



Slumber

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Prince Thomas galloped through the countryside, he and his black stallion nothing but a blur against Orwell Kingdom's picturesque landscape. Kicking at the horse's flanks, the prince spurred it on, faster still, as they careened past the towering evergreens of Rambler Forest, glistening waters of Wilbury River, and finally the vast fields of bluebells currently in bloom. But Prince Thomas didn't notice the natural beauty of the land he was destined to rule. For that was not the intention of his speed-fueled ride. His sunrise outing through the countryside had been a futile attempt to escape the grief of his father's recent passing – he had died only days before the prince's 18th birthday. But the flowers honoring the former king that had covered the cobbled roadside into the kingdom for the last month, made it hard to ignore the fact that his father was dead.

After two hours of galloping with reckless abandonment, the prince returned, slowing his horse to a canter at the sandstone entrance as he waited for the large iron gates to be opened by four of the king's guards. The commoners bowed as he approached on his way to the palace but their sense of obligation was not lost on him. There was no joy on their faces, only obedience. Prince Thomas knew how much the people had loved and respected his father. He also knew how little the people respected him. He had never seen the commoners look at him – not even just once – the way they had looked at King Harold during his reign.

Arriving outside the five-story majestic palace, its walls a combination of pale stone and maple wood, Thomas pulled on the reins and descended from his horse before it came to a complete stop. He ignored the servants that were waiting to return his black stallion to the stable, stomping inside the palace amidst their whispers, disregarding the less than flattering remarks directed at him. It wasn't the first time he'd heard them speak ill of him, of his manners. *Let them talk*, he thought as he strode down the marble tiled hall, catching his appearance in the full-length mirror hanging on the wall to his right. Their opinion didn't bother him in the slightest. He was Prince Thomas – the handsome future King of Orwell Kingdom. They were mere servants, nobodies of unimportance.

When he entered the lavish dining room – a table over half the length of the oversized room rimmed in gold with two-dozen satin covered chairs to match – he saw his mother Queen Margaret seated at the head of the table and halfway through her eggs Benedict. Another servant, who Thomas could never remember by name – because he had never bothered to learn it – pulled out the prince’s chair and tucked a napkin into Thomas’s collar before scurrying away.

“Mother,” Prince Thomas muttered sinking into the golden-framed chair, choosing to ignore the queen’s suspicious hint of a smile.

“Darling, how are you on this fine morning?”

He also chose to ignore her questionably upbeat tone. “Famished.”

He reached for a buttery croissant, ravenous from his long ride. Amidst his creamy delight, the scurrying servant returned and fumbled with a tray filled with portraits of princesses from near and far. The prince’s appetite was immediately replaced with annoyance. He turned to his mother, her smile now completely formed as she sipped her cup of tea.

“What is this?”

“We have another five suitors.”

“You promised no more visits unless I approved them.”

“And you promised me a bride.”

Thomas glared at his mother but she was immune to his bratty antics and stubbornness. And she was also the Queen. It was inevitable that she would achieve the outcome she so desired.

Thomas knew better than to challenge his mother to a stare off, for he had inherited her stubborn streak. Instead, he conceded, perusing the profiles of the royal women before him. All were quite beautiful in their own right but the prince was able to find fault with each one.

Too fat. Too thin. Wrong eye color. Crooked smile. Freckles.

“No. No. No. No ... and No.”

In the short time since his father’s passing, the queen had wasted no time in finding Thomas a princess to marry, and he had not been short of suitors. For Prince Thomas was dashing handsome at six-foot-two, with tousled dark hair, a chiseled jaw, and piercing blue eyes. His physique was buffed, his voice as smooth as velvet. All this along with the whole prestige of royalty – he was quite the catch.

Over recent weeks, it had resulted in many proposals from princesses willing to go to extremes to marry him. The Princess of Amoura had renamed mountains in his honor. The Duchess of Fenway had moved one in the most literal sense. She had demanded her cousin, King Howard, have his army cut the base of Mount Wascoe and shift it to the right two paces. It reduced a good six weeks off her journey between her kingdom and Orwell Kingdom. She had to make certain she beat her thinner and younger cousin to Orwell Kingdom so the prince would propose to her instead.

