly aware she was missing a dozen other things.

"Look at them!" she cried. "They're just like me!"

They came upon a circle of peasants happily clapping along to an elderly fiddler's song. Three small girls danced in the center with carefree smiles and bare feet. Something about the innocent joy in their faces drew her attention more than anything else she had seen thus far. The fiddler kept a bulging eye on the girls as they giggled and spun one another around. Faster and faster he played, luring them into an impossible game, and soon their feet tangled and they ended up in the dirt, tears of laughter in their eyes.

"Wait," said the girl, twisting to watch as they rode past. "Couldn't we stay? Just for a bit?"

"We're late. Stay if you like, but you'll miss your chance to become a princess."

She watched the girls as long as she could, until finally they disappeared from view. Their happiness was so pure, it made her wistful, and also a bit melancholy. *I was never that carefree.*

Remington reined the horse down an alley past yet another timber-framed cottage, and almost

immediately the joyous hustle and bustle of the high street was gone. The sharp pungency of rotting things made her bury her nose in Remington's doublet as the horse clopped through brackish puddles. The farther down the twisting alley they went, the more clearly she could hear something up ahead. A ominous murmuring sound.

"What is that?"

"That, my dear, is about to be the strangest day of your life." Remington clicked his tongue and the horse cantered up a slight grade in the dirt. Finally, they emerged back into the sunlight.

Across a vast courtyard of cobbled stone there stood an imposing palace of polished black slate and mortar. Castle Marburg. It loomed nobly over a temporary marquee held aloft by three massive timbers. To the side, a line of carriage coaches waited, each hitched to a team of horses. And the sound the girl heard was the combined voice of hundreds of excited girls milling beneath the marquee.

She went numb, unconsciously clutching Remington just a bit more tightly. The girls were all of her same age, each wearing an elegant dress of such a variety of colors the girl had never seen. All different, yet somehow essentially the same. *They're just like me*, she thought. *Only nothing like me at all.*

As Remington's horse crossed the courtyard, she began to notice that they had been noticed. Faces turned to them with unusual expressions. Delight upon seeing Remington, then befuddlement when their eyes landed on her. The din of voices softened. She heard whispers of his name—"Remington"—circulating through the crowd.

His mud-spattered boots hit the stone with a soft thud. "Mind your dismount. Fall on your face before these girls and they'll never let you forget it." Alone on the horse's back, she realized that nearly every eye in the courtyard was focused squarely on her, and she began to go pale. She took his callused hand and slid to the ground. "First test, beautifully passed."

She tried to hide herself behind him, but after adjusting a strap on his saddle, he swung back atop the horse and left her alone on the cobblestones. Alone in a crowd of hundreds.

"Right. I'm off to knights' enlistment."

"Wait!" she said. "What do I do?"

He pointed into the shade beneath the marquee, beyond all the colorful dresses, to several long wooden tables. "You march straight over there and enlist. You've as much right to be here as anyone."

She looked up at him with eyes full of fear. *Take me home! I don't want to be here anymore!* she thought. But no words came.

"'Bravely ventured is half won,' as my father likes to say. The only way to find the girl on your parchment is through that lot." He nodded to the crowd, not at all surprised by the attention coming his way. "Off," he said, rearing the horse onto its hind legs with a dramatic whinny. Then he rode away across the courtyard, leaving a ripple of awed gasps in his wake.



BRAVELY VENTURED is half won.

As she stepped forward, her head dizzy and her legs weak and trembling, Remington's words rang hollow. Still, the girl's bare feet moved ahead, one after the other, into the reluctantly parting crowd.

"Is she wearing spiderwebs?"

These girls were draped in linen and lace, silk and tulle. Adorned with straps and belts, crests and symbols of faraway families in faraway lands. Their hair was brushed and plaited and curled, none of it littered with sticks and leaves. They had smooth skin of every shade, clear of the dried mud that covered her body.

"What do you expect when you open enlistment to girls who aren't princesses of the blood?"

