

Fortress of Forty Winks

by mreid

In which our heroine, an old man, and a maid walk around a castle. Our heroine would have been better off finding a bar. A fractured fairy tale. Complete in four chapters.

Once Upon a Time

Chapter 1 of 4

In which our heroine, an old man, and a maid walk around a castle. Our heroine would have been better off finding a bar. A fractured fairy tale. Complete in four chapters.

On a grayish sort of winter evening, when the temperatures hovered just shy of freezing and all possible sorts of weather were out causing a mess a young woman pounded resolutely on a wooden door. This door was on the outside of castle, and the woman standing on the wrong side of it was hoping that maybe, just maybe, someone would let her in out of the rain. Looking up at the high granite walls, slick with water and moss, she found the likelihood of this occurring rather dismal.

The castle perched topside of a craggy cliff whose face descended straight into the depths of a murky bay. Upon approaching by ship, the castle resembled nothing more than an ancient heap of weathered boulders, long-used to withstanding both air and water and stubbornly deciding to stay put. To Sarah, the castle appeared an elderly giant, who upon squatting down to attend to some very private business suddenly died, leaving a frozen corpse with bared haunches: thus mooning the sea for all eternity.

To reach the castle from land on a fair day, a person need be hale of body. The incline to the castle walls was steep, and sharp shale was always underfoot. To reach the castle on a bad day, a person must also possess a determined mind. Fortunately, Sarah was blessed with both.

She passed a windmill and two patrol houses on the way up, but their occupants would not be roused. One might question why this young woman chose a dirty climb over any other path from the main road. It was not because she wished to be closer to the rain nor did she enjoy the occasional blasts of icy wind which stung her eyes. Rather she decided to walk toward the buildings with specks of light shining through the windows. So far, though, the cheery yellow warmth they promised was not delivered. Sarah doubted if the castle's inhabitants would prove more welcoming. This was the last dwelling for miles, and she was in need of a nice, warm bed.

A snick of an iron bolt being pulled back caused Sarah to stop her incessant banging. The door yanked inward to reveal a face of indeterminate age and gender. A single blue eye glinted beneath a mass of brown curls.

"What'll be ye wanting, Missy? 'Tis not a night for young lasses like you to be roaming 'bout the countryside willy-nilly." The person grumbled in a high enough register that Sarah decided her would-be host was female.

She was mistaken.

"Good evening, madam. I am a traveler seeking lodging for the night. Would you have some small space to spare? In the kitchen, perhaps?" Sarah asked as politely as she could. Lone traveler or no, she did not appreciate being addressed as "Missy."

A rumble ending in a bit of a burp preceded a response. "Well Girly, I don't know who you'd be calling ma'am, but I'm sure one of the maids in the scullery would be willing to share her bed. Or one of the lads for that matter...." The one eye that peeked out at her between door and frame leered.

Oh bollocks, Sarah thought, *of course the door had to be opened by the castle pervert.*

"Sir, I apologize for the mistake, but truly any space will do. I shall keep to myself." Sarah tried to sound earnest and not desperate. Desperate could be misinterpreted; there had been enough of that already.

"We've room. Now come inside before you catch your death." The man opened the door wider and ushered her inside. He kept a wide berth, as Sarah was doing her best to turn the room into a swamp, dripping mucky water all over the floor. She blew some air out of her mouth, pulled back her hood, and allowed her extremities to become reacquainted with the rest of her body. Her eyes took in the room, well more of an antechamber really. Coarse rock walls, one of them covered in a threadbare tapestry depicting some sort of hunt maybe? Sarah squinted then glanced at her sodden feet. The floor was more of the same stone.

A few minutes later, Sarah, now drier, stood in a puddle of her own making. The man who allowed her entry into the castle had not moved nor said a word. Sarah decided to venture a question. "Begging your pardon, good sir. Would you please direct me towards the kitchens? I find I am quite fatigued."

"Yes, Missy. Iffen you sure thass what you be wantin'."

Sarah made the universal gesture of confusion...widening her eyes, lifting her brow just-so, and parting her lips as she tilted her head to the side. Just what was this man implying?

"Kind sir, all I am need is a place to sleep undisturbed till morning." She paused. "I have little coin, but I would be happy to assist in the kitchens or with cleaning, in order to thank you for your hospitality and the generosity of my hosts, the owners of this..." Sarah paused again. *How should she characterize this dreary eye-sore?*...historic castle by the sea."

Now it was the man's turn to show emotion upon consideration of her words. Sarah wondered how long this was going to take. Now that she was getting dry, her multitude of layers was starting to stifle. "Would ye be expectin' to see Her Majesty and His Royal Highness then?"

What now? Sarah was not sure how this turn of conversation came about. "Of course not, sir. I would never presume.... I am, as you said, just a lone young lady looking for a place to spend the night...that is to sleep. To avoid the weather, sir." *There. That is explicit enough.* Sarah shifted from foot to foot. Her boots squelched.

"Wellen thass good, but Her Majesty would like to be apprised of all guests who arrive at the shore house in the middle of the night."

