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Prologue

In the midnight darkness of Quale Castle, a woman emerged from the Queen's chamber. She carried a small carpet bag and wore the travelling clothes of an upper-class servant.

The woman mounted the stairs to the second floor, her shadow trailing in the candlelight. At the top of the stairs she hesitated, glancing round as though fearful of being overlooked. She hurried down the corridor, eased open a door and slipped inside.

A four-poster bed, its hangings pulled against the treachery of draughts, stood in the middle of the room. The woman placed her candlestick on a table. The flame grew long and thin. She pulled back the bed-curtains and stood gazing down at a sleeping child, a small girl with a pale face and a tumble of dark red curls. The woman sighed once, softly. As if a spell had been broken, the child's eyes opened. 'Mama?'

'Go back to sleep, Charlie. I didn't mean to wake you. Sleep now. I love you. Remember that.'

The woman took her daughter's face between her hands and stared at it until the child felt the breath catch in her throat and the first cold squirm of fear uncurl in her belly. Her mother kissed her, then rose and left the room without

a backward glance. The glow-worm trail of candlelight faded. The bed-curtains gaped, but darkness hung thick as velvet.

The child's fear returned – and grew…

One

Five years later…

'Hold it there, you scrounging, nibbling limb of Satan!' A bony fist grabbed the back of Charlie's dress. She was lifted into the air and shaken like a rat in the jaws of a terrier.

She stuffed the stolen food into her mouth and chewed furiously, trying to swallow before either the cheese or the shaking choked her dead. She had a mouthful of dry flakes and no spittle to wash it down. Crumbs spewed from her mouth and nose. The fist gave a ferocious shake, and she coughed out the cheese. It plopped onto the flagstones in a dusty heap. Charlie followed it.

'Oh, look what you done!' moaned the fist's owner. 'That were to be my dinner. Been looking forward to it all week. Kept it from the rats and from that nasty old Watch scrounging my kitchen at night worse than any rat. I been dreaming of rarebit sizzling and golden on a thick slice of toast. And now look at it! Not fit for the cat!'

Charlie stood and rubbed elbows and knees. 'Sorry, Maria, I didn't know you were saving it for yourself.'

The cook bent down, elevating her skinny behind and resting her large red hands on her knees. She considered the grey mess between her boots. Then she raised her long neck and considered Charlie. Charlie did not think

it was a friendly consider. She got her running muscles ready. Maria had a good strong throwing arm.

'I don't know what is going to become of you.' The cook unfolded and speared Charlie with a look of severe disappointment. 'Or any of us, for that matter. But *you* didn't ought to steal. It may be all right for some, but princesses didn't ought to steal.'

'I'm hungry!'

'Then you should have asked for summat,' Maria snapped. 'You know I'll always give you a morsel if you ask nice. Providing I got a bit the old witch won't miss, that she ain't counted and catalogued and marked down in her book.'

'An apple?' Charlie wheedled. 'Just one wrinkly old apple?'

'Might of done,' Maria said, 'if you'd not just spat me dinner out all over the floor. Now scat!' She reached a lanky arm for a wooden platter. Charlie gave a squeal of dismay. She made it through the door a second before the platter.

She paused for breath in the servants' hall. Maria wouldn't leave the warmth of the kitchen for the slender joy of thumping her. The hall was a gloomy brown room with a trestle table where the servants perched along a narrow bench to eat their meals, like so many shabby starlings. Charlie's eyes swept the room in vain: not a crumb to be seen, not a biscuit tin, a jam jar, a sticky spoon in sight.

Footsteps approached the door. She was trapped. None of the cupboards were big enough to hide in. If it was the O'Dair… Charlie squeezed into the corner made by the dresser and wall, as the door swung open and the upper parlour maid and third footman clattered in.

'…seven crates of playing cards I toted up there. Have you seen that room? And himself? Upside down and wisty? Fair give me the collywobbles!' The footman shivered until his rusty black coat-tails flapped.

'Course not,' snapped the parlour maid. 'Not my business.'

'He ought to be put away.'

Crammed in her corner, Charlie felt sick. The servants never talked about her father in front of her. She had long ago guessed what they must think of him, but hearing it was different. Worst of all was her fear that they might be right.

'You keep a civil tongue in your head, boy,' said the maid. 'He *is* the King, cards or no cards.'

'What good is he?' The footman was new – a gangling, yellow-haired boy with acne. 'Worse'n no king! We should have had a revolution same's the Esceanians. Cut off his head! He'd never miss it! Mad as an hatter and no blame use to anyone. Country's going down the plinker, and he's playing at jackstraws!'

Charlie darted forward. She wanted to hit the footman, to kick him as hard as she could on both his skinny shins. Anything to fight the wave of panic sweeping over her.

Years ago, the last king of Esceania, King Charles the Twelfth, had been executed by guillotine. There was a large painting of his last moments (with the King looking very heroic, if rather plump) in the library. The image floated in front of her eyes, only it was her father she saw kneeling before the guillotine, hands tied, head raised in calm defiance. She blinked back tears and paused long enough to look for a weapon. Something heavy and hard!

Martha, the parlour maid, turned a scandalised face on the footman. 'Don't you let O'Dair hear you talking that way, Alfie Postlethwaite,' she gasped. 'She'll have your scalp! She don't put up with no Republican nonsense.'