As she shuffled through the marquee, the girl realized something else that separated her from the rest. Something much more painful. *They've all got their parents with them.*

"How on earth does *she* know Remington?"

She could feel the hot sting of tears forming in her eyes, but refused to let them fall. *Just get to the table . . .*

"Hey! *Hey!* Over here!"

A girl with curled hair the color of sunset motioned her to one of the queues leading to the enlistment tables. She wore a dark red riding hood over a black cloak, and the kindness of her smile was the most welcome sight the girl had seen since she'd left home.

"Honestly, you'd think we were witches enlisting instead of lowborn girls," she said. "You all right?"

The girl nodded. Now that she had an ally, the others seemed to lose interest in her, and the excitement of enlistment day returned. But as she chanced a look around, something else became clear. The girls on this side of the marquee weren't wearing silks and furs like the rest; theirs were handmade clothes, patched and repaired and altogether less lustrous. These were the lowborn girls.

"Next!" shouted a rotund old woman sitting behind a stack of parchments, and the queue inched forward.

"I mean no offense, but how is it that you came to ride with Remington?" said the red-haired girl with thinly disguised excitement. "He's half the reason there are so many girls here, all pining to be his one true love—"

"Leave her be, Magdalena, she's covered in webs, for goodness' sake," said a scowling bald man

picking his nose behind them. His fingernails were black and he seemed in a great hurry to be anywhere else.

“My father doesn’t understand why people like to gossip about royal families, but I can’t help it. I find them *fascinating*. Go on, then, you were saying how you know Remington?”

The girl was about to answer, until the witch and the cottage and the candy-making machine flashed into her mind. “I don’t know, really. I only met him yesterday—”

“Next!”

“All my friends were jealous when they heard I’d be in his year,” said Magdalena. “He comes from one of the most prestigious families in the Western Kingdoms. They say he killed his first dragon before age twelve. You know him better than I do, but it seems he might actually be perfect.”

The girl looked across the courtyard to where she had last seen Remington. He hadn’t said a word about killing a dragon, but then, she supposed she had never asked.

Suddenly, Magdalena clutched the girl’s arm, her eyes wide. A tall girl with hair like spun silk and soft, beautiful features joined the queue behind them. She wore an immaculate pale blue tunic dress with intricate gold embroidery along the trim.

“Begging your pardon,” said Magdalena, “but princesses of the blood queue up over there, Your Serene and Exalted Highness—”

“Don’t call me that!” the blond girl said, cringing. Magdalena blanched, as though she had just made a horrible mistake.

“But . . . but you’re a Blackmarsh royal—”

“Aye, and I hate that bloody address.”

“Forgive me, Highness.” Magdalena lowered her head and dipped a knee. Then she elbowed the girl in spiderwebs, who did the same.

“Call me Demetra. Please. And stop doing that.”

“Yes, Highness.” The girls straightened up. “I’m Magdalena, of Seigny. Maggie.”

“Seigny?”

“It’s in the south. Beyond the Valley of Giants. No one’s heard of it.”

“And you?” said Demetra, turning to the girl. “I see I’m not the only one whose parents couldn’t be bothered to turn up.”

“My parents don’t know I’m here.”

“Don’t they?” said Maggie. “How scandalous!”

“Who’s next?” said the old woman at the enlistment table. “Step lively, we’re running behind.”

“I think that’s you,” said Demetra.

The girl turned. Sure enough, they had reached the front of the queue. She stepped forward, then looked back to Demetra and Maggie for guidance. They gave her a smile, but were already busy chatting about something else.

“Name, please,” said the old woman, her quill tip hovering over her parchment. “Go on, child, what’s your name?”

“I’m sorry, I . . . I don’t have one.”

The old woman removed her eyeglasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Siblings?”

“I have a sister.”

“And I’ll wager she hasn’t been to the Academy, has she?” The old woman ran her weary eyes over the tangle of webs, strewn with souvenirs of the forest.

“I don’t think so.”

“Where are your people from?”

With rising panic, the girl glanced back to Maggie and Demetra, but they were still deep in conversation.