Sarah's first thought was: *What happened to the backwater burr?* closely and somewhat inanely followed by *"House?" If this hulking relic is a "house," then I must be Queen Laura.*

But Sarah felt like the current conversation might finally place her closer to a bed, so she decided to continue. "Oh sir, if I am to be imposition, I would much rather take my chances in the storm." She thought her delivery overly dramatic, but the servant who opened the door acted as if she said the right thing. In precise tones his voice more pleasant now that it was no longer hampered by outdated inflection he said: "If the young lady would follow me, I shall show you to your chambers."

Sarah, realizing that she was close enough to her goal of a bed that she almost felt the clean sheets enveloping her, made one last show of appreciation. With a ladylike indrawn breath that would have made the best dramatic actresses of the capital seethe with envy she whispered: "My chambers?"

The servant quirked his lips upon hearing that, and then proceeded up four flights of stairs. The further from the antechamber, the more elegant the castle became. Be-tapestried walls depicted the affairs of monarchs over foxes and hounds. Stone floors gave way to wood slats. Slats gave way to plush carpeting. Sarah's tired feet approved of the change.

When they reached their destination, Her Majesty's man bid Sarah good evening. "A lady's maid shall be sent up right away to help you bathe and dress for an evening audience and repast with Her Majesty and His Royal Highness. Enjoy your stay."

Sarah who only heard up until "bathe," murmured her thanks. She shed her cloak and bag and hung them in the sitting room wardrobe by the main door. Then having for once no desire to explore, she sat at the small oak dining table to wait for her newly assigned maid.

Twenty-seven minutes later Sarah was pondering whether or not the interior decorator knew the definition of overkill. Elegance is, of course, in the eye of the beholder. Gold filigreed molding along the edges of the high bronze papered ceiling was definitely too much, however. Sarah had just closed her eyes to avoid staring at burgundy wallpaper patterned in a dizzying number of gold fleurs-de-lis, when she heard a knock at her chamber door.

Sarah forced her legs to work and went to open it, allowing Christine, the maid, to enter. "Thank you for waiting, my lady."

"It is of no consequence," Sarah lied tiredly. "I appreciate the help. I need to prepare myself for bed."

"Yes, my lady. I mean, no, my lady. I am here to dress you for your audience with Her Majesty and His Royal Highness."

"Wait. What?"

"They have requested your presence."

Sarah wanted to collapse in a heap and not move until sunup. Well, if it can't be avoided, she reasoned. "Very well."

Christine, although she was abominably tardy, proved an efficient lady's maid. The Grizzled Giant as Sarah had decided to mentally refer to the castle at least had modern plumbing, so she only had to wait another ten minutes for Christine to heat the water for her bath. Having informed Christine that she could manage to clean herself on her own, Sarah gave the girl the assignment of securing for her something fitting to wear. This was no small task, since Sarah brought nothing with her except a change of underclothes, socks, and an extra sweater. Sarah then scrubbed and perfumed her body back towards what would be appropriate for civilization. Sinking down into the depths of the hot water, she washed the tangles from her hair and half-listened to Christine's faint humming from the next room. The water lapping at the base of her neck was a luxury Sarah hoped to experience daily for years to come. Wanting nothing more than to stay immersed until her wrinkles could rival a prune's, Sarah called for a towel.

Best get this audience over with. Sarah gritted her teeth as Christine dried and plaited her hair. After many uncomfortable pullings and partings, Christine jabbed thirty or so pins into Sarah's scalp and deemed her lady's coif presentable. Sarah's eyes were watering so that she couldn't see her dress properly until Christine successfully stuffed her into it.

Oh, that's beautiful Sarah noted upon viewing the garment in the mirror. The deep rose of the silk damask flattered her pale skin and dark blonde hair. Her brown eyes looked less muddy than usual, and the style of the dress actually suited her tendency towards plumpness. Christine even managed to find a pair of antique gold slippers that fit well enough to go with the gown.

"Thank you, Christine. You are adept at choosing clothing. Do I need to call for an escort to Her Majesty's audience chambers?"

"Oh yes, my lady. I mean no, my lady. That is, Bernard will be here shortly to show you the way, but Her Majesty and His Royal Highness are not there. That is, not in the Royal Receiving Room. That is, they, their Royal Highnesses, that is, are taking tea in the private study. Now." Christine didn't manage to right her speech near the end. *Well at least she has talent in dressing people* Sarah thought.

"And I am to have an audience with them there?" Sarah did not think this respectable. The one door of her suite which she had not opened beckoned. She believed herself

just awake enough to make it to the bedroom before collapsing. Sarah sighed; at least she'd had a bath.

She was still gazing longingly at the door when Bernard arrived. It turned out that Bernard was the same man with the effeminate voice and roaming eyes who had greeted her at the servant's door. Only he must have decided to shuck the lecherous country-man routine entirely, as his homespun tunic and pants were exchanged for a waistcoat and trousers in the Queen's colors; his gaze remained fixed somewhere to the left of Sarah's shoulder.

