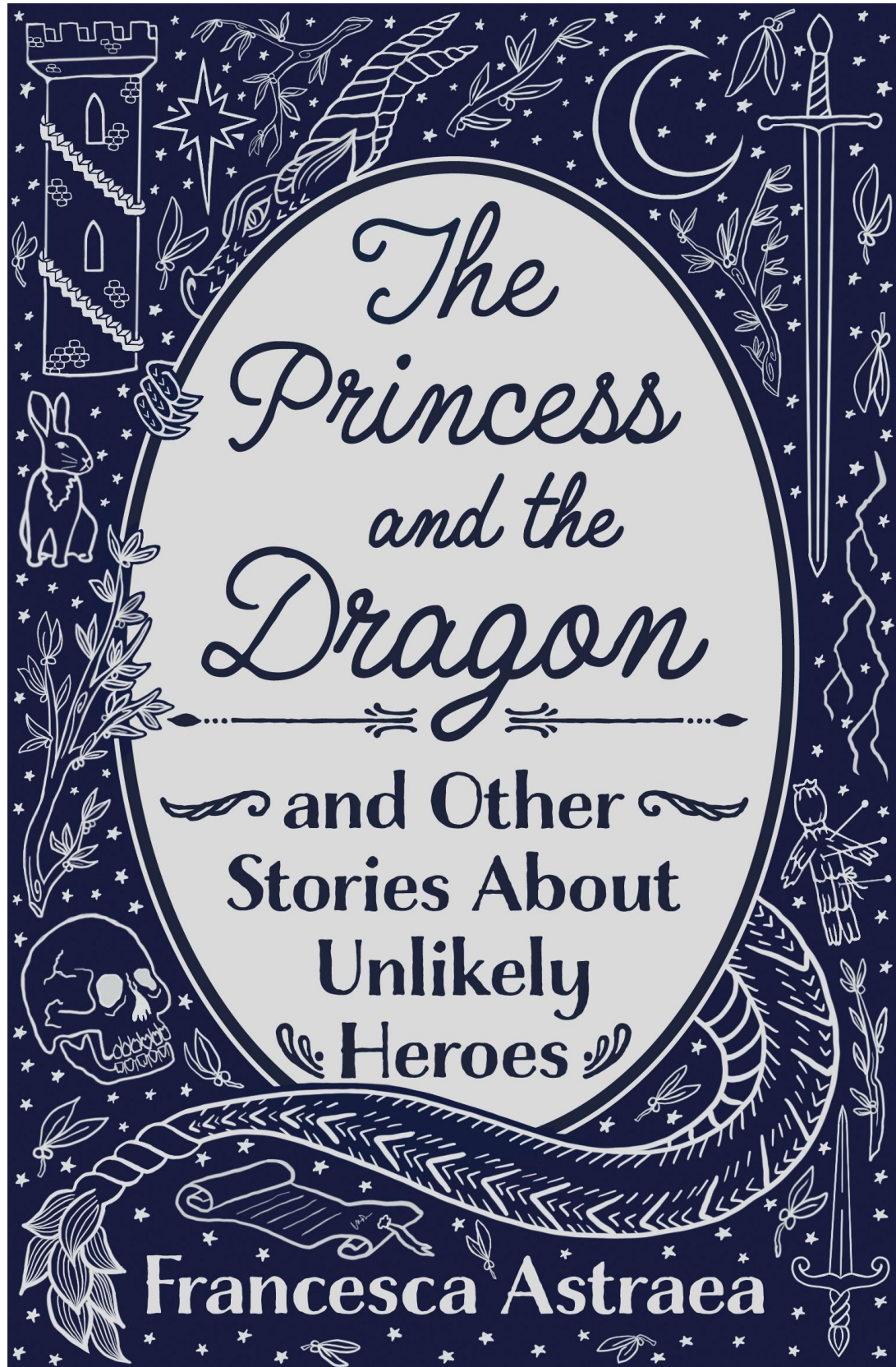




The Princess and the Dragon and Other

Stories About Unlikely Heroes

SAMPLE

Prologue

Not all fairy tales have happy endings. Some end with a marriage, which could be a happy ending or a happy beginning, depending on how you look at it. Some end neatly, which could be a happy ending or a sad ending but is more often quite a boring one. Then there is this fairy tale, which ends neither happily nor neatly.

The island of the Three Kingdoms is tucked away at the edge of nowhere and surrounded by violent sea on all sides. It slightly resembles a crescent moon and greatly resembles the sort of place you find silver-tongued elderly ladies with a tendency to cast enchantments and witty young men with a tendency to embark on valiant quests and declare themselves heroes. There are surprisingly high levels of hygiene and health and safety given the lack of electricity and standardised paperwork.

Several thousand years before the witty men and the hygiene standards, the Three Kingdoms was merely a small, volatile, pocket of ocean. One afternoon the earth sneezed, accidentally spewing out a handful of magical creatures, a variety of poisonous plants and four strains of the common cold. The ocean viewed all these things as the unfortunate natural by-product of a sneeze and made to clear them away, so the earth hastily spat out a spectacular island of mountain ranges and beaches and lush green valleys, offering its exiles a comfortable prison. Magic seeped through the earth and out into the sea, calling out for humans to come and look and stay a while. This was probably where things went wrong.

The islanders promptly set about harnessing the magic and taming the creatures and figuring out which plants could be eaten if cooked properly. They also named the Three Kingdoms the Three Kingdoms *of* something, but they kept claiming one another's thrones via wars or marriages (or a war disguised as a marriage) until specifics faded away and all that remained

were three royal families and three tenacious nations, mutually enjoying the eternal bonds of shared history and common culture.

Well, three royal families and three tenacious nations with a lot of shared history.