“Headmistress! Over here, please!” sang the old woman, wagging her thick fingers.

Slowly, with captivating elegance, a woman with a jeweled crown and a stern bearing turned to face them. The Headmistress wore a luxuriant golden dress, the graceful arc of her crown resting atop cropped white hair. She excused herself from her conversation and strode the length of the table. The sophistication and grace she exuded from afar melted away as she drew near, replaced by an inscrutable coldness.

Another woman followed the Headmistress, angular and thin and scowling, her face as lumpy as a bag of frogs. “Spiderwebs,” this other woman snarled, scratching a quill across one of the parchments she kept clipped to a piece of snakewood bark.

“Terribly sorry to interrupt, Headmistress,” said the old woman at the table. “It’s bloody hard work trying to sort these common girls out.”

“Not at all. How may Corporal Liverwort and I be of assistance?” It was a voice of authority, of lifetimes of experience.

“I reckon it’ll be another memory curse, Mum. Doesn’t know her name or family.”

“Not royals, you can be sure of that,” said Liverwort.

“That’s enough, Corporal,” said the Headmistress. She smiled at the girl, but it was a smile of formality rather than kindness. “My name is Princess Beatrice, and I am Headmistress General at Pennyroyal Academy. I know this must be quite strange for you, but there’s nothing you need fear. The reason you’re finding it so difficult to remember is that you’ve been cursed, most probably by a witch. There is no shame in that at all. Curses happen to even the most seasoned of princesses from time to time—”

“But there’s nothing wrong with my memory.”

Beatrice stared down at her, expressionless. “Very well, then. Give me your mother’s name.”

“Um . . .”

“‘Um,’ she says,” said Liverwort. “She don’t know what’s what.”

“Young lady, quite often a memory curse leaves one completely unaware that she has even been cursed. You must trust our expertise; the Academy has the finest medical staff in all the land.”

The girl stood silently, memories of years past flashing through her mind like fish in a river. She could remember the first tree she had ever climbed, a gnarled old beech that her sister called “the weed.” She could remember the terror in her mother’s eyes when she found her standing on the highest branch, and the words she had used to assign punishment. *How could I possibly have a memory curse?* Still, standing beneath the authoritative eyes of Princess Beatrice, she didn’t argue.

“Put her on the standard treatment program,” said Beatrice, setting both Liverwort and the old woman to scribbling. “How many is this, Corporal?”

“This one here is . . .” said Liverwort, scrambling back through her notes. “Ten before her, Headmistress.”

“Very well, she shall be known as Cadet Eleven until our medical staff uncovers her given name. Will there be anything else?”

“No, Princess,” said the old woman. Beatrice gave the girl, now called Cadet Eleven, a tight nod, then walked away, Liverwort trailing behind.

“Cadet Eleven,” said the old lady, writing it onto an official parchment. “And you’ll be assigned to . . . Ironbone Company. That coach right there.” She pointed to the line of carriage coaches off to the side. Girls were already filing onto each of them.

Cadet Eleven. I’d rather not have a name at all.

She stepped out from the marquee and looked up at the stark, black face of Castle Marburg. She tried to picture the girl on her parchment standing before it, so full of confidence and strength. That was what she had set out to find when she ran away from home. Now, surrounded by people who

looked just like the girl on the parchment, she couldn't help feeling somehow disappointed. When she finally did find her, would she gossip and giggle and back away, too? Clearly this parchment held an answer, but she had never really been sure of the question. When first she had set eyes on it, the discovery had caused an unexpected pivot in her life, sending her off in a direction she had never before contemplated. Who was this girl on the parchment? And what role would she play in Eleven's life? Standing in the shadow of Castle Marburg, she was faced with the possibility that the answer might not be as satisfying as she'd wished.

I've come too far to stop now, she thought. And besides, where else would I go?

She realized the courtyard had emptied considerably, so she hurried to her assigned coach. With Ironbone Company about eighty girls strong, nearly every seat was already full. The coach was abuzz with enthusiastic chatter now that the enlistees had finally bid farewell to their parents. She looked down the center aisle for a place to sit and spied an opening on a bench about halfway back.