"If Madam would follow me."

"Yes, thank you, Bernard."

Sarah was then led through a convoluted series of corridors, cluttered with an array of closed doors. She marveled at the illogical floor plan and was hypothesizing as to what hallucinogenic substances the architect must have been using when he built the place when Bernard suddenly stopped in front of another closed door. *So many damn doors*, Sarah thought. Then from behind said damn door, Sarah heard fragments of a conversation between two people *or argument*, her mind amended. A man and a woman. The man's voice seemed vicious. Sarah was able to decipher: "...cannot believe... made... participate... this bloody farce!" The last few words were several decibels louder than the rest. But the shouting was cut short when Sarah was swept into a cozy chamber, one much less ostentatious than the red-and-gold sitting room. A fireplace merrily warmed the room along the far end, casting long shadows upon cream-papered walls. Sarah wanted to sneak a glance at the ceiling, but decided it would be best to focus on Her Majesty and His Royal Highness, as was dictated by protocol. Bernard seemed to be making some sort of introduction, although of what sort, Sarah could only guess, since she had not once been asked her name or station.

Bernard left just as crisply as he arrived. With a bow only taught in court, he exited, leaving Sarah face-to-face with royalty. There were no other servants in the room.

Sarah was well and truly alone.

Far, Far Away

Chapter 2 of 4

In which our tired heroine comes face-to-face with royalty.

The queen and prince sat on opposite sides of a stately sofa. They stared: politely and regally, of course. Only royals seem to stare as if it is their right and theirs alone to look at you like some sort of inferior being. At least their aristocratic faces complemented the act of looking down their noses at the unwashed masses. With long beaks like those, Sarah could not miss the family resemblance between mother and son.

Silence loomed around the edges of the room. The queen and prince did not seem bothered by it. Sarah expected they thought she was to be the one to break it, but she was at a loss. This really was not her day. Her mind, while not empty never empty tried prodding her with thoughts of fluffy pillows and downy coverlets. Sarah did not find this useful. As was her habit, her eyes slid of their own accord to the floor. Realizing her faux-pas, Sarah lifted her gaze from the blue carpet, the royal blue carpet, just in time to see the prince smirk.

Now that goaded her into action; words poured forth. "Your Majesty and Your Royal Highness. I must apologize humbly and profusely for the intrusion. I sincerely do not wish to interrupt your evening so. I believe there may be some confusion as to my presence here. I am simply a traveler looking for one night's refuge from the storm. Your generosity has been overwhelming and most appreciated. I have never been blessed by such..." *Such what, Sarah? Charitable? Munificent? Keep it simple. You're rambling*, "kind hosts."

The queen's face remained emotionless: acceptable and matching the somber twilight hue of her gown. From the other side of the settee, the prince's smirk nearly widened into a smile. *For goodness' sake. He better stop doing that. It is most discourteous and makes him look almost handsome* Sarah's exacerbation threatened to overflow. She was grateful when the queen spoke.

Her gratitude was short-lived.

"There is no need for apologies, my dear. Guests are most welcome here, no matter what the hour."

Bloody hell, thought Sarah. *Does she mean to chasten me? But I cannot apologize again, as that would directly go against her previous statement. Bloody royalty*

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Do take a seat. My son and I are most interested in how you came to arrive on our doorstep in such abysmal weather." Sarah sat upon one of the two upholstered chairs that faced their Royal Highnesses. She picked the chair opposite the queen valiantly refusing to succumb to its cushions and perched upon the front edge. She hoped she made the right choice.

The queen's grey hair might have betrayed her advancing years, but the storminess of it suited Her Majesty's attire perfectly. Her face, while solemn, seemed open enough, and not nearly as wrinkled as Sarah thought it would be. Stony like the castle, but softened inevitably by age, one had to climb that sharp regal nose to gain access to intelligent green eyes. Upon reaching them, Sarah realized that, unlike the Grizzled Giant, Queen Anna of Shea would never be caught with her pants down.

"Your Majesty," Sarah daintily cleared her throat. The prince rose from the settee to pour a cup of tea from the sideboard; Sarah did not look at him. "I do not know what to say. I feel that my long journey has taken much of my energy." *That could be interpreted as whining. Best continue*, thought Sarah. "I am from the neighboring kingdom of Yore and was that is, I am on my way to visit my grandmother. She lives near the town of Overleigh." *Alright, this is true so far. But I need a reason for my visit other than "my parents are smothering me."* Sarah was not entirely sure how to continue until she stumbled upon the best, and most overused, lie in the book.

"My grandmother is ill; I admit I have not seen her in many years. I had hoped to be of help to her for a time. She lives alone at present."

Is this even making any sense? I think I might have chosen the wrong story But a quick glance at the queen showed Sarah her words found a sympathetic ear. So she kept going: "I had an escort, of course, but we were separated in the storm. I fear they may be lost in the woods off the main road. Well, not lost exactly, but thinking I am lost, they might be searching for me. I do hope they find shelter for the night. Once better weather comes with the sun, I can seek them out."