Not surprisingly, Prince Thomas proposed to neither.

Queen Margaret pulled the portrait of a freckled princess from the pile and held it before her son once more.

“What about this one? She’s rather handsome.”

Thomas turned back to his croissant and bit into it angrily, concentrating on the light splattering of spots across the nose and cheeks of the princess’s otherwise acceptable face.

“Not handsome enough.”

“Darling, I wish you would focus less on beauty and more on what is in one’s heart,” Queen Margaret scolded her son. She was unable to pinpoint exactly when her son had begun to lack substance and depth.

Thomas rolled his eyes and directed his focus to the tapestries lining the dining room walls as he prepared himself for another lecture on the apparent deeper and more meaningful things in life.

“Thomas, love encourages you to grow, to put others first. It challenges you to accomplish feats you never dreamed of. That takes character and the purest of intentions. The woman you marry will shape the man you become.”

But the prince failed to understand why his future queen’s character or intentions, or even the contents of her heart for that matter, were paramount. The biggest dilemma his queen would ever face would be deciding which dress to wear to a ball. The least she could do was look good in it. Still, all this talk of marriage was threatening to give the prince a nosebleed, and red was a color he failed to wear well.

“If I am to marry someone, I should at least get a say in the matter,” Prince Thomas spat as he rubbed his temples in between deep breaths.

“I am more than happy for you to choose your bride but do so quickly, son, for you cannot take the throne without a queen.”

“It has been three weeks, Mother!” Thomas snapped, rising from his chair like a cannon. Talk of becoming Orwell Kingdom’s future ruler was certain to have blood gushing from his nose like a waterfall. He wasn’t ready to talk of ruling a kingdom. He had barely mourned the loss of his father.

The queen stood beside him and cupped his dashing handsome face in her delicate hands, wishing his transformation from boy to man would come sooner rather than later.

“And this kingdom needs a King, Thomas,” she told him bluntly. She held his gaze, lips firm, and expression decisive. She had made up her mind and her son would yield. Whether he liked it or not.

“Perhaps they will appear more appealing in person. Come now.”

She patted his cheek and exited the room. Thomas threw down his napkin and scowled as Queen Margaret disappeared through the French doors of the dining room. He sunk into his chair, determined not to follow her. *For goodness sake*, he thought, *I am a man! I should not have to take orders from my mother, even if she is queen.*

The prince had experienced his mother's temper only once in his life. When he was eight he had given the king's favorite horse, a white Andalusia mare, a haircut before the annual royal parade. What was left of the thick and lustrous mane and flowing tail (that was immaculately braided with colorful ribbons and on display for the occasion) was little more than a spikey inch running down the animal's neck and a short white tuft sitting above her behind. The king looked rather comical riding a tail-less and mane-less horse but he had insisted (the horse was his favorite) and Queen Margaret scolded the prince like an angry bull. It had been quite an ordeal for an eight-year-old and Prince Thomas vowed that he would never again witness his usually sweet and kind mother morph into an ogre, and for ten years he had been successful in this endeavor.

Unfortunately, he knew his mother all too well and if he refused to meet these girls in person, there was a real possibility that her reprimand would be much worse and, man or not, he wasn't keen to be subjected his mother's wrath any time soon. So, he begrudgingly rose, kicking his chair back and storming out after his mother.



An arrow whizzed through the forest towards its target – a fat, black pheasant darting in and out of the low-hanging shrubs. It shuddered with a twang into a tree trunk fifty feet from the animal.

“I think I’m getting worse.”

Lucy took the bow from her friend and demonstrated to him for the tenth time that morning, how to use it correctly.

“It’s all in the wrist, Jack,” she told him as she loaded another arrow, pulled back her bow and let it loose in the direction of the plump bird. “See?”

There was a short-lived cry from the pheasant before it fell sideways to the forest floor.

“You make it look so easy. Is it dead?” Jack asked, running towards the still, feathered body amongst the greenery.