"Pardon me, would it be all right if I . . ."

The girl sitting there glanced up. Her rain-gray eyes stared back with an intensity that cowed Eleven. Her silky black hair was so dark and lustrous it went midnight blue when the sun caught it. She wore a sleek silver gown that trailed off her shoulders like stardust. There was something radiant about her, a concentrated beauty, as though the Fates had awarded her a double measure.

"I'm sure you'll find more options farther back," she said. Even her voice was controlled, just loud enough to be heard and not a bit more. "I only just got this dress, you see, and I . . . well, you understand." She flicked her eyes to Eleven's spiderwebs.

One of the girls in the seat behind her snickered. The other just stared with cold eyes.

"Don't be horrid, Kelbra," said the girl with the black hair. "This is Kelbra—her father's a king. That's Sage—her father's a king as well. And I'm Malora. And my father is also a king." She stretched her legs across the empty seat. "And you are . . .?"

Kelbra giggled again. Eleven's stomach began to simmer.

"Over here!" called a familiar voice from the back of the coach. It was Maggie, waving enthusiastically. Eleven glowered at Malora, who stared back with eyes like dirty ice, then went up the aisle and joined Maggie.

Demetra turned back from the bench in front of them. "Sorry about her. Some girls think being born in a tower means they're supposed to look down on people. We're not all like that."

Eleven studied Malora, laughing at a joke she had just told her friends. She was so at ease amidst all this chaos. So at ease in her own skin.

"I never got your name back there," said Demetra.

"They told me I'm called Eleven."

"*Eleven?*" said Maggie, grimacing like she'd just eaten something rotten. The coach lurched forward, causing a ripple of screams followed by laughter.

"RIGHT, ALL OF YOU, EYES FORWARD!"

The laughter faded to confused silence. The moment hung there as the horses pulled the coach across rutted ground, no one yet sure who had spoken. It was the voice of a woman, silvery and sweet and feminine. Yet it also contained hard authority, unwilling to be ignored.

"So this is what they've trotted out as Ironbone Company. My word. That should make my job easier. Most of you lot will be gone by half term and I can catch up on my reading."

And that was when Eleven saw her: a fairy, no bigger than a hummingbird, floating up the center aisle, a mist of shimmering dust falling from her wings. Maggie nudged Eleven and gave her an excited smile.

"I am your Fairy Drillsergeant, and I am your new reality. There is very little chance you'll like me and even less chance I'll care." As she flew closer, Eleven could just make out her features. Her hair

flowed blond, and her nose and cheeks and ears were as dainty as lace. She almost looked like a princess herself, albeit a fraction of the size. “You,” she said, stopping in front of one of the highborn girls. “Why do you want to be a princess?”

The girl’s spine was straight, her hands folded neatly in her lap. Each hair on her head was perfectly in place, and polished jewels dangled from her ears. Yet with each passing moment, her composure crumbled.

“Urm . . .”

“Well? You didn’t just stroll in off the street, did you? Why do you want to be a princess?” The girl wiped her brow, her hand quivering. “Come on, Cadet, this is the easiest bloody thing I’ll ask you all year!”

“I suppose I’d like to meet my prince,” she blurted out.

The Fairy Drillsergeant’s tiny jaw tightened like a noose.

“Get out!” She turned to the coachman: “Stop the coach!” And back to the hapless girl: “GET OFF MY COACH!”

As everyone looked on in astonishment, the coachman reined his team to a stop. The girl hurried down the aisle and disappeared off the coach as fast as she could go.

“You are no longer highborn or lowborn or sidewaysborn or anything else,” said the Fairy Drillsergeant as the coach jerked forward once again. “You are third-class princess cadets. And that’s all most of you will ever be.”

Eleven slumped a bit lower as the Fairy Drillsergeant floated by. “I am not here to make friends, ladies, I am here to make princesses. For those of you willing to work harder than you ever have in your life, I will transform you into a Princess of the Shield, sworn sister to all who have come before and all who follow . . .”