A thought struck Sarah. "Are the forests here safe? Free of wild animals and the like? Of wolves?" Suddenly a hand holding a tea cup thrust itself in front of her face.

"Oh." Startled, Sarah went to cradle the cup with both hands, only to remember that she was with company. Royal company. She lightly held the handle between three fingers, neatly avoiding brushing the prince's hand with her own. "Thank you, Your Highness." Sarah's tone was even.

"My pleasure," he said. And Sarah could not help but look up. Up into the face of a man who, while seemingly sincere in his reply to Sarah's thanks, had a much less open countenance than that of his mother. *Interesting*, was Sarah's single thought before she burned the tip of her tongue on the tea, and nearly upended the contents of the cup onto the royal blue carpet.

Her Majesty smiled. "Is something wrong with the tea, dear?"

"No, it is lovely. I simply was not expecting it to be so hot." Sarah weakly returned the smile. Good will and all that.

"Was it now, Peregrine?" The queen remarked to her son. Apparently Sarah was not trusted to be an objective observer of the relative temperature of liquid.

"I am sorry, my lady. And I was worried that the tea might be too tepid." Prince Peregrine directed the latter to the Royal Mother. His tone was dry. His own cup of tea must have done little to improve his attitude.

"You needn't worry Your Highness." Sarah replied to the first, outwardly remaining calm. She internally huffed at the rest of the prince's response.

"Call him Prince Peregrine, dear. No need to stand on ceremony. We are all friends here."

Are we really? Sarah was beginning to find this encounter, for lack of a better word, surreal.

She needed to learn to go with the flow.

Especially since the night was young and would become stranger yet.

The prince resumed his seat next to the queen. Sarah sipped her too-hot tea. The queen smiled again. Sarah wished she could leave. Instead she decided to look at Prince Peregrine. Now that she had a name for him, and learned that he might be temperature-insensitive, Sarah wanted to figure him out.

Excepting his mother's nose, he resembled a bird of prey not at all. Tall. Too old for gawkiness, though. A few years older than Sarah perhaps. Black hair. Plain face with a strong nose and jaw. Sarah could just make it past his imposing nose to see his eyes. They were brown: unremarkable really. Dressed reasonably well, although his attire was less impressive than the queen's sable trousers, kid boots, hunter green jacket. Again, nothing remarkable.

So why did something about him bother Sarah so?

The queen picked up a slim leather-bound volume from an end table to her right. "Do you read, dear?"

Faced with a non sequitur, Sarah answered truthfully. "In general? Yes, I do."

The queen opened the book and removed a thin ribbon. "Would you read for us, dear?" She passed the book to Sarah.

It was a collection of poems. In Farbudi.

Fortunately Sarah had studied Farbudi at school; she enjoyed languages. However, the fact that the queen of the kingdom of Shea wanted her to read aloud some poem in Farbudi struck Sarah as presumptuous. Were all those sweetly-spoken "dears" meant to put her in her place as some sort of novelty act, perhaps?

But, finding no way out of it without appearing rude herself, Sarah read:

"Kan jiu shairsh pur tes'yu/ Jiu truv / Man ahm," which roughly translates to: "When I look for your eyes I find my soul *Bugger*. *It's a piffling love poem*. Sarah internally cringed. She read every word. Queen Anna of Shea was charmed.

"Oh, Peregrine, how delightful. It is good to know they still teach you young people the classics." Sarah, who had a passing familiarity with "the classics" knew that the poem she just read was not one of them. The phrasing was much too modern to be Medieval, Classical or Romantic Farbudi verse.

"Pardon me, Your Majesty, but surely this poem was written more recently? In the past decade or so?" Sarah was unsure as to whether she should question Queen Anna, but a discussion of the literature of Farbud seemed much more pleasant than awkward silence or small talk. Prince Peregrine coughed. Both Sarah and the queen ignored him.

"You are correct, Dear. *La lan di'ahmur* was published just last year, in fact. Peregrine gave it to me as a birthday gift." She smiled at her son.

"How thoughtful." Sarah replied, frustrated that the queen chose to acquiesce so readily. "It is rare for a son to be so perceptive of his mother's interests."

"Isn't it though?" replied the queen. Peregrine frowned. It made him unattractive.

"Dear, your Farbudi is almost fluent. Where did you study it? Did you have a governess?"

"I last studied Farbudi at the Brighton Academy, Your Majesty."

"Really, dear? How wonderful! My daughter Annabelle has been at Brighton for nearly three years now. Have the two of you met?"

Sarah let surprise show on her face. She did know Princess Annabelle fairly well. They had a couple of courses together at Brighton, belonged to several of the same clubs, and lived next door to each other for a semester. Sarah had no desire to tell all of that to the queen, though. "I believe so, Your Majesty. I was a member of the debating club while I was there. And we were in the same faction twice." Sarah answered. "I enjoyed working with her."

"Oh, Annabelle is a part of so many organizations, it is hard to keep up." The queen smiled. "But you do not attend Brighton anymore?"

