



# *A Dream of Heroes*

Hx Rx  
Retold Fairy Tales

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The combatant fell, his grace diminished as he fell from his mount in a spiral of agony. In response, his victor, who still wielded the blade, tore himself from the path of the horse and turned to face the final champion.

Arabella hated to be referred to as the champion. In her mind, she could not describe herself as a knight. She neither possessed the dauntless bravado nor the self-sacrificing nature of the other competitors, but that was not why she hated it.

As a girl, not yet a woman, she was scorned, mocked and ridiculed by the crowds of the tourney. Cries of 'girls do not belong on the battlefield' or 'she cannot wield a sword' followed her wherever she went. Women with painted faces and gaudy robes would watch her closely from a distance, taunting her at banquets with their songs of beauty and courtesy. Arabella could learn their graces as best as she could, but she was always somewhat out of place. The people of the kingdom were as obedient as they were oblivious; they sang her praises when it suited them, but a defeat would forsake the support of the King. She could not squander his faith when so much was dependant on her victory.

Their horses danced as if they were partners in a ballet, but beneath the duet, they were locked in a war of steel kisses and shimmering metals. Breathing heavily, Arabella lurched forwards, bearing her sword. It arced through the air, graceful as a dove, before colliding with the breastplate of her companion. He grasped at the reins as his horse staggered backwards. Power coursed through her veins as she leapt forwards. With a cry, her blade soared through the air and found its purchase against the armour of her enemy. She was the victor.

She removed her visor and lowered the sword before dismounting to the cheers of the populace. A smile illuminated her features as she offered her gauntlet to the nearest competitor. He bowed before offering her a

single rose. Finally, she was free.

Her feet were not nearly as sure as they had been on the battlefield, but she forced herself to continue until she reached the wooden perimeter shielding the royal from the common folk. Upon the podium sat the Prince, who with his circlet of soft gold exquisitely wrought roses and tunic of jade green velvet, was every bit as handsome as the stories spoke of. Despite his handsome features and deceptively deep brown eyes, he was still a boy, his gaze alight with the wonder of battle. Arabella suspected though that it would not be long until he reached maturity. Especially since his father...

“I must congratulate you on your victory,” he called. “I must have the pleasure of escorting you to the feast this evening, Lady-“

“If it please you, my Lord, I am no Lady.”

She blushed as soon as the words had been spoken. It was not considered proper for a woman of her status who had renounced her titles to interrupt the heir and future King. Fortunately, he did not seem to mind, for he offered her a smile before he continued.

“What do they call you, where you come from?”

Slowly, she removed her helmet, allowing a wave of curling brown to fall, spiralling down to her shoulders. She watched as his eyes, bearing their discerning youthful visage, widened momentarily as he admired her.

“My name,” she replied shyly, “is Arabella, former Princess of Essolis.”

Still gazing at the Prince, she stared as he stepped down from his gilded throne and stood just inches from her, separated only by the wood of the fence that segregated the noble from the common.

“I ask you then, Arabella, former Princess of Essolis, if you will do me the honour of accompanying me to the feast in honour of my father’s name this evening?”

She nodded. “I will accompany you, Prince-“

“-Cerran.”

“Very well, Prince Cerran. I would be delighted to accompany you this evening.”

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To her dismay, the rich cobalt silk offered her figure no favour. It clung, too tightly, to her voluptuous figure, and was simply too rich in colour to eradicate her almost sickly pallor. The gown of sunlight adorned with the glow of emeralds and precious topaz gems was not made to suit a woman of her height. Women of the kingdom were accustomed to wearing corsets and bodices drawn tight so as to further accentuate their elfin

frames. The only dress remaining was one of a rich and textured velvet in the blossoming pink of summer. Mercifully it was not too tight and did not require a corset; a champion, as they called her, could not be restricted by her undergarments.

With rings adorning her fingers and her hair swept up into a delicate cluster of intricate braids, she thanked the handmaids and departed. Once free from the heavily perfumed aroma of intoxicating flowers and powders, she removed the rose from her hair and tucked it inside her dress, over her heart. With a furtive glance, she consulted her reflection in the mirror before she moved to join the celebrations. She may not have been the most beautiful in all the lands, but tonight, she truly felt like a princess.

A clatter of heavy footfalls against the flagstones drew her from her reverie. She turned and was momentarily astonished to find the servant of the Prince in her wake. His flaxen hair was unkempt and peppered with white, and his robes were ruffled as he stopped to catch his breath.

“My Lady,” he gasped, “the Prince-“

“I am to accompany him to the feast,” Arabella replied. Suddenly nervous, her hand inched towards the blade concealed beneath the layers of her embroidered skirts.