She trailed off. Cadets began to look up in confusion. She was hovering in the aisle, staring at something in the back of the coach with an expression of utter shock.

“Excuse me,” she said, her voice cold and even and ready to explode. “Boy. What exactly do you think you’re doing?”

Heads began to turn. A confused murmur broke out. Eleven followed the Fairy Drillsergeant’s glare to the very last bench where, indeed, a boy casually tried to shield his face with his hand. He was thin and snub-nosed with floppy hair, and he was pretending to look out the window. The moment became so heavy he could no longer ignore it. He looked up from behind his hand, cheeks red as fire. “Sorry, were you talking to me?”

Her face contorted into a pained grimace, as though the universe had just disappointed her yet again. “And we haven’t even left Marburg yet,” she muttered to herself.

“Uh, my apologies, Fairy Drillsergeant,” said the boy. “This is where they told me to go . . . Your Highness.”

Muted laughter spread through the coach. Malora dangled her arms across the back of her seat, watching with amusement.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Basil. It’s . . . Basil. Of Witch Head Bay, near the sea.”

“Well, *Basil of Witch Head Bay near the sea*, Ironbone Company is a princess company, is it not?”

“Yes, F-fairy—”

“And you, *Basil of Witch Head Bay near the sea*, are a boy, are you not?”

“Y-yes, Fairy—”

“THEN WHAT ARE YOU, *BASIL OF WITCH HEAD BAY NEAR THE SEA*, DOING IN MY PRINCESS COMPANY?”

“My mother wanted a daughter, a princess,” he stammered, the words flooding out of him now.

“But she just kept having boys. Twenty-two of us. She couldn’t bear to have more children, and I was the last, so here I am.” The Fairy Drillsergeant floated toward him with barely contained fury. “F-f-first was Balthazar, he’s my eldest brother, then Benjamin, Bartholomew, Bannington—”

“SPARE ME YOUR FAMILY TREE, CADET!”

Basil stopped talking, but his jaw kept moving. The Fairy Drillsergeant flew right down in front of his nose and gave him a withering look. “You’d better be a cracking princess, boy,” she said, her voice so low that only the last few rows could hear her. “Because I’ll enjoy watching you fail. And you won’t like it when I enjoy things.” She turned and floated away, showering him with the dust from her wings.

Basil slumped over and clutched his head in his hands. Eleven sympathized with him, but she never wanted what had just happened to him to happen to her. She began to formulate a strategy in her mind. *Stay quiet, keep to yourself, and do not do even the slightest thing to attract her attention.*

“You will have academic and practical training with other members of Pennyroyal staff. But all of your fieldwork is with me,” said the Fairy Drillsergeant. She glanced out the window as the coach rumbled through Marburg’s massive curtain walls and into the great, green world beyond. The horses snorted and stomped their hooves as they pulled the coach up a steep path and into a dense, dark forest. “This is the Dortchen Wild. It is the most dangerous enchanted forest in all the land. And Pennyroyal Academy sits bang in the middle. So enjoy your last breath of freedom, ladies. Because as of now, you belong to me.”

She flew out the window and joined the coachman. Inside, silence descended like snow. The excitement of enlistment was gone. The cadets became lost in their thoughts.

Eleven stared past Maggie out the window. As the coach jostled through the forest, and the endless black-green of trees and shadows rolled past, she was overcome with an exhaustion unlike any she had felt before. And for the first time in days, she fell into a deep sleep.



YOU MUST NEVER bow to fear . . .

Through the mist of a gently falling rain, her eyes opened, deep and piercing green in a world of gray. She stood on the roof of a crumbling tower above a sea of trees.

Yours are a warrior's eyes . . .

The voice was older, and although it had the ethereal quality of a daydream, Eleven knew it was real. She turned and found a woman standing there. She had seen this woman before, but couldn't place where. Her thoughts seemed slower, dulled in a mist of their own. The woman stepped forward. She wore a simple tunic dress, a rich shade of purple with pale sleeves, and had the small bud of a lily in her hair.