"I graduated, Your Majesty."

"Did you? With a degree?"

Sarah was worried she was being led onto dangerous ground, so she decided to tread carefully. "I studied the arts and sciences, Your Majesty."

"And your focus, dear?" Sarah was unaware that the queen was not on solid terrain at all, but instead waged her war on the water. The queen was always at home above the roiling waves.

Sarah saw no way around the question; she could not lie. "Politics and government, Your Majesty."

"Call me Queen Anna, dear. And what will you do with such knowledge?"

"I am not yet sure, Queen Anna. I have family obligations at the moment." Sarah sidestepped Her Majesty's prying and reminded the queen of her "ailing" grandmother all at once.

"Of course you do, dear. And have you been enjoying your journey from Yore, was it?" The queen navigated the conversation back to safer waters.

"Yes, Queen Anna. The weather has been mild until yesterday, and I have appreciated the change of scenery."

"But surely the trip has been long? Where is your home in Yore?" The queen was a tricky adversary.

"We have been on the road but four days, Your Majesty. We came from Silverdell just across the border."*Nothing like a bit of deference to help avoid a potentially dangerous question*, Sarah hoped.

"I see," said Queen Anna. "Peregrine, King John and Queen Laura have a summer residence in close to Silverdell, do they not?"

The prince whose taut shoulders belied the fact that he was, in fact, not reading a treatise on medicinal herbal remedies, but listening to everything being discussed in front of him curtly replied, "Yes."

"I thought so," said the queen serenely.

"Young lady, do you have any siblings?" The queen cast another baited hook at Sarah.

"No, Queen Anna. I am an only child."

"Pity. Peregrine and Annabelle were practically inseparable as children. Was your time at Brighton difficult for you, dear? All those girls? We females can be noisy when housed together." The queen's smile was nothing short of conspiratorial.

"I shall always treasure my time at Brighton, Queen Anna. I made many lifelong friends."

"Then you must visit again when Annabelle is home. She always likes to spend her holidays with young ladies of quality. Perhaps at the royal residence in the capital?"

Sarah wondered if getting up and dashing from the room could be misconstrued as temporary insanity and not her survival instinct forcing her to flee. "That is very kind of you to offer, Queen Anna."

The queen looked at her son.

"Yes. Great idea, Mother." He returned to his book. The queen sighed.

"It seems my son has also developed a taste for the written word."

"I was always taught of the importance of an engaged mind." Sarah babbled.

"How so, dear?" prompted the queen.

"My parents told me that those persons who willingly use their minds," a muffled noise came from Prince Peregrine's side of the settee, "will not have to worry about them failing when they need them most."

The queen's placid look slipped for a split second; her eyes narrowed. Luckily Sarah was studying the tea leaves at the bottom of her cup as if they held within their swirling dampness the secrets of the universe.

"That is very enlightened of them, dear." Queen Anna forced a regal yawn, her gown crinkling as she stood.

Sarah, clutching her empty cup, rushed to do the same. Her back protested at the sudden change in position.

"I believe the hour is late, and it is time I retire. Christine will show you to your bedroom." The door opened to admit the maid. "Good night, Peregrine."

The prince grunted.

Sarah, appalled at the prince's rudeness to the queen and in front of a guest, no less noticed it was her turn to speak. "It was wonderful meeting you, Your Highness. Thank you again, Your Majesty. Good night." Sarah curtsied, deeply. Then she docilely followed Christine from the room.

They Lived

Chapter 3 of 4

In which our heroine tries to sleep, meets her match, and falls prey to the dastardly "fade-to-black."

Sarah did not remember the route from the guest suite to Queen Anna's chambers. However, it seemed to her sleep-fogged mind that Christine was leading her to a completely different wing of the castle.

The door at which they stopped looked nothing like the one before; it was considerably plainer. Christine's fingers went into her apron to remove a heavy set of keys. It took her nearly a minute to find the one that would open the tarnished lock. Sarah did not understand why she was being moved. She almost asked Christine, but she did not wish to seem ungrateful. After all, Sarah did not mind where she slept as long as she could sleep somewhere.

The door opened, protested with a creak that traveled along the floorboards and up Sarah's spine. She shuddered. "After you, my lady," murmured Christine.

Sarah took a few steps forward. Her eyes adjusted to the muffled gloom. Once they registered what Sarah was seeing, they nearly escaped back into the recesses of her head before Sarah managed to gain conscious control of them by breathing deeply.

"Christine," Sarah ventured, "is that to be my bed?" Christine did not reply.

The furniture in question, if one was generous in considering the sole object in the room as such, rose like an obelisk from an ancient Puzhan rug on the floor. It proclaimed its magnificence by height alone. The most arresting feature, though, was that the bed seemed to be composed entirely of wide mattresses of varying thickness.

Eleven...no twelve!...mattresses towered in the dark. Sarah hoped for clean sheets and a few soft pillows atop the thing, but since she was unable to see that far up, she could not be sure of their existence.