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The Princess and the Dragon

Chapter One

The Kingdom of Mirrors, the loudest, southernmost and most magical of the Three Kingdoms, filled the bottom third of the crescent moon with olive trees, fishing boats and about ten thousand mirrors. It was ruled by the Durante line of the House of Stars, whose family tree was dotted with the types of people whose exploits are written into ten-minute songs about burning cities, eccentric fashion sense and enormous acts of courage in the face of fire-breathing dragons. Princess Amelia, the youngest of the Durante family, knew from early childhood that she, too, would one day have to defeat a dragon.

Nobody initially expected Amelia to face the dragon in question, partly because she was a girl and partly because she had been born second in line to the throne. Her older brother, Prince Nicholas, was both dashing and handsome and perfectly capable of embarking on such a heroic quest by himself. Unfortunately for Amelia, by the time she reached her teens Prince Nicholas found himself indisposed, so although most people were too polite to mention it, the task of dragon-slaying ultimately fell to her.

Amelia was fourteen, and in happier stories she would be learning how to dance or dabble in magic. In this story, Amelia was in charge of olive oil production. She was also kingdom treasurer, head of the royal family's public relations department, occasional fisherwoman and part-time carer to her ailing father, the king. For someone born into a centuries-old dynasty, she spent a lot of time with ancient legal documents and recently gutted fish.

Amelia's path to notoriety began one overwarm Monday evening in early spring when she had finished a day's work in the kingdom treasury and was heading through the Kingdom of Mirrors' busy capital city, Lumiere, to evening lessons in the castle. Today she would be learning mathematics with her tutor—which seemed redundant when she ran the entire

kingdom's budget from a piece of parchment and an abacus—so she dragged her feet as she walked through Market Street towards the castle.

Market Street was the epicentre of Lumiere and Amelia's favourite part of the city. Lumiere looked like a fairy tale, or a dream. It was a dream, of sorts: Amelia's great-great-times-something grandparents designed the city themselves after the previous one was ravaged by one of those wars disguised as a marriage. Wait, no, this one was a war disguised as a war.

Neither grandparent was particularly conventional when it came to architecture, so every corner of Lumiere demanded your attention. White stone buildings rose into spires with forty sides, each one mosaiced with tiny chips of glass or ceramics. Colourful tiles trimmed every window and door, forming intricate patterns that drew the eye in a hundred directions. Only a few windows in each building held clear glass: almost everywhere boasted a stained-glass frieze of pictures or spirals. Even regular stone walls were round and misshapen, like someone plucked all the cobbles from the street and piled them on top of one another until they resembled a building. On every wall in the kingdom, from the tiniest cupboard to the largest battlement, hung a looking glass. No one was sure who had started the tradition, but they all appreciated how easy it was to check if you had food stuck in your teeth. Brightly painted doors, each competing for attention in violent shades of fuchsia or lavender or buttercup, were elegantly latticed with wrought iron. Some buildings were mosaiced entirely in silver, others in turquoise or tangerine. There wasn't a grey space in the country and according to rumour, every colour in existence had been pressed into use somewhere in the kingdom. A staple of every primary school education in the Kingdom of Mirrors was a day spent naming the colours of each public building.

On some walls Amelia passed, mosaics formed cheery squares like kitchen tiles. On others they made bright, childlike images telling the history of the Kingdom of Mirrors. There were

the olive trees, there was a woman brewing a potion, there was a boat next to some fish. The mosaiced fish were consistently bigger than the little people on the boat, which always made Amelia wonder whether the artist had no sense of scale or if they wanted to emphasise how brave the fishermen were, sailing out to face enormous krakens and territorial mermaids and climate change.

As she walked, Amelia gazed across Market Street to the little boats in the harbour, bobbing about on a minuscule breeze. Something moved near the hull of a dinghy, perhaps a school of fish or a merperson. The boat's owner dozed on deck, oblivious. Up in the hills, lights twinkled from the peaks of each mountain. Lime green parakeets hollered over tiny sparrows, shouting over hulking seagulls.

Amelia stopped at one of Market Street's twenty food carts to buy a snack before lessons. After a small diplomatic incident in which a local butcher replaced fresh lamb with fresh cat without mentioning it to anyone first, Amelia had lost her taste for kebabs, so she chose a cheese pastry and orange juice, praying that the cheese came from a farmyard animal. 'You don't have to pay, Your Majesty,' the vendor told her as she rummaged through her purse. Although Amelia was dressed exactly like her subjects in a loose cotton dress, and had the same umber skin and jet-black hair, the market knew her well. She frequently hid there to avoid going to the castle.

'Of course I do...' Amelia searched for the vendor's name. 'Sarah. Of course I have to pay, Sarah, I'm not going to go around stealing from my own people!' *Especiallly when you're one of the few tradespeople who pays their taxes*, she added silently.

'Well, if you're sure... can I put some magic in it, on the house?'

'Oh, go on then.' Amelia yawned and fanned herself with her sunhat. 'Something to revive my desire to go to my maths tutorial.'

Sarah smiled and reached under her little counter for a vial labelled *enthusiasm: medium strength*. She flicked a couple of drops into Amelia's orange juice. 'Bad day at the office, Your Majesty?'

Amelia gazed across the square at children her own age. Walking home from school with cloth satchels slung over their shoulders, wearing faded patterned dresses or shorts, they jostled each other along in a way that always struck Amelia as very comradely. She tried to push back a pang of jealousy. Until Amelia's father suffered a stroke when she was twelve, Amelia attended the same local school, wearing the same faded patterned dresses. Amelia hadn't especially enjoyed formal education when she was forced to go, but after years of squeezing in private tutoring between royal business and gradually losing touch with her friends, Amelia would have given anything to spend eight hours with other people her own age. Especially since public schools let children take a class in brewing potions, and Amelia's parents wouldn't let her near any magical substances since an unfortunate encounter with a dog and a growth potion when Amelia was ten.