Your blood is the blood of Saudade . . .

Now Eleven stepped forward. She *had* seen this woman before, in the vision in the dragon scale the night by the fire. But just as this realization came, a wave of coldness hit her, so intense it caught her breath. She wheeled. There, nearly twice her height, stood the faceless, hooded witch from that same vision. Her sleeves fell back as she lifted her arms, and Eleven saw her skin, slick and thin as spider's silk. Black creeping things were pushing out from inside her, like caterpillars made of smoke trying to escape their cocoons . . .

Eleven startled awake. She wasn't on a tower. There was no princess, and there was no witch. There were only girls staring back at her in wary judgment.

"All right?" said Maggie. Eleven nodded, but in truth her terror remained, like the cold droplets on her skin when she had climbed out of the river. "You've been asleep all afternoon. Nothing but endless trees."

Eleven glanced around the coach. It had all *felt* so real, and yet it wasn't. How could a dream provoke such fear that it carried over into life?

"Maggie," she said. "Do you know a place called Saudade?"

Maggie faced her, puzzled. "No, I don't think so. Demetra, have you heard of Saudade?"

"I haven't, but that doesn't account for much. My knowledge of the world beyond the Blackmarsh is woeful."

Maggie and Demetra started chatting about all the places they hoped to see some day. It quickly became a discussion of where the Academy might place them should they complete the three years and earn their titles. Eleven didn't join in. She pretended to listen, but her thoughts were far away in

another part of the land where the cliffs were as high as the moon and the trees were bigger than dragons. Her homeland. She thought about her father. When she had left him, he was recovering from injury. She hadn't said goodbye, and she very much regretted that now. It had only been a superficial wound, but a fluttering in her stomach was telling her that something was wrong. Minutes passed, one by one, and that feeling of dread slowly began to build into panic. *I must get off this coach. I need to go home, but . . . no . . . I can't do that. I can't do that to them.*

Suddenly, sunlight flooded through the windows as they emerged from the gloom of the forest into a vast clearing. Eleven heard gasps all around her. She blinked away the light, and once her eyes had adjusted, she gasped, too.

A rippling plain of yellow and green wildgrass stretched on for hundreds of yards, then the cliffs and valleys of the Dortchen Wild began anew. In the distance, the diamond-white glint of the Glass Mountains cut a jagged ridge in the sky. The coach veered right, tracking through worn mud ruts around a low stone wall, crumbled and ancient, that ringed the clearing like a piecrust. But what had captured everyone's attention, what brought the excitement boiling back for the first time since they left Marburg all those hours ago, was in the center of the meadow.

Pennyroyal Academy sat atop a grassy plateau, a kingdom unto itself. Its towers, keeps, and battlemented walls gave it the look of a jeweled crown. Every cadet on the coach leaned to Eleven's side to get a better look.

"Right, here we are, ladies," said the Fairy Drillsergeant, floating back in through the window. The cadets reluctantly returned to their seats, desperate to see their new home but unwilling to risk her ire. "Now, before we reach my beloved Academy, I'd like you all to note the wall. It is bewitched. Princess Pennyroyal herself tricked a witch into enchanting it many, many years ago, and it is utterly impenetrable. Anyone may pass freely *out*, but the only way back in is through a fairy's wand." She lifted hers, the size of a small splinter. "Nothing gains entry to the Academy unless a fairy lets it, and that includes runaways and sneakabouts. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Fairy Drillsergeant," they replied.

"Good. I don't want any trifling with that wall. There are wolves and witches and even the odd giant out there."

The coach rumbled up to a break in the wall. Two tiny fairies, visible mainly by the shimmering sparkles falling from their wings, waved their wands. A transparent, rippling sheet of magic lifted off the stone wall, and the horses pulled the coach underneath.

Demetra looked out her window, then those on the other side of the coach. "Is that it?" she said. "Where's the curtain wall? Where are the soldiers?" But the other cadets were too enchanted by the Academy to worry about security. The closer they got, the more its incredible scale came into focus. loomed above, ancient and bursting with history, yet new to them all, waiting to be explored.