"How am I to get up there?" *Will this night never end?* Sarah moped.

Christine finally regathered enough of her scattered wits to construct a sentence. "There should be a ladder somewhere..." she flicked her gaze about the room, "my lady," she appended belatedly.

Sarah spotted a rickety ladder precariously perched against the foot of the bed. Constructed more of air than wooden beam, Sarah thought of what a pity it would be if the ladder succumbed beneath her weight. Now that Sarah realized she only had to climb one more mountain to reach the finish, the bed did not appear an insurmountable obstacle.

First, she needed out of this dress. It would weigh her down.

"Christine," she said sharply, reaching down to remove her slippers. "Help me out of this gown." Christine's fingers, needing none of her mind's few wits to work their magic, undid the laces readily.

"Right," Sarah said mostly to herself. Now clad only in a snowy white shift, freed hair flowing down past her shoulders, she, somewhat incongruently, looked like a virgin sacrifice prepared for battle.

Sarah grasped the third rung of the ladder with her right hand. "Hold the base of the ladder steady please, Christine. Once I reach the top, I will call out to you."

Sarah climbed the ladder with more determination than she thought she had. When her head cleared the top of the very last mattress, which she happily noticed was layered in blankets, quilts, coverlets, and comforters, unadulterated triumph burst within her breast. Sarah took a deep breath...the air seemed sweeter at the summit...and dismissed Christine. She clamored up and into the delicious warmth, tucked herself between clean cotton sheets, and buried her head into the pillows at the other end of the bed. This wasn't a bed fit for a princess or a queen. This was a bed fit for an empress.

And it was all hers.

The fuzzy thought crossed Sarah's mind that she might fall off the bed in her sleep; there were no sharp edges in her exhausted head, though, so Sarah was not as alarmed as she should have been.

Her eyes shuttered of their own accord, and the light in Sarah's brain winked out. Sarah's victory was hard-won, but it was a victory all the same.

She surrendered enthusiastically to slumber.

A few hours later, Sarah was roused from a deep, dreamless sleep, by a shaking of her mattresses.

An earthquake? No! Someone was trying to scale her bed. Who dared disturb her? This was her bed, and she was sleeping in it.

Bernard? Sarah briefly entertained visions of being set upon by men garbed in Queen Anna's livery. She screwed her eyes shut and mentally scrubbed the image from the backs of her eyelids.

A hand clutched at the corner of one comforter. Sarah gasped a somewhat frightened and affronted gasp and brought her knees up to her chest. She could not escape except off the sides of the bed, and she did not think it prudent to plunge valiantly to her death just yet.

Sarah waited.

Another hand joined the first and a black-haired head soon followed.

Peregrine, Crown Prince of Shea, levered himself onto Sarah's bed. His jacket was rumbled and unbuttoned. Sarah noticed he appeared slightly winded. She watched his chest rise and fall beneath the loose drape of his shirt.

"Through the woods and to grandmother's house is it?" a snide voice asked. Sarah registered it as belonging to Prince Peregrine. "Wolves?" His tone teetered dangerously close to screeching.

"What? What are you doing in my bed!?" No need to stand on proper forms of address. There was a man. In her bed.

"Wolves?" The prince repeated.

"What are you on about?" Sarah yanked her bed linens up to her neck. Prince Peregrine took no notice.

"You asked my mother whether or not we have wolves in the northern woods! Wolves! And now you are going to tell me that your traveling cloak is red, right?"

"No." Sarah did not think an hours-old conversation merited so much ire. "Actually, it is brown. Who would wear a red cloak?"

"El Puti Shapurin Ru, that's who," Prince Peregrine nearly shouted the title in Farbudi.

"Oh." Sarah's brain caught up with her. "I must have been channeling the wrong folktale, then. Did you get through any of Von Gierke's Modern Physik this evening?" Sarah asked, referring to the prince's neglected book. Without waiting for an answer, she burrowed into her pillows as if to return to sleep.

The prince shook her; Sarah's eyes snapped open. Her blankets fell to her waist.

"What do you think you are doing? Unhand me." Sarah further upset her bedding with her struggles.

"Not until you listen."

"I doubt you have anything to say that would interest me."

The bedroom was dark, so Sarah would not have been able to see this clearly, but Prince Peregrine's face was flushed a most unnatural shade of pink. "Listen you..."

Sarah cut him off. "No you listen to me, Your Highness. I refuse to hear out the nocturnal ramblings of a strange man who has accosted me in my sleep! Are you mad? Does it run in the family? Madness can be inherited, you know. And with your family's history of inbreeding...mmpf!"

Prince Peregrine placed a warm hand over Sarah's mouth just as she was about to launch into a history of mental disease amongst royalty. "Shut up. Look, I don't care what you think of me at this moment. I came to speak with you about my mother's plans. I thought you deserved to know."

"Wha?" came from beneath the prince's palm. The prince's skin tasted like salt and parchment.

"My mother has decided to take it upon herself to play fairy godmother to both me and an unsuspecting victim...that would be you, by the way. The reason you are currently sleeping atop a dozen mattresses is testament to her grand idea. She has placed a pea underneath this pile of a bed."