'Oh you know...' Amelia shrugged. 'Eighty per cent of our teachers and healthcare professionals have gone abroad in the last five years and we can't afford to train anyone new. There's also a shortage of sorcerers who know how to bewitch the weather, so we're in for a long summer.' She scowled and chomped her pastry. 'Oh, and the Earl of Star's Reach spent half an hour telling me how he plans to convert an entire room in his house into a shrine to the gods of gratitude. Gratitude! He'd do better praying to the gods of lost causes.'

Shrines in the Kingdom of Mirrors were like pairs of shoes: everyone owned at least one, but to people who considered themselves fashionable, they were the ultimate status symbol. Each building housed a shrine to one god or another, made from chips of mirrored glass or colourful tiles. Some were the size of a post box, others the size of a shed. Some people, like

the Earl of Star's Reach, dedicated an entire room in their house to their shrine, replacing all the windows with stained glass and filling the room with candles, incense and tiny prayer scrolls. The Earl fancied himself a priest and a magician... the rest of the court fancied him a nuisance, especially when his attempts at magic resulted in a castle-wide evacuation.

'Is he thinking of going for any particular design?' Sarah asked. Her kiosk's little shrine to the water gods was the size of a milk jug and made from blue glass chips. It sat on the till, which Sarah had bewitched to open only when she touched it.

'The Earl wants a plain mirrored mosaic floor in the shape of his family crest to remind him of his respect for the gods of hearth and home,' Amelia recalled. 'But his wife doesn't like to be reminded of her mother-in-law.'

'Maybe she should pray to the gods for a new husband, then,' Sarah suggested. 'Or send him south to Scavenger's Ruin. The Sapphire Dragon will take care of him.'

Amelia tried to laugh, but something stuck in her throat.

She finished her food at the communal iron tables, soaking up the atmosphere as the evening sun reflected off the mirrors on each building, casting the entire street in strange beams of light and duplicating the market one thousand times over. When she was little, Amelia thought that every mirror contained another world, where another Amelia sat, looking into another mirror.

The temperature was starting to drop, so Lumiere was coming alive. Children scampered around fountains while parents chatted at cafés. Amelia could hear restaurants getting ready for the dinner shift, lighting fires to roast lambs and goats on spits, and she could smell oregano and bougainvillea plants. A cicada chirruped somewhere, almost drowned out by a marching band performing at one end of Market Street. The band appeared to be in direct competition with an orchestra holding a performance at the other end of the street. Babies'

cries mingled with dogs' barks as street vendors contended with everyone. 'Salted olives, a jar for a silver coin!' Amelia could get two jars of olives for a copper coin; there were more olive trees in the Kingdom of Mirrors than there were people. A wasp buzzed near Amelia's pastry wrappings, close enough to count its legs. She waved it away. Another vendor hollered, 'Feather pillowcases, collected from swans this morning!' Very few swans lived in the Kingdom of Mirrors. Possibly the manufacturer had plucked several pigeons.

It was well past time to go to lessons, so Amelia hauled herself from her seat and brushed her sticky hands on her dress as the loudest voice of all cut through the crowd. 'Magical gold amulets—guaranteed to keep your marriage healthy! Just five gold pieces for two!'

Amelia stopped at the stall, waving another wasp away from her face. Anything for another two minutes of fresh air. 'What do those amulets do?'

'They spice up your marriage, Your Majesty.' The vendor, a sun-wrinkled old man called Harry, bowed when he recognised her.

'My marriage?'

'Or your parents' marriage!' Harry seemed to remember who he was talking to. 'Not that the King and Queen need any help in their marriage! I am sure they're blissfully happy!'

'Yes, blissful,' Amelia agreed. She rubbed her temples. The enthusiasm was taking its time kicking in. 'Couldn't the marching band and the orchestra perform at different times?'

'Course they could,' Harry grunted. 'But that would be too easy. The orchestra is starring in a musical.'

'Remind me never to see it,' Amelia muttered.

'You might want to, Your Majesty, it's about the war with the Sapphire Dragon.'

‘Why on earth would I want to watch a musical about the war?’ Amelia demanded. Why couldn’t people stop bringing it up? First Sarah with her joke, now Harry. For ten whole minutes as she strolled through Market Street, Amelia had forgotten all about the war her people waged against their unfriendly neighbourhood dragon.

Harry shrugged. ‘Search me, Your Majesty, I’ve never been much of a theatre person. Can I interest you in a shell for calming headaches?’

‘No, no, I’ll take a tonic later on.’ Amelia knew that Harry’s ‘magic shells’ came from Lumiere’s beach. Although blood red and very pleasant as a table decoration, they held absolutely no magical properties. Amelia didn’t have the heart to tell him she knew the scam: not everyone in the kingdom was a magic user. Amelia never quite got over the fact that her mother, Queen Hazel, excelled at casting protection spells, while Amelia, Nicholas and their father, King Emmanuel, possessed about as much magical ability as a pair of socks.

She left Harry there as he called into the market once more. ‘Magical shells! Endorsed by the Princess Amelia!’

Miraculously, Amelia arrived earlier than her tutor. Madame Louisa taught every subject on a different day in their little room at the very top of the castle tower. Ten floors up, Amelia could still hear the orchestra and the marching band battling it out. While she waited, she flicked through the pile of newspapers they’d used for her current affairs lesson the previous week. There was the war, *again*, on almost every page.