"I can't believe I'm actually here," said Maggie, her voice quiet with reverence. "Can you imagine it, Evie? The princesses of legend . . . the most storied romances . . . all the tales we've been told since we were little girls were formed *right here.*"

"Evie?"

"It's better than Eleven, don't you think?" said Maggie with a smile.

"Oh, absolutely," said Demetra. "It quite suits you, actually."

While everyone else focused on the Academy, Evie settled into her new name. *Funny*, she thought. *I've never had a name before, but this one just feels . . . right. Evie.* It was as though some part of her she hadn't even known was missing had somehow been found again. For the first time in days, she smiled.

"There's the Queen's Tower!" said Maggie, pointing to a colossal crystal spear rising high above campus. It dwarfed the other towers sprinkled across the grounds, giants of cut limestone and granite

and sandstone and flint. The reflected sunlight made the Queen's Tower glow from within like an icicle in spring thaw.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Evie.

"The Queen commands the whole of the Academy."

"What about Princess Beatrice?"

"Beatrice reports to the Queen. They say no one's ever seen her before, but some believe she's actually Rapunzel."

"Blimey! Rapunzel?" said Demetra. "That's brilliant."

Evie smiled politely. She wasn't familiar with the name, though she could tell by Demetra's reaction that she should be. There was another round of gasps as the coach finally crested the plateau and the campus stretched out before them. A vast marsh sat beneath the Queen's Tower surrounded by networks of roads that snaked between timber-framed buildings and giant stone structures. The Academy looked to be two or three times the size of Marburg.

"Right, ladies, listen carefully," said the Fairy Drillsergeant. "This next bit is very important. Those buildings there . . ." She pointed out Evie's side of the coach to a series of long, low structures with arched roofs. Each flew a different-colored banner. "Those are the knights' barracks. Yours are on the other side of campus. Should you choose to tour the knights' barracks, I suggest you enjoy yourself so you'll have something to think about on the ride home. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Fairy Drillsergeant."

Evie regarded the knights' barracks with a frown. Although it was true she wouldn't have made it this far without Remington, and in fact, would probably be dead, she would much rather there weren't knights at the Academy at all. Would she ever truly feel comfortable knowing they were just there across the marsh? And why did no one else seem bothered by them?

"Before us is the Grennilieu Bog. It is named for the troll who brought water back to the Academy after the Seven-Years Summer. And if you go in there without permission, you will also be dismissed."

The Fairy Drillsergeant continued to point out the larger features of the Academy, but it all sounded like gibberish to Evie. So she gave up trying to understand and focused instead on what she could see. The campus was a maze of moss-covered castles; giant fortified keeps with exposed walkways and staircases; circular towers and square towers and octagonal towers and bartizans that started halfway up the wall, blooming into towers above; arrow slits and murder holes and words from long-dead languages etched in stone, nearly worn smooth by age and weather. She could *feel* the weight of the Academy's history in every brick of cut stone. It looked immense, exciting, and above all else, fun.

The coach rattled across a wooden bridge and into a courtyard. A huge stone fountain sat in the center, creating a circular reception area. Two twenty-foot statues, a knight and a princess, rose from the sparkling pool.

As the Ironbone coach rolled past the fountain and joined the others, Evie's eyes remained fixed on the statue of the princess. The heroic pose. The expression of quiet fortitude. This was the girl on her parchment. Evie had found the thing she'd been searching for since she'd left home on that terrible night.

"I want you to look round this coach," said the Fairy Drillsergeant, spreading her minuscule arms. "These are your company-mates. These are the people with whom you will train. On whom you will rely. These are the princesses you will follow into battle." Evie's eyes shot forward. Battle? What did she mean by that? She glanced at Maggie, who didn't seem bothered. "Ironbone Company has been around since giants roamed those woods. Some of the greatest princesses ever to live were Ironbone girls. Do them proud, or get out."

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