"A pea?" The prince removed his hand from Sarah's lips. "That's the big surprise? That's it? To what end?"

"My mother is suffering from the delusion that a princess, a true princess, would be unable to sleep soundly due to the lump caused by a single pea beneath a tower of mattresses."

"Seriously? Perry, that's ridiculous!"

The prince doggedly continued. "In the morning my mother will ask you if you slept well. To prove that you are a princess, you must tell her that you did not."

"I am supposed to tell Queen Anna that I slept terribly because of a pea?" The disbelief in Sarah's voice was evident.

"No, not 'because of a pea.' You're not supposed to know about the pea. Bloody hell, woman! Are you being this obtuse on purpose?"

Sarah sat up and laughed; she could do nothing else. Prince Peregrine scowled at her.

"So I will be exhausted because my delicate royal body could not get comfortable during the night, leaving my delicate royal self unable to sleep?"

The prince scoffed. His eyes locked on Sarah's. "You are not delicate. But you are a royal..." Prince Peregrine trailed off.

Sarah prompted him. "Royal pain in your...?"

"Forget it. Do you understand the plan?"

"Yes, sir. Your Royal Arse, sir."

Prince Peregrine, who was readying himself to make the perilous climb back down to ground level, started. "I have never heard you speak like that before," he whispered.

"This is what happens when I am assaulted by princes in the middle of the night. I am unable to check my tongue. Besides, I am no princess."

The bedroom was awash in quiet except for the synchronized breathing of its two occupants. The prince and Sarah were lost to internal self-debating. One of them was about to instigate something rash.

"You know. It might be better...for the plan...if you actually are tired in the morning." The prince addressed this statement to the level of Sarah's chest.

Sarah, now wide awake, said: "I won't be able to fall asleep anytime soon thanks to you."

The prince of Shea reached out to take Sarah's hand in his own. He missed, though, and caught her thigh instead.

She froze. Moments passed silently. They spoke volumes.

"I think I understand you now, Prince Peregrine." Sarah's words were oddly formal.

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Will you really go through with it all of it?"

"Yes."

"You realize there will be lasting consequences?"

Sarah's voice came out a little lower than usual.

"You know, I think I am counting on them."

Prince Peregrine then sought to prove to Sarah that being attacked by strange princes in foreign castles on stormy nights is not necessarily bad.

For her part, Sarah was trying her hardest to embrace this new development. Nearly an hour later, once her eyes had adjusted quite well to the shadowed room...and her hands and mouth had adjusted just as easily to other places...Sarah experienced two bright epiphanies in quick succession.

At least that is what she had decided to call them.

She had been wrong before.

The way Peregrine was looking at her, searching her face as his body hovered over hers, he embodied his namesake completely. Sarah looked at his eyes in turn: truly looked. And she found, with no begrudging reluctance, that maybe the Farbudi poet had the gist of it after all.

And then she had no room for thoughts, revelatory or otherwise.

Happily

Chapter 4 of 4

In which our heroine learns, once and for all, that the game of chess has it right when it comes to the power of the queen.

The prince left before the sun rose.

Sarah awoke to Christine knocking on the door. Sarah found her feet to be cold and realized that most of her bedding must have ended up on the floor sometime during the last six hours. The maid steadied the ladder so Sarah could climb down.

Christine brought with her a light green muslin day dress and leather slippers. Even after she was dressed, brushed, and washed, Sarah's reflection was proof of a restless night.

She pondered if Peregrine would be proud of the circles under her eyes. She was not sure whether he would feel secretly boastful of the aches he inflicted upon her or concerned. Knowing him, a mixture of both. Sarah decided not to mention it the next time they were alone.

A different servitor showed Sarah to the dining room. She was relieved the man was not Bernard. She did not know how she would have responded if it was, untoward behavior on his part or no. Sarah would have likely done something foolish.

She kept her own counsel on the way to breakfast. Her internal monologue had nothing to contribute.

As with the previous evening, the queen and prince were already seated when she arrived. Prince Peregrine did not get up when she entered the room, but Sarah did not expect that he would. His manners did not take after the queen's.

Queen Anna looked at Sarah and, of course, smiled. "You seem exhausted, poor dear. Did you not sleep well?"

This is it, Sarah realized. "The bed was... unique, Your Majesty, Queen Anna. I was very warm. But for some reason I was unable to get comfortable last night."

"You did not enjoy your first night here, my lady?" Peregrine enquired.

Sarah addressed the queen. "It is of no importance, Your Majesty."

"It is of the utmost importance, my dear. Congratulations! You and Peregrine shall be married."

"Your Majesty?" Sarah was blindsided by the queen's abruptness. "But we have just met."

"Nonsense. You have a name, don't you dear?"

"Sarah, Your Majesty." Sarah could not say anything else without ruining everything.

"Sarah. Let us eat, shall we?" In Queen Anna's eyes the matter was settled, and the kingdom of Shea's prosperous future secured.