They saw Charlie and snapped their mouths shut like a pair of carp.

'You shouldn't be here!' Martha had gone bright red. 'You know O'Dair don't allow you in the servants' quarters.'

'I heard you!' To her fury and shame, Charlie's voice wobbled. She stood in the middle of the room and shook from head to toe, unable even to speak.

'Yeah?' The footman smirked at her. 'What you gonna do about it? Tell Daddy on us?'

'Stow it, Alfie!' snapped the maid. 'You got no reason to be nasty to the kid. You'd best make yourself scarce,' she said to Charlie. 'O'Dair'll be along any minute.'

Charlie gave Alfie Postlethwaite her most evil glare before stalking from the room.

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‘Poxy-nosed scarecrow!’ she muttered. ‘I’ll show him!’ She slid out the scullery door into the back yard that served the kitchen. She was not supposed to go into the Castle gardens without permission: Old Foss, the gardener, had complained one too many times to Mrs O’Dair about stolen apples and inventive booby traps. But today she would risk being caught out of bounds, even if it meant a week on stale bread and cabbage water.

The yew hedges had not been pruned for years. They leant over the yard, tall green-black waves threatening to crash onto the cobbles. Charlie stopped for a moment and cocked her head like a robin, listening. Then she darted to a corner of the yard where the hedge was leggy and sparse. In a moment, she had wriggled through. She crouched at the base of the hedge, scouting for enemies.

The autumn sunshine was so sharp it made the air vibrate. For a moment, she wanted to twirl like a wild thing, crunch through the frosted grass in the tree-shadows, run and run until she collapsed in a heap. But she didn’t dare. Besides, she wasn’t here to play. She was here to pay out Alfie Postlethwaite.

Charlie took off, sprinting across the shrivelled grass and into the old orchard, weaving through the corpses of apple and pear trees. Her heart was thudding from running and the thrill of disobedience.

In the distance, beneath the trills of birdsong, Old Foss’s grumble wormed through the undergrowth. She

sped up, skirting the high brick walls of the kitchen garden, where the gardener did daily battle against weeds and old age. Breathless, she peeked through the gate. He and the boy were inside, hoeing the endless rows of winter cabbages. Charlie slipped past the gate, and her heart sang with victory.

She trotted past the end of the wall, past blinded greenhouses and rotting sheds, past hillocks of mouldering compost. And there it was: the brown and black mountain of strawy manure, steaming in the sunshine. Her nose wrinkled at the rich smells trickling out of it. She pulled a rusty pencil tin from her skirt pocket and squatted to scoop the tin full of the ooziest lumps she could find, using a spoon she had stolen from the scullery. It was absorbing work, and she grinned, imagining Alfie's face in the morning.

'Oi! Get out of it!' A hand grabbed her shoulder and spun her round. Tin and spoon went flying. Charlie's foot slipped, and she plopped, with a squelch, onto the manure. The gardener's boy stood looking down at her, hands on hips, eyes dancing. 'Little Princess Muckheap,' he said and laughed.

'You rotten toad!' She scrambled up, fists clenched. Then she stopped. Tobias was a year older – a year taller and stronger – and she knew from experience that if she hit him, he would hit her back.

'Give me one good reason,' he said, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, 'why I shouldn't call old Fossy.'

‘Because that would make you a snivelling, sneaking worm – as well as a toad!’ spat Charlie.

Tobias grinned. His light blue eyes gleamed in the midst of his brownness – brown hair, brown face, brown freckles. She longed to punch his brown nose and see if he still smiled. In all their years of warfare, she had never once managed to make him lose his temper. It was one of the things she hated most about him.

‘Toad or worm,’ he said, ‘either one can get you nicked. And then Fossy’ll take you straight to Devil O’Dair. I *might* not fetch Fossy, but it’ll cost you.’

‘What do you want?’ As if she didn’t know. The smugness spread over his face was past enduring.

‘Let me think.’ He scratched his head. ‘What could you possibly have that I’d want? You ain’t got no money, and I don’t play with dolls—’

‘Neither do I!’

‘—so I guess it’ll have to be another book. It’s called *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. Bring it to the summerhouse eight o’clock tomorrow morning.’

‘Tomorrow morning!’ Charlie’s heart sank. He meant it. If she didn’t deliver, he would serve her up to Fossy and smirk while he did it. Rot and blast Tobias Petch! ‘That’s not enough time!’ she grumbled. ‘What if I can’t get in the library tonight? Watch might be hanging round. And the morning’s the worst time to try and get out of the Castle. I’d have to get past O’Dair and Maria.’

‘That won’t wash, Charlie.’ He shook his head. ‘Climb

out a window if you got to. You done it plenty of times. And make sure you hang on till I get there. 'Tain't always easy getting away.'

'What if I can't find the book?'

'Then Fossy'll learn about your visit to the muckheap.'

'You make me sick!' Charlie said.

'Good.' Tobias grinned the self-satisfied grin of the victor. 'I'd be going if I was you. Fossy's nearly done weeding.'

There was nothing to do except leave. She rescued the pencil tin and spoon. Most of the manure was still in the tin. She closed the lid and shoved everything in her pocket.

'What do you want that stuff for anyway?' Tobias asked.

'To put in your porridge!' She stuck out her tongue and ran.