Lucy beat him to the bird, kneeling over it to check for any sign of life.

“As a post,” she replied flinging the pheasant over her shoulder with the other nine she had caught earlier that morning. Lucy had attempted to teach Jack the art of hunting with a bow and arrow for five consecutive days now and he was yet to hit one bird. God willing he would show some improvement tomorrow but at least they had enough produce to sell at the market that morning, and Mother Nadine would be none the wiser on who actually caught the fowl.

No sooner had that thought escaped her mind, Mother Nadine came huffing and puffing towards them. Without warning, Lucy offloaded the fowls in Jack’s direction. The force of the throw caught him off guard and he barely managed to catch them without tripping over himself.

“What the –”

“Great, job, Jack, a fine effort,” Lucy said loudly as the nun came to an abrupt stop in front of them, her cheeks red from a combination of anger and exercise.

The old woman glanced at Jack briefly before her gaze landed on Lucy. The stern glare and flaring nostrils were a dead giveaway that Lucy hadn’t fooled Mother Nadine in the slightest. The

nun tugged on the neckline of her habit, a characteristic that Lucy had come to learn over the years meant Mother Nadine was displeased – specifically with Lucy.

“I didn’t come down in the last shower, child ... and what are you wearing?”

Lucy glanced down at the hessian trousers and woolen shirt she had borrowed from Jack.

“I couldn’t very well hunt in a dress, Mother.”

Mother Nadine turned to Jack with a disapproving glare.

“I take it they’re your garments, Jack?”

Jack let out a nervous squeak and Lucy scowled at him. When he carried on like a little wuss she wanted to slap him silly. She quite possibly could have done, given Jack was as thin as a reed and only a little taller than Lucy at five-foot-seven. His ears protruded through his untamed, fire-red hair and his pale freckled face wore a welcoming smile. His appearance was more inviting than threatening.

Jack shook his head profusely, his face beginning to match his hair.

“Of course not, Mother Nadine.”

“The Lord does not look favorably on liars, child.”

The nun quickly stepped towards Lucy and raised a hand to her face. For a brief moment, she thought the nun was going to slap her but when Mother Nadine began combing her fingers through Lucy’s tangled dark brown mane, the orphan let out the breath she had been holding.

“You are a pretty girl, Lucy. But if you don’t act like one, you will never find a husband. It’s important for someone of your age and lowly status to do so.”

For the last six months, Mother Nadine had constantly reminded Lucy of her impending 18th birthday along with her lot in life. The nun didn’t seem to care that Lucy wasn’t particularly fond of finding a husband at this point in her life, common orphan or not.

“Now, markets begin in an hour. You can take the apples you picked yesterday and your fowl from today. Oh, and Lucy? Wear a dress.”

Lucy refrained from rolling her eyes. Instead, she nodded obediently.

“Yes, Mother.”

When Mother Nadine walked back towards the nunnery, Jack elbowed Lucy in the ribs abruptly. “I am going to hell for lying to a nun,” he told her, showering her with half the dead pheasants.

“Then it seems I will be joining you,” Lucy replied as she began walking back towards the nunnery, throwing the dead birds over her shoulder. Lucy had no intentions of wearing a dress to market. Or ever, for that matter.

Lucy’s rebellious streak had only become apparent when her father died when she was 13 and she was sent to live with the Sisters of Rathbone. One week shy of 18, Lucy was the oldest of the nine orphans under the sisters' care. She hated being told that all the things she was good at, like hunting or sword fighting or reading were not proper and what she despised even more was wearing a dress. It wasn’t exactly the most hunting-friendly attire as she had learned early on when

she had been in pursuit of a fox at the age of ten. She had rounded the corner, hot on its tail, only to fall face first into a muddy puddle after tripping on the hemline of her skirts. After that, her father insisted on having trousers made for such hunting occasions.

Lucy did not want to be defined by her sex or her appearance. She wanted to be defined by what she had to offer the world. Why else would her father have taught her skills if she weren't to use them? Had her mother been alive, she was certain she would feel the same way.