‘The Sapphire Dragon razes another town!’ screamed one headline. *‘Is he heading north from his cave at Scavenger’s Ruin?’*

'King Richard of the Valley of Dreams sends more troops to the Kingdom of Mirrors' aid,' announced another paper. *'Meanwhile, King Emmanuel has borrowed money from Queen Margaret of Stormhaven to pay for another siege at Scavenger's Ruin, to force the Sapphire Dragon from his stronghold.'*

'King Richard's troops are killed in a failed siege of the Sapphire Dragon's lair,' bemoaned the most recent. *'The latest failed attempt to oust the Sapphire Dragon, who has laid waste to the south coast of the Kingdom of Mirrors for 20 years, brought the military death toll up to 32,892 troops, and the civilian death toll to—'* Amelia stopped reading. She knew the numbers already.

What really depressed her was that these newspapers could have been from any year in the past two decades, ever since the Sapphire Dragon blew in from the Western Ocean on a terrible storm. Villagers spotted him curled on the beach at Scavenger's Ruin, a fishing town at the southernmost tip of the kingdom. According to survivors, his wicked blue scales reflected the sun and his wicked grey claws left welts in the sand. Fire spat from his nostrils as he torched every building in sight, along with most villagers. War was declared immediately, of course. There's a saying in the Three Kingdoms: *sticks and stones might break your bones but they don't do squat to dragons, so you'd better bring something stronger.*

Everyone was hopeful for the first few years. Hundreds of well-trained soldiers marched south each spring, although barely fifty would make it back, and most of those spent months in the Lumiere hospital being treated for horrendous burns. The navy lasted precisely fourteen minutes, which was how long it took the Sapphire Dragon to incinerate the entire fleet. The Valley of Dreams, the Kingdom of Mirrors' closest neighbour, sent troops and extra weapons. Dragons are creatures of habit and prefer to live in secluded, enclosed spaces,

so the Sapphire Dragon existed mostly in the hard-to-reach caves below Scavenger's Ruin, venturing out occasionally to hunt fish from the once-plentiful sea or to meet the latest contingent of soldiers. Once or twice a year he would fly north, razing more towns and extending his territory just a little bit closer to Lumiere. Within some six years of the dragon's arrival, half the nation was inhospitable and hundreds of terrified families had fled to Lumiere. Others went further north still, to the Valley of Dreams.

Lumiere soon started to creak under the extra pressure from its new inhabitants. Tensions built up in crowded communities as the war dragged on. After a few more years of state funerals for fallen soldiers and emergency aid relief for refugees, someone cracked and threw a brick into the tent of a refugee family, starting the famous Midsummer Riots. Amelia remembered watching the carnage from her bedroom window as a terrified six-year-old, counting the fires that spread across the city. 'Dad will sort it out,' twelve-year-old Nicholas assured her. 'He has an army.'

'He doesn't,' Amelia argued. 'They've all been eaten by the dragon.'

'The Sapphire Dragon doesn't eat people,' Nicholas assured her. 'He just sets them on fire.'

Amelia refused to go near a lit candle for weeks after he said that. Emmanuel and Hazel finally bowed to political pressure and began to borrow money from Queen Margaret of Stormhaven to train even more soldiers. They signed an agreement with the Valley of Dreams, allowing thousands of refugees to relocate to safer lands in exchange for access to the Kingdom of Mirrors' ancient magical scrolls, something no monarch had allowed for centuries. Eight years later, the kingdom's debts were crippling its economy and all those extra soldiers proved about as effective as a comedian at a funeral.

'Your Majesty!' Amelia jolted out of her reverie as Madame Louisa swept into the room.

'Apologies for my tardiness. Let's get started with some mathematics!'

Madame Louisa didn't set particularly difficult exercises today —but then, Amelia recently balanced Louisa's family's bank account. Amelia scratched away at algebraic fractions, trying not to think about dragons. She glanced out the tower window. All the way up here she could see the entire city, nestled amongst the mountains and olive groves, temple spires sparkling. People would soon be making their way to evening prayers, if not just stopping for ten minutes to light a candle in the nearest shrine. If she had magical vision, which wasn't unheard of in the Three Kingdoms, she could see around the coast, all the way down to Scavenger's Ruin. From this distance the road looked like it was scratched into the mountain by a dragon's claw. Her fist clenched around her pencil. Would she ever go anywhere without being reminded that her kingdom was on its knees?

The pencil snapped. Across the room, Madame Louisa raised her eyebrows and handed Amelia another.

Chapter Two

‘Lovely fish soup, Dad,’ Amelia ventured, as she sat down to dinner with her parents later that evening. The family ate in the ancient, draughty castle kitchen. Ever since the head chef and kitchen staff moved away to find jobs in more prosperous parts of the Three Kingdoms, her father assumed the role of castle cook. Amelia could see zero olives, which meant he was having a good day. After his stroke, Amelia took on most of his responsibilities so Queen Hazel didn’t need to double her workload, but he insisted on running the kitchen. Across the table, her mother attacked a loaf of bread and tried not to raise her eyebrows. Amelia dipped her spoon into the bowl. ‘Wow. I can really smell... garlic?’ King Emmanuel was an enthusiastic chef, but the people of the Kingdom of Mirrors generally survived on what they could afford, which was bread and olives. There are a great variety of ways to serve bread and olives, but they all require imagination, which King Emmanuel ran out of around the same time his teenage daughter took over his job.

‘Garlic is the only thing that makes the fish seem fresh,’ her father said sadly. ‘I mean, er, it is fresh. Of course. It came from the harbour... yesterday.’ Amelia knew it had come from the harbour a week ago because she was the one who went out with the kingdom’s little fleet of fishing boats to see what was left in the sea after so many years of the Sapphire Dragon helping himself to its fish. She also knew how much effort it took for her father to be able to stand at the kitchen counter at all, so she tucked in.