Sarah was engaged.

The rest of the meal was uneventful. Prince Peregrine spent all of breakfast speculating on how long Sarah would be staying and if her next room could be closer to his wing of the castle. Sarah was thankful for seat cushions and strong coffee. The queen nattered on and on about wedding plans. The date: Sarah nodded her head in the affirmative to a spring wedding. It would give her parents months to get used to the idea. She was not sure how to break the news of her bourgeois status to Queen Anna, though. Peregrine can do it, Sarah decided uncharitably. *She is his mother, after all.*

Once everyone finished eating and the dishes were cleared away, Queen Anna told Sarah she would send some men to search for Sarah's escort.

"Sarah, please just rest for today. I am sure your people are somewhere close by. You can continue on to Overleigh tomorrow." The prince's face fell at that pronouncement. Although, since he rarely lifted his countenance to any sort of height, no one would have noticed the difference had they been looking. "And I will be in my rooms. I have much to organize; I need to draft letters to everyone. I absolutely love weddings." Queen Anna walked to the hall. She turned before leaving.

"Peregrine, may I speak with you?"

"One moment, Mother."

Once the queen left, Sarah relaxed slightly.

"Perry, you smug bastard, why didn't you warn me your mother was so nice and pushy? Dear this and dear that. And always smiling."

"Well I couldn't give away all the family secrets at once, now, could I?" Peregrine attempted a disarming smile.

He failed.

"You could have at least told me that this plan of yours a countermeasure you devised, by the way, a countermeasure that I only agreed to because I felt sorry for you, didn't want you saddled with some vain Alban Duchess or, even worse, another princess would be easy enough to achieve just by showing up at your door." Sarah, chest heaving, paused for a breath.

Peregrine took his chance and cut in. "I did, Sarah." He placed both hands on her shoulders in what he assumed was a comforting (and placating) gesture.

Sarah shook them off.

"I distinctly recall you mentioned a series of tests. I have been overanalyzing every single thing since I got here, from how I address the servants to how I sip the tea. Your mother even made me read out of that damn book of Neoromantic Farbudi poetry that I told you to purchase for her birthday! I'm a stressed-out wreck because of you, you conceited prick."

"I thought we took care of your stress last night," said the conceited prick.

This allusion to good sex was not appreciated by Sarah. She felt her anger completely justified and did not want to let it fizzle out just yet.

"You better go talk to your mother. I'm not going anywhere."

Perry, knowing that Sarah only pushed back a few hours what would likely be a major row, conceded. He went to find the queen in her chambers.

Sarah, true to her word, did not move from the dining room.

Instead, she fumed.

"You never told me how charming she was."

Sarah? Charming? Peregrine wondered just what the women in his life expected of him...and if he was too old to run away from home.

"To whom are you referring, Mother?"

"Sarah, of course. Sarah Pemberton. Her father is the chemistry professor at Whitford College. He taught you once, I believe." Peregrine's jaw dropped open, nearly unhinging itself with shock.

The queen ignored her son's uncharacteristic display of emotion and continued, "I know the two of you have been enjoying each other's company for some time now. I am glad I was able to finally put you on the path towards marriage."

Peregrine searched his mother's face for a cancerous growth or even another head, anything to explain what she was talking about.

"Mother, what are you saying?" He belatedly realized that he sounded absolutely horrified.

"I had hoped you would find someone more suitable in rank, of course. But she is a decent girl and shall be able to handle her duties as Queen very well, I think. Certainly, the kingdom is becoming more cosmopolitan in attitude. I am sure the populace will love your ordinary choice of bride."

"You mean, you knew?"

"Of course, dear. Your sister mentioned you being taken with Sarah after she introduced the two of you at some sort of academic society meeting last year." The queen smiled. Peregrine remembered that meeting. He had argued with Sarah on the nature of social inheritance for a good forty minutes.

"But... but this whole," Peregrine gestured widely, "fairy tale set-up. This stupid search for a princess. What was it all for?" The next time Peregrine saw Annabelle he was going to strangle her.

"To get you to commit, Peregrine," the queen stated blandly. "You are a grown man and have been for some time. You need to form your own household, your own family. And ready yourself for your place as King."

Peregrine raked his hand through his hair. "So you came up with this ridiculous plot just to force me into marriage?"

"I have not forced you to do anything, Peregrine. You make your own decisions."

"But, Mother, you don't understand. We were are " Peregrine corrected himself, "friends. Sarah has no desire to be Queen. I had to beg her to rescue me from an arranged marriage. She will hold this over me indefinitely. I will never be able to repay her."

"Now, you cannot fool me, Peregrine. I know you are more than merely friends. And as for the matter of your so-called 'repayment,' this is just the way it should be. Your father owed me everything for loving him, as well." And with those parting words, the queen left the prince standing gobsmacked.

Her Majesty returned to the dining room to warmly welcome Sarah into the family.

Sarah learned that Queen Anna was a little less nice than, but just as intelligent as, she initially thought.

Sarah liked her all the more for it.