"You know, if you got married, you'd have to leave here," Jack said when they arrived at the horse and cart already loaded with barrels of apples from the orchard and baskets of eggs from the chicken coup.

Maybe that's what Mother Nadine wants, Lucy thought as she loaded the pheasants in beside the apples – she was nearly 18 after all.

"But who would teach me how to hunt and do all the manly things?" Jack asked, concern and relief simultaneously washing across his face. Lucy smiled as she slid into the driver's seat and took charge of the reins. Jack had arrived at the Sisters of Rathbone two years after Lucy and even though he was a year younger, they had struck up an instant friendship. They had been inseparable ever since. And Lucy was grateful to have been taken in by the nuns – really, she was. But, she couldn't deny that her life was lacking and she yearned for more.

"Do you ever wish for something more out of life, Jack?"

Her friend shrugged as the cart bumped along the trail towards Orwell Kingdom. "Do you?"

"All the time."

"So, you do want to marry then?"

This time it was Lucy's turn to shrug. She wasn't completely against the idea. Just the idea of getting married right now and what marriage stood for. She'd be expected to be what society deemed a "lady" and she wasn't quite ready to settle for that. Plus, she had never been in love and her sentimental side always thought that when she did marry it would be for love, not because she was getting kicked out of her current living arrangement.

"Maybe ... eventually. But I don't want to be some girl in a dress, who curtsies and isn't deemed useful. I want to leave my mark on the world somehow. Make a difference. Is that so wrong?"

"To want more than your lot in life? I suppose not," Jack murmured. It was something he never quite understood about Lucy. It was something he tried to emulate by having her teach him useful skills so he could better himself. But when push came to shove, he was a commoner. They both were. Beyond living a simple life and paying their taxes, the world didn't expect much from them at all.

They arrived at the marketplace, the streets already bustling with people and stalls and within two hours they had sold most of their produce. Only a single barrel of apples was left for the final hour of trading.

“Hey, more suitors for Prince Thomas,” Jack said, his gaze cast towards the palace as he handed Lucy an apple.

Lucy looked in the direction of the palace. Five princesses in magnificent embroidered gowns of lace and silk stood in line as they waited for the prince to examine them.

“I wonder if he’ll actually choose a queen this time or if it will just be more broken hearts?” She pondered, twisting the stem of the apple until it broke free.

There had been lots of tears over the last few weeks. A river had even formed at the entrance of the kingdom from them. The locals had nicknamed it Rejection River and were hoping the prince would choose a suitable bride before it flooded the east side of the kingdom.

The crowd dispersed and Prince Thomas appeared, stopping before each of the princesses. Even from a distance, Lucy could see them falling over themselves at the mere sight of him. She bit into her apple in disgust at the pageantry before her.

“I can’t believe they’re swooning all over him like that.”

In Lucy’s books, they were a disgrace to the female sex. She didn’t understand how they could be so shallow. How he, the prince, their future king, could be so vacuous. There was more to life than looks. What good was it to have a pretty face if there was nothing between one’s ears? The fact that beauty was the only quality Orwell’s future king demanded of his bride meant that Prince Thomas was as shallow as a convex puddle and as dumb as one too.

Jack reached for another apple and polished the skin on his shirt.

“But he’s so ... swoonable,” he said chomping into the sweet and crisp flesh.

Lucy fired back a belligerent stare. “Ewen im man an I ca amit he is,” Jack argued with a mouthful of fruit.

Lucy guffawed. “You? A man?”

Jack raised his eyebrows and flexed his puny arm. He was only 17 but in his books, that made him almost one. His manly display of bicep flexing did nothing to change Lucy’s mind.

“Well, I disagree on both arguments but mostly on the Prince Thomas one.”

Jack almost toppled over the empty barrel he was sitting on from laughter.

“Liar,” he chuckled, taking another bite of his apple. A woman not finding the prince attractive was just not possible.

“He’s a conceited, pompous idiot. And if it wasn’t for his appearance, not even women would like him.”