As they ate, the family went through the day’s business. ‘As you know, Emmanuel, Queen Margaret sent messengers last week to remind us we owe another portion of loan repayment,’ Queen Hazel said, ‘but Amelia managed to persuade her to give us until the winter solstice.’ Amelia was surprised at Queen Margaret’s leniency. King Emmanuel had put off asking Stormhaven for money until after the Midsummer Riots because no one did business with Margaret de Winter unless they wanted to spend the rest of their lives feeling like a fly

trapped in a spider's web. Stormhaven was the northernmost and richest of the Three Kingdoms, and its ancient matriarch ruled with a personality far colder than her name.

Queen Margaret travelled all the way south when Amelia was small; Amelia's abiding memory of the visit was the elderly monarch's icy stare and enormous fur coat, which she insisted on wearing even as the midday sun melted windows and one of her servants fainted from heatstroke. Amelia never saw Margaret emit a bead of sweat. Rumour had it that she slept with a dagger under her pillow, had locked one of her nephews in a dragon-guarded tower and planned to rule from beyond the grave via an Ouija board and a set of tarot cards, despite a kingdom-wide ban on magic use. Amelia believed every rumour.

'How much does Margaret want for this instalment, exactly?' King Emmanuel asked. He had his daughter's wide brown eyes and awkward shoulders. When they smiled, they were copies of one another: all teeth and lots of dimples. Neither had smiled recently, and although Emmanuel was only fifty, he could have passed for Amelia's grandfather.

'She has demanded five hundred gold bars,' Amelia replied. 'Unfortunately, we have zero gold bars. Do you think she would take the equivalent weight in olives?' she asked. She was only half joking. The Kingdom of Mirrors' olives were famous throughout the Three Kingdoms and the nation's most popular export. Just last year Amelia traded a quarter of the state's olive oil stock for a thousand cattle from the Valley of Dreams.

'The only language Margaret speaks is money,' her mother sighed. She sipped some soup, winced, then looked at the table. 'Of course, Amelia, Queen Margaret would be very happy to marry you to one of her sons or grandsons.'

'No.' Amelia said flatly.

'Amelia...' her father began.

‘No.’ Amelia uncovered an olive and stabbed it. ‘How many times do I have to say no? You can’t just marry me off to clear our debt!’

Her parents did not mention that they could. Nor did they mention that her older brother had been happy to marry himself off until fate threw him off course. They didn’t need to.

‘Oh, we’ve had another message from the merpeople,’ her mother added. ‘The dragon has taken two more children this summer. Parents are starting to move north to safer waters.’

‘That’s all we need,’ Amelia groaned. ‘Half the population of merpeople in the harbour won’t make life difficult for anyone.’

‘They’ve suffered as much as we have,’ Hazel pointed out. ‘And they can’t just move to dry land.’

‘Thanks for mentioning that, it hadn’t occurred to me!’

Hazel raised her eyebrows, which suggested Amelia had better stop arguing, so she spent the rest of the meal in silence and excused herself as soon as the plates were washed. She wandered the castle for half an hour and found herself back in the classroom at the top of the tower, staring at the newspapers. The Kingdom of Mirrors was once a prosperous, vibrant nation known for its lively street festivals, beautiful architecture and delectable sea food. Her parents weren’t to blame for its terrible fortunes. But if no one did anything about the dragon, the war and their debts soon, there would be no kingdom left to rule when her father died. Which, a tiny and horrible voice in the back of her head whispered, would probably be sooner rather than later.

Irritatingly, Amelia wouldn’t be in this position at all if not for her annoying brother.

Because she grew up with an older sibling, Amelia was never expected to shoulder a large portion of royal responsibility. Throughout her childhood she was taught the basic

requirements of being a good princess—how to make small talk with someone who has bad breath, the best way to throw a dinner party for politicians with special dietary needs, the fastest way to stab an adversary with a longsword—then left to her own devices. But when Amelia was twelve, Prince Nicholas embarked on the customary coming-of-age quest that all wealthy, promising young men undertook when they reached their mid-teens or decided they did not enjoy academic study.

His quest was to ride north to the castle of Queen Margaret of Stormhaven and choose one of her many offspring to marry (or her offspring's offspring—there were enough of them to choose from). In return, Margaret would cancel half of the Kingdom of Mirrors' debt. He was to rid one of Stormhaven's many mountains of a pesky goat-eating lion on his way, just to prove his worth. Instead, Prince Nicholas killed the lion on the slopes of Traveller's End Mountain and, when a local goat farmer named Raphael made Nicholas dinner to say thank you, he decided to marry him. Although marriages between royalty and commoners were perfectly normal in the Kingdom of Mirrors, Nicholas wanted to live on the mountain with his husband and their goats rather than inherit a large, hot kingdom filled with olive trees and refugees, so he abdicated. Most of the kingdom protested: marrying below one's station is one thing but rejecting public duty to become a farmer (albeit with the title Duke of Lumiere) is quite another. Gossip columnists complained that Princess Amelia was even less tameable than her brother, although critics agreed that at least she would have decades to practice being queenly.

King Emmanuel had his stroke six months later.

Amelia and her mother did a pretty good job of running things with the help of their High Council, but they spent most days wondering how much longer the kingdom could go on without defaulting on their loans. A few years ago, Amelia hadn't even known what the

phrase ‘defaulting on loans’ meant, and she hadn’t cared. Why couldn’t her brother have quested to the south coast instead of heading north? He could have killed the dragon like a good prince was supposed to do and *then* gone on some little journey to rid Traveller’s End Mountain of that lion. It wasn’t even a magical lion, Amelia thought bitterly. It was a standard, boring mountain lion. She was even more annoyed with herself for missing having him around the castle. He would have liked Harry the amulet salesman, and he always made royal engagements feel like an adventure instead of like a piece of complicated homework.

