

Illuminator

By sk8rchick131313

Submitted: February 3, 2006

Updated: February 3, 2006

it originally started as a short story for an Eng1 project, but i just couldnt stop, and after a week or two, i made a thirteen chapter fantasy novel. its stupid, but i hope to publish it someday.

its all on one document, so no other addtions are

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Preface: Beginnings

Once, long ago, a friend told me of a maid and the rich man she worked for. The ugly maid had fallen in love for the man, and served him, hoping he would love her too. He married a girl in a high class, and the maid, heartbroken, killed herself in grief. At first when I heard the story, I was filled with pity and remorse for the maid, but then again, I did not know what love truly was.

Oh, how I always hated tales about miserable orphans being pulled to high society, going down in history, but here I am, and not at all surprised if you dislike this desultory tale or discord, romance, adventure, talent, and one multitasking illuminator and orphan since a child, me. As I was told, Anselmo, my distant relative, me, and my baby brother Miko were found huddled on the doorstep of our childhood orphanage. Clutched in my hands was a letter from our family nurse telling our ages, names, and how our parents died. It wasn't until three years later at age six, that I understood fire, and its' ever consuming flames of destruction, tearing down our mansion, our fortune, and especially our parents. Through the years growing up in the orphanage nursery until ages 10 for me and Anselmo, (he was a few months older than I) we cultivated artistic talent, and my nurse Glia taught me how to read, and so shortly after, I taught Anselmo who before had absolutely thought of letters or words. When the patrons of the orphanage found our paintings, poems, and sketches heaped in wooden box, they quickly snatched us from that dread building and sent us to the house of our new tutor, Signor Monsini. He was a tall, well built man of middle age, dark haired, dark eyed, whose eyelids never drooped, instead his eyes were very ratlike and beady but filled with great knowledge of the arts, history, language, alchemy, and the dreaded arithmetic. At the age of eighteen, we were inducted to the King's Court, and served him immediately as court poet (Anselmo) and court dancer (me). My younger brother Miko, was recently apprenticed to become goldsmith, and it actually could come in handy when I want a dramatic discount on an embellished bracelet.

Chapter 1: The Hearth

The streets of the bustling, pulsing city of Dextora were crowded with vendors and peddlers with anything a humble, ingenuous wench would desire in a lifetime. Ribbons, pottery, paintings, jewelry, incense, and my favorite colored stones are in great quantity and little demand, for chances are, if you live here already, you have any type of trinket found on street corners. Shops are filled with skeins of silk, thread, cotton, linen, and coffee shops send aromas that energize even the sleeping. Mulled wine can be bought in great tankards, and the spicy smell and rich flavor lull even the most coffee soaked being to drunken, peaceful slumber. Bakers waft their rich pastries into the air, making the most satisfied person hungry again.

Dextora lives and breathes life and happiness, and many a traveler give it the name: The Hearth, for at the Hearth you find rest, food, life, and the center of any life, no matter how minuscule. Even though this prosperous city coexists harmoniously with the surrounding mountains, at night, when the only living thing to be found is the possum licking the daily scraps out of desolate alleyways, robbers, thieves, and mainly cowards, scramble across the closely-knit rooftops, their clumsy, blundering feet knocking terra cotta shingles off the inns with a slight *chink*, as they break on the deserted, moonlit cobblestones. Many times did Anselmo and I sneak out of Signor Monsini's house to explore the Hearth

from the bird's eye view of the rooftops, and we always played a game to find out which person could knock the least shingles off the roof. I always won. Even though I had the luxuries of a princess in my quarters of the king's castle, I had always wanted to travel far away to the lands described in the novels, depicted so beautifully by the illuminating around the curly scripts. I never knew how much I would miss my home and place, at the Hearth.

Chapter 2: Definition of Love

The rain padded and poured on Dextora, but no one cleared the streets as is wont; everyone simply whipped out metal parasols, to protect from rain, sleet, or hail. I quietly cursed myself for having left my gold one tucked safely behind my door, and pulled my scratchy woolen cloak over my already saturated hair, and nimbly elbowed my way through the crowds to get back to my warm quarters, for tonight, Anselmo was having a party. As I thought of the most recent book that he had written that I had yet to illuminate, I expelled my frosty breath in meditation and lagged over to the nearest store, a jewel stand—covered with a ridiculously large parasol.

“Ummm, that large lapis lazuli right there, yes, and three small packet mixes for orpiment, violet, and malachite too— illuminating books y' know...”

“Pricy business as well!” the vendor added with a nod. I handed him the silver and tucked the stones in my leather cinching bag, embroidered with beads and silk, with a pattern of vines and flowers, dewdrops just barely dripping off the leaves; my very own design, I was very dramatic. Later, after the party, I would work on the book, fingers stained and sore from grinding the pigment, but after the finished product, it was all worth it. With a smile, I dashed home, planning what to wear to the gathering. Tapping down the entrance of the palace in no way at all fit for a nineteen year old, I ungainly raced up a flight of stairs, made several turns, and pushed open my chamber door. I was back to Artista, my nickname for my beautiful quarters. The sign on the heavy ebony door read: *Gabriella Lominari, Court Illuminator, Herbalist, Singer, Head Embroiderer, and Dancer*. Hurriedly, from my common room to my bed chamber, I glanced and pawed around for outfit ideas. I finally chose a dark silk dress, purple in color, with black satin slippers, and a gold coin necklace with matching bracelets, and earrings, and a circlet for my head; to tame down the rampant curls; a birthday gift from Miko, fashioned lovingly for my nineteenth birthday, inlaid with amethyst, my birth stone. I grabbed my parasol this time, and hurried out the door to Anselmo's apartments. After scurrying across the vast courtyard and forum, and rushing up and around, I came to Anselmo's door, and knocked on the great brass knocker, adjusting the circlet resting on my curls and smoothing down the rest of my locks. He opened the door himself, smiling a big pearly, oh-so-Anselmo smile, like he used to when I snatched milk and cookies from the kitchen for our own midnight snack, then discovering that Signor Monsini himself, fancied the same eats, at the same hour.

“Glad you could come