Jack held his hand up, offended by Lucy’s tone. “Ah, we’re talking about our future king here, some respect, please. And you’re a woman. One who refuses to wear a dress but a woman, nonetheless.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. She hated when Jack got into his self-righteous rants and tried to force his common sense onto her in an attempt to make her see things his way. Sometimes he was right but when he was, Lucy never admitted that and she wasn’t about to start now. Lucy may be a woman but she was never going to fall over herself in the presence of Prince Thomas.

“The day I swoon over that man will be the day I wear a dress,” she said firmly. Jack laughed even louder for he found it preposterous that she could even say such a thing. He hadn’t seen Lucy in a dress since she was 16 and Prince Thomas was the most handsome man the world had ever seen. Her statement, while ironic, was delusion at its best.

Lucy watched as Prince Thomas let each and every one the princesses know they were not good enough for him. It didn’t matter that Princess Anita came from the wealthiest kingdom in the west or that Princess Rochelle spoke five languages and wore the most wonderful array of gowns. Prince Thomas took superficial above and beyond. The only thing that mattered in his quest to find his queen was her face. It had to match his dashing handsome one.

Like clockwork, the waterworks followed and the princesses’ departing tears contributed to the newly acquired stream as they departed the kingdom. The fact they had been willing to settle for a man who would treat them as a mere object because he happened to be visually appealing made Lucy depressed for mankind. What was the world coming to?

“Stupid idiots,” she muttered, nibbling on her apple.

“They’ve had their hearts broken. Have you no compassion?” Jack reprimanded her, as he watched the princesses with pity.

“I have plenty,” she argued back. Jack smiled at her disbelievingly and Lucy got defensive.

“What? I do!”

Jack waved his hand dismissively, an out of control smile erupting into a giggle.

“No, it’s not that. I’m imagining what you’d look like in a dress.”

A scowl tore across Lucy’s face and she fixed Jack with a murderous stare. It wasn’t that she hated dresses. She only hated that she was expected to wear them. She liked pushing boundaries when it came to her sex and what was deemed acceptable or not. It was something she was extremely good at but Jack was just as crafted in pushing boundaries, specifically hers.

“What did you say?”

Lucy’s perpetual warning tone no longer scared Jack and he continued to wind her up. Controlling his guffaw, he closed his eyes and tilted his head in awe at the non-existent vision in his mind.

“Oh, Lucy, you are a splendid sight!” he bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Lucy aimed her half-eaten apple in Jack’s direction.

“Take that back, right now, Jack!”

“I’m thinking lilac or peach,” he mused, backing away from her with a devilish grin pleased that his teasing was having the desired effect.

She reached into the barrel and retrieved another apple, arming herself for war.

“That is it!”

Without mercy, Lucy launched the apple in Jack’s direction. Her throw was as good as her arrow shot but he ducked just in time to avoid the hit.

Prince Thomas, who was retreating back into the palace after another dismal round of bride auditions, was not so lucky ...



“‘**W**hat the –”

Thomas reached for the back of his throbbing head and felt a slight bump beneath his fingers. He turned around to find a partially gnawed apple at his feet.

He was astounded that someone had thrown a piece of fruit at him – the future king. As he scanned the marketplace, he noticed a boy behind a market stand with a barrel of apples – the very same variety as the half-eaten one before him – quickly lift his hood to conceal his face.

“Did you just throw your apple at me?” Prince Thomas yelled to the cloaked boy, who immediately began walking in the opposite direction.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Prince Thomas fumed as he strode off after the boy careful not to lose him amongst the many other commoners he was trying so hard to blend into.

“Answer me, boy!” the prince demanded as he gained on the perpetrator.

How dare an insolent commoner use their future king for target practice! he thought angrily.

Suddenly, the hood made a break for it and Prince Thomas swiftly followed as they embarked on a chase through the marketplace. The prince struggled to keep up with the offender as he darted in and out of market stalls and around horse carts. Prince Thomas considered giving up when the boy made a wrong turn into the palace’s open-air storage area; it had only one way in and one way out.

Thomas didn’t bother to wait for his guards as he charged towards the fool who dared to embarrass him in public.