Amelia tidied the newspapers and organised a few textbooks, just for something to do. Her favourite history book, *The Magic, Mayhem and Mystery of the Kingdom of Mirrors* was dog-eared and out of date, but the author had recently moved north and was now focusing on researching the Valley of Dreams’ historical association with the wine industry. Then there was *The Monarchies of the Three Kingdoms (and how two of the kingdoms managed democracy)*, and *Sorry, Dragons Don’t Really Die, But Here’s How You Can Try*. Amelia scowled at it. Down on Market Street, a trombonist started a solo. A second later, a cellist started one too. Why on earth were they *still* playing music? It was night-time! When Amelia became queen, her first Royal Decree would be a change in live music laws. She pulled *Dragons Don’t Die* from the shelf, angrily sweeping past the sections on Ruby Dragons, Emerald Dragons and the Lesser Spotted White Gold Dragon. There was the section on the Sapphire Dragon:

Sapphire Dragons are not the largest of the dragon family, nor the most dangerous. They can’t spit poison and their eyes won’t paralyse you. They do not eat people. Unfortunately, what they lack in strength they make up for in cunning: it is hard to outwit a Sapphire Dragon, and their only known weaknesses are their sensitive ears and delicate eardrums. They cannot stand high pitched sounds at great length, and if anyone were to shoot an arrow into the ear of a Sapphire Dragon, they would surely slay it, as the opening of the ear is the

only part of the Sapphire Dragon's anatomy that isn't protected by a layer of scales. No one in human history has ever come close enough to try, though.

Their sensitive ears.

An idea hit Amelia like a beam of sunlight.

Before she could think too much, Amelia hurled herself down the tower stairs and through the castle, so quickly that the stained-glass windows started to blur together. Her parents were sitting in the smallest drawing room with cups of wine. The king worked through his physiotherapy exercises while the queen read a book about strategic negotiations.

'I have a plan to slay the Sapphire Dragon!' Amelia gasped as she skidded to a halt on the rug, narrowly avoiding the wine cups.

Her parents looked up. 'Amelia,' her mother chided, 'can't this wait until tomorrow? Your father can't take too much excitement.'

'I hardly think a conversation with my daughter is bad for my health,' the king murmured, although he didn't look entirely convinced. 'Does this have anything to do with your plan to build a giant water cannon and fire it at the dragon?'

'I made that plan *ages* ago,' Amelia said dismissively. 'We don't have enough equipment to build a *canon* powerful enough. This is a new plan.'

'All right,' Queen Hazel shrugged. She had the same long afro hair as Amelia, but while Amelia braided or tied up hers to keep it away from her face, Hazel wore a new style or accessory every week, refusing to fire her hairdresser even as they cut down every other expense. She also remade all her dresses, so she looked like she had a new outfit for every occasion, but it was really the same material, redesigned four or five times a year. Even

curled in a frayed armchair, she looked more like a queen than Amelia ever would. ‘Let’s hear it.’

Amelia took a deep breath. ‘Well, the reason the kingdom has had to borrow so much money over the last twenty years is that we’re fighting a war we can’t win, *and* the entire population of the south of the kingdom moved north *and* the bottom dropped out of the tourism industry. That’s correct, isn’t it?’

‘Correct,’ her father agreed.

‘*And* the reason for the war, refugee crisis and tourism trouble is that the Sapphire Dragon razed every village on the south coast and is sitting at Scavenger’s Ruin right now, setting fire to anyone who tries to kill him. That’s right, right?’

‘Right,’ her mother sighed.

‘And it’s entirely possible that, were the dragon to disappear then the war would be over and within three to five years, and assuming we ran a sustainable tourism programme and ploughed proceeds into rebuilding towns, life as we once knew it would return.’

Both parents nodded.

‘In that case,’ Amelia said. ‘It’s time the dragon disappeared.’

‘Oh, well, I’m glad you’ve thought of that,’ Queen Hazel said with a wave of her hand.

‘We’ve spent twenty years thinking that we quite like having him around.’

‘Mother!’ Amelia was stung. ‘I’m only trying to help.’

‘We know that, Amelia...’ the king said gently. ‘But if we knew how to kill the Sapphire Dragon, we would have done so by now. Dragons can’t be killed easily. Or at all. Do you really think we haven’t tried everything we can think of?’

‘Of course not!’ Amelia said quickly. ‘It’s just, you’re going about it all wrong.’

Queen Hazel’s eyebrows did a complicated dance. ‘How, exactly, are we going about it all wrong?’

Amelia steadied herself. *Please don’t let them laugh at this please don’t let them laugh—*

‘Wasps at the food carts in Market Street don’t sting all the people to make them abandon their food. They just buzz around until people are so irritated that they go indoors to get away.’

‘Um, yes,’ Queen Hazel said. ‘But I don’t think we can get rid of the Sapphire Dragon with wasps.’

‘We need something more annoying than wasps,’ Amelia pressed.

‘Mosquitoes?’ her mother suggested.

‘Fish soup?’ her father asked.

Amelia rolled her eyes. *People*. People are so annoying! They yell at you about feather pillows, they insist on selling you fake amulets and they play their trombone at the same time someone else is trying to play the cello! What’s the *most annoying* thing you’ve ever heard?’

‘Oh, that’s easy,’ her father replied. ‘It was the time you and Nicholas decided to form a jazz band. Half the castle got tinnitus.’

‘I think the most annoying thing for me was when our seamstress had quadruplets,’ the queen mused. ‘None of them would sleep at the same time, remember? For months, you could always hear a baby crying. Eventually you thought you could hear a baby crying even if it was quiet. I thought I would go insane.’

‘Some would say you did,’ the king said amicably. The queen stuck her tongue out at him.

‘So what you’re proposing is that we can just *annoy* the Sapphire Dragon into just getting up and flying somewhere else?’ King Emmanuel asked.