“No my Lady,” he spluttered. “The feast has been postponed. The Prince has fallen into a unyielding sleep. The King has tried in vain, but-“

“You cannot wake him?”

“Yes- I mean, no my Lady.”

She watched him warily, her hand inching towards her blade. “There’s something else that you have not told me.”

The servant glanced towards the doorway before beckoning for her to move closer. Clutching the hem of her dress, she crouched to the servant’s height before allowing him to whisper a response.

“The Prince Cerran was cursed as a babe, my Lady. An enchantress who was wronged by the King decreed that on the eve of his sixteenth birthday, he would prick his finger on a spinning wheel and fall into a deep death like sleep of which only the strongest of warriors and true love’s kiss could wake him. The King was advised to hide Cerran in the forest so that the curse could not flower, but he would not be parted from his son. Now he is doomed, and the kingdom too,” he sighed, “unless true love-“

Arabella’s eyes had grown wide with terror at the thought of the kingdom without an heir, but this was replaced with a surge of shock at the servant’s words.

“You think that I am his true love?”

“Perhaps not, but the Prince was greatly enamoured with your presence at the tourney, my Lady – some may have even called it infatuation. If our beloved Prince has any chance now, it is surely you, the greatest warrior in all the kingdom.”

Arabella was terrified, but she knew that it had to be done. She had to try to save Cerran, if not for herself then for her people. They could not be allowed to perish at the hand of the enchantress for her failure.

“Very well,” she declared. “I will do my best to save our Prince.”

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Silent as a shadow, she crept towards the bridge overlooking the swirling depths of hell below. She did not know how far the fall was, only that it would certainly be fatal. Inhaling sharply, she adjusted her visor and continued along the narrow stone towards the tower. She could save him. She had been chosen. She was the victor-

A great scream of torment and agony conjured from the fire of hell itself descended from the parapet. Frozen with fear, she raised her visor and stared up at the canopy of stars, obscured only by the burnished glow of moonlight. All was peaceful, all was calm-

She did not have time to raise her shield. Thankfully she had discarded the dress of summer blooms and donned her armour, for surely she would have perished. Enveloping her in its fiery embrace were great tendrils of smoke snaking around her wrists, suffocating her. Serpentine coils rose from the battlements as she danced away from the plumes of fire towards the castle wall, desperate to free herself from-

The scream died in her throat as there, just beyond the wall of fire, was a dragon. Its skin was a vast expanse of emerald, interlaced with an armour of obsidian scales, interrupted only by a blockade of metallic claws tipped with poison and primed for vengeance. She lifted her sword, though she knew that her efforts would be fruitless in this face of her enemy. Its eyes were malevolent daggers, fiercer than any of her former foes. She was not a knight-

-she was not a knight. She gasped, inhaling the poisoned kiss of fire. Knights fought in the way that they were instructed – with valour. She had not be educated in this way. She was a woman, and she could fight in her own way. She was not a noble man, so why should she fight like one?

Breathing deeply, she tightened her grip on the hilt of her blade as the dragon charged towards her. The familiar surge of power flooded through her veins as the dragon came closer, closer, closer...

She cried out as the sword flew from her grasp. Her eyes flew open in wonder as the dragon bellowed a scream of anguish. Arabella of Essolis had always been the greatest warrior in the land in her mind, but now, as she watched as the dragon shrink backwards, erupting in a blaze of fire as the blade pierced its heart, she thought that her dream of being a warrior had never been more true. Smoke filled her lungs but she did not care. The dragon cried out and plunged forwards. It was too late for her foe. Arabella stared as it fell from the bridge and plummeted towards the depths of hell beneath the bridge. She was the dragon slayer - but now she had a far more important mission. Forcing her way through the thicket of smoke, she charged towards the door of the castle. She tore it open and raced inside.

The winding staircase could not slow her as she hurried to the top. At the summit, she raced towards the adjacent door -

Asleep, Prince Cerran was peaceful. Without his crown, he looked younger still, buried by the mountain of cloth that held him prisoner in his sleep. She crossed the room, discarding her blade, before kneeling at his side. With a gentle hand, she caressed his cheek, brushing an errant lock away from his forehead.

She was terrified, but she knew her duty. Slowly, she lowered her face towards that of her prince, and kissed him lightly on the curve of his mouth. His breath was the kiss of summer, of warmth and of compassion. She drew away and waited with bated breath as he lay, as still as stone. He couldn't be dead - he couldn't be. She stood and began to turn away, but froze as a hand clutched at her wrist.

"You do not need a prince to be the hero of your story, Arabella."

She turned to see Cerran smiling at her from beneath a wreath of curls circling his face. "You are the true knight. You are the hero."

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