“Assaulting the prince and then fleeing the scene,” he rumbled, tugging on the offender’s shoulder, and forcing the boy to face him.

“It was an accident ... Y-Your Highness,” the boy stuttered, keeping his eyes on the ground.

“Which part? Your aim or your sprint?”

“My aim ... well, you happened to be in my line of sight. And then my feet got carried away with me.”

“I could have your head for such crimes. Prison at the very least,” Prince Thomas spat, sinking lower to catch a glimpse of the perpetrator’s face.

“Look at me, boy!”

When he sunk even lower, Prince Thomas reached out, grabbed his face and roughly tilted it to meet his eyes.

The offender’s face was not what he expected. Fine features, if not a little dirty. Not at all like a boy’s. After a moment’s deliberation, Thomas removed the hood in one swift movement, revealing a young woman with thick dark hair, and intense green eyes. A girl had thrown an apple at him. A girl!

“Do you have a name?” the shocked prince finally muttered.

“Lucy, Your Highness. Do what you must,” she said kneeling to the ground before him.

He glanced down at the unkempt creature, her face, and hands covered with dirt and wondered when she had last bathed, and why was she dressed like a boy. Thomas scratched his head in confusion, which was quickly replaced by irritation when it dawned on him that he could hardly punish the girl. While it would have given him no greater pleasure than to put her behind bars for assaulting him so freely, it was a known fact that leniency was given to the weaker sex when it came to sentencing for women were simpler and could not endure as men did. Plain and simple.

“Get up, you’re free to go,” the prince finally uttered, angry to have wasted his time on a pointless chase. His head was still throbbing from where the apple had hit him. Where *she* had hit him. A girl! He was still having trouble comprehending that one pertinent factor.

Lucy clambered to her feet, her face a cloud of dusty bewilderment and anger.

“What?”

Prince Thomas seemed peeved that he had to explain himself. Exasperated he said, “Well, I can hardly sentence you to death now, can I?”

Lucy’s lips tugged down and she placed her hands on her hips, which only made the prince even more conscious he was dealing with a woman. And judging by the stomping of her unpolished boot, an angry one.

“It seemed perfectly acceptable when you thought I was a boy.”

Is she questioning me? Is a woman actually questioning me? he thought gobsmacked. It really shouldn’t have caught him off guard considering the same woman had just used his head as target practice but it did. He answered on autopilot, still in shock at the commoner’s audacity to dare challenge his ruling.

“It is acceptable for a boy. But not for a girl.”

Prince Thomas turned away from Lucy, ready to leave the dreadful and surreal ordeal behind him.

“You cannot base your sentence on my gender!”

The prince spun around, mouth agape. He hadn't counted on the backchat. He was peeved yet not surprised that this audacious sullen "lady", if he could even call her that, once again failed to address him by his title.

"I can, and already have. And you will address me by Your Highness, madam," he said angrily before turning to storm back towards his castle.

Thomas also hadn't counted on receiving another apple to the back of his head but the solid thud and sharp pain as the fruit made contact with his parietal lobe was unmistakable.

He came to an abrupt standstill and slowly turned to face the commoner. Every inch of his body twitched with rage at the sight of her smug face waltzing towards him.

"That one was not an accident, *Your Highness*," she sang before she provided him with an exaggerated curtsy and then strolled away.

Prince Thomas looked for something to hit. Anything. She was unnerving, not to mention bothersome. Oh, how the prince wished he could sentence her to death.

"Arrrgh!"

"Your Highness?"

"What?!!!"

He spun around to find one of the queen's guards waiting patiently on his horse. He dusted a speck of dirt from his uniform, unaffected by the prince's outburst.

"Her Majesty requests your company with her royal advisor. It's about your choice of bride ... or lack, thereof." He descended from the stallion and handed the reins to Prince Thomas. "The queen requested sooner rather than later, Your Highness."

If there was any more talk of brides today, Thomas was sure his apple-bruised head would explode but the throbbing pain in his skull from being made target practice twice would be the least of his worries if he kept his mother waiting.

So, clenched-jawed, Prince Thomas mounted the horse and galloped back towards the palace.