‘We can if we make everything he hears ruin his delicate ears.’ Amelia held up *Dragons Don’t Die*. ‘The Sapphire Dragon’s ear canal and eardrum is the only unprotected part of its anatomy.’

Her parents looked at each other. It was the same look they exchanged when Nicholas brought Raphael the goatherd home.

‘How do you propose we make enough noise to ruin his hearing?’ King Emmanuel asked.

‘We hold a festival.’

‘A festival?’ the king asked. ‘For... for whom? The dragon?’

‘For our long-suffering troops down on the south coast! This year is the twentieth anniversary of the dragon’s arrival. Our brave soldiers deserve a traditional Kingdom of Mirrors festival honouring their work and sacrifice. So I’m suggesting a three-month event—

‘Three *months*?’ Queen Hazel asked. Her eyebrows did another dance.

‘Three months,’ Amelia continued, ‘of sporting events for the soldiers, each one with its own marching band. Three months of accompanying orchestral performances, street theatre, opera shows, circus events. Three months of *jazz music*.’

She knew she was onto something, because her parents exchanged another look. It was the one they exchanged at Nicholas and Raphael’s wedding.

‘All right,’ her mother sighed. ‘Call the Council to meeting.’

Amelia smiled as she swept from the room to find parchment to write notes to the High Council, calling them to a breakfast meeting the next day.

When Amelia was queen, she would commission a new mosaic for the castle's walls, depicting how she defeated the Sapphire Dragon.

SAMPLE

Chapter Three

The next morning, the High Council assembled around a huge olive wood table in the Great Hall, tucking into jugs of iced coffee, stacks of fresh croissants and plates of fruit. King Emmanuel's specialty was breakfast; unlike most teenagers, Amelia had great enthusiasm for getting out of bed.

After Amelia's great-great-times-something grandparents won their war, the Crown rescinded absolute power to a publicly elected High Council of eleven people plus the monarchs—or ten people, if there was only one reigning monarch. An uneven total of councillors ensured there was always a tiebreaker... and someone to referee impromptu football matches. The citizens of the Kingdom of Mirrors lived, peacefully, for generations... until the Sapphire Dragon arrived and the fairy tale ended. At present the High Council had four non-royal members, only three of whom held Amelia's respect. The other seven members travelled south to slay the dragon the previous year and were now incapable of leaving either their hospital bed or their coffin. The kingdom hadn't held elections to replace them yet, because they were running out of suitable candidates; some muttered that Prince Nicholas should be bullied into returning to royal life. Still, Amelia called them to the richly decorated hall because she felt the occasion warranted pomp and circumstance. Queen Hazel took her seat next to Amelia and selected a croissant. King Emmanuel sat in a spare chair, watching his daughter carefully.

Most of the morning's pomp and circumstance was supplied by Lord Donald Fitzpatrick, who earned his title by saving a young Prince Nicholas from drowning in the harbour on a day out. In the seventeen years since then, Lord Donald had done little else to distinguish himself except wear spectacularly expensive clothes, which he purchased from the Valley of Dreams with sales of a book written about the twenty seconds he spent hauling three-year-old

Nicholas out of two metres of water. Amelia would never understand how he had been elected four times without ever venturing to the south coast to help slay the dragon.

‘Thank you for coming,’ Amelia began when they were all assembled. Next to Lord Donald sat Baroness Theodora Rosewater, a businesswoman elected to the council after years of running the most successful fishery in the kingdom, employing six hundred people. These days she oversaw the entire kingdom’s fleet of fishing boats. Next to her, sipping glasses of orange juice, sat twin sisters, Ladies Elisa and Beth Montague. They had inherited an ailing olive grove forty years previously and within a decade they trebled olive oil production, invented a new type of olive press and married, then buried, a total of four husbands between them. Amelia could never remember if Elisa had three husbands and Beth one, or the other way around. Amelia took a deep breath. ‘We have a new plan to slay the dragon.’

She outlined her idea, and when she was finished her parents nodded encouragingly. The twins looked faintly impressed and Baroness Theodora was tapping the hilt of her butter knife against the table thoughtfully. Only Lord Donald appeared uninterested.

‘Your Majesty, apologies for not understanding...’ he did not sound particularly sorry. ‘But surely it is too dangerous to take simple musicians into the war zone?’

‘Well, my lord, we’ve tried slaying the dragon the traditional way.’ Amelia deliberately slowed her speech. ‘Or some of us have, anyway. Clearly it has not worked. So we are embarking on a new strategy, employing the wonderful skills of regular townsfolk. Who will of course be trained in self-defence. And heavily guarded. As we can’t bully the Sapphire Dragon into leaving our lands, we will persuade him to go using more peaceful means.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I know you don’t.’ Amelia’s mother coughed into her serviette. ‘I know you don’t understand *yet*,’ Amelia corrected, ‘but you will. You might want to take notes, my lord, because I have quite a detailed plan...’

Explaining plans, it turned out, was quite boring. Over the next few weeks, Amelia went through her idea with every council member at least twice, then got the kingdom security services involved. Eventually, after weak points were highlighted and second opinions asked for, backup plans formed and every potential situation analysed with surgical precision, the Council voted anonymously on Amelia’s plan. Amelia was highly put out when she remembered that someone needed to abstain to ensure a majority rule; she was more put out when she realised that the fairest option was to abstain from voting on her own plan. Honestly, democracy. Her plan passed; four votes to one. Amelia smiled tightly at Lord Donald and asked him to have signs drawn up:

‘TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY WAR RELIEF GAMES AND FESTIVAL STAFF WANTED.

Are you a chef, baker or greengrocer? Are you a skilled plumber, carpenter, blacksmith, surveyor or architect? Visit the Royal Castle immediately. YOUR SKILLS CAN HELP OUR TROOPS! Volunteers must be able to reach the south coast in good health and be willing to stay there for a minimum of two months before the war relief festival begins, then a further three months for the duration of the festival. Volunteers are welcome to bring their families and loved ones to enjoy the festivities and will be given an allowance of gold to do so.

P.S. No one will have to live within two miles of the Sapphire Dragon. There will be armed guards. We promise.’

Uptake was slow at first, but gradually a queue began to form outside the castle. Amelia could hear Harry flogging crystals to visitors: a few chefs, some construction workers, a

couple of olive farmers. Amelia saw Sarah the pastry vendor with her daughters, signing up eagerly. Some families had fled twenty years ago and were more than willing to return home; others just wanted to get out of the city before the summer heat set in.

After a week or two, once Amelia was sure people were willing to consider returning to the south, she designed another sign:

*'TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY WAR RELIEF GAMES AND FESTIVAL: ENTERTAINERS
NEEDED.*

Have you got a set of skills or hobbies that could entertain our troops? Visit the Royal Castle immediately. We are especially interested in: musicians, circus performers, opera singers and actors. Volunteers must be able to reach the south coast in good health and be willing to stay there for a minimum of three months. Volunteers are welcome to bring their families and loved ones to enjoy the festivities and will be given an allowance of gold to do so.

P.S. No one will have to live within two miles of the Sapphire Dragon. No, really. There will be armed guards. We absolutely promise.'

Harry flogged more amulets while the marching band and the orchestra signed up, shooting one another filthy looks as they queued. Within two weeks, Amelia counted about five hundred entertainers, plus their families.

Finally, Amelia designed another sign and sent it to the army camp at Scavenger's Ruin:

*'INTRODUCING THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY WAR RELIEF GAMES AND
FESTIVAL!*

In this 20th anniversary year, by order of the High Council, Scavenger's Ruin is holding a festival and sporting games to honour you, our brave troops, and your efforts to slay the

Sapphire Dragon. All service people will be given four months' leave, effective immediately, to train for and participate in sporting events, and to enjoy the festivities.'

Word came back almost immediately. The soldiers were delighted to have some time off, and could the castle please send a list of participating sports? Would duelling be allowed? Amelia smiled and wrote back that yes, duelling was absolutely allowed.

'Come on you lot!' Amelia called from her horse a week later. 'We only have three more weeks until your group leaves for the south! I heard a dud note there!'

In front of her a ninety-piece orchestra, many of its members from that first orchestra in Market Street, sweated underneath a canvas shelter. Their conductor sipped iced water and asked nervously, 'Your Majesty, I must ask again. *Why* are you holding a festival?'

'We're doing something nice for our troops!' Amelia explained for the thousandth time, to the thousandth bewildered entertainer. 'It's about time we had some life in the south of the kingdom, and life means music! The Kingdom of Mirrors used to be famous for our festivals, and we deserve to be famous for them again.' The ninety-piece orchestra looked like it disagreed. '*There is a dragon on the south coast,*' she heard one flautist whisper to another. She tried not to imagine outlawing the flute.

'After you've gone through your music, I want you to practise Emergency Plan F Sharp,' Amelia reminded the conductor. 'We might need it if things go wrong.' The conductor nodded and wiped sweat from the bridge of her nose.

'They're not going to like it, Your Majesty,' she murmured with a glance at the flautist.

'Well, I don't like ninety-piece orchestras, but here we are!' Amelia beamed, gritted her teeth and trotted off to the next group of volunteers: a fifty-strong group of surveyors,

architects and builders, enlisted to create temporary concert venues and housing for the entertainers.

‘Ladies and gentlemen!’ Amelia began, tossing her braids over her shoulder.

‘Actually, Your Majesty, we’re all gentlemen,’ murmured a blacksmith near the front.

‘Really?’ Amelia asked, ‘how awful. No wonder there are so few women in the construction industry. When this is over, I want an apprenticeship programme set up in schools to encourage participation in science, technology, engineering and maths. Anyway,’ she continued, ‘I have an important job for you all. In one week’s time, you will move to the tip of the south coast to discern which buildings can be used for the festival, and design new concert halls, arenas and accommodation. Your new buildings will be temporary as we plan to rebuild the original structures eventually, but for the purposes of the festival we need Scavenger’s Ruin to look like a proper town again!’

‘Your Majesty,’ asked the smith who’d spoken earlier. ‘No disrespect, but why are we relocating *so* close to the Sapphire Dragon? Couldn’t we just move the troops further out of the town for the festival so it’s safer for everyone?’

‘Good question.’ Amelia had discussed the exact location of the festival with the Council at length and decided that the workers, of all people, deserved an explanation for the insane levels of danger she was asking them to walk into. ‘Look. Scavenger’s Ruin is where the dragon first arrived all those years ago. It’s where our troops are based. They live there all year round. It’s only right that we’re based there too, to show our respect—and so we can offer proper relief and entertainment. Everything will be at least two miles away from the Sapphire Dragon’s cave. We’ve trebled the number of magic charms on Scavenger’s Ruin, and we’ve doubled the number of security workers. I can’t tell you that it’s completely safe.’

She looked the blacksmith in the eye. ‘But I can tell you it’s as safe as we can possibly make it.’

‘It’s a suicide mission,’ someone muttered. Amelia took a deep breath. It was tempting to explain that the real reason the festival needed to be so close to the dragon was to annoy him into flying away, but the less the general public knew of her plan, the less they would complain if it went wrong. If this didn’t work, there would be serious calls to bring Prince Nicholas back from Traveller’s End Mountain and reinstate him as crown prince, goat farming predilections or not. There was no way she would give her title back to her irritating, duty-abandoning brother. She would never live it down at family parties for one thing, and for another she wanted to get him back for that time he told her girls were terrible at running the country. He was about thirteen at the time, but still.

Her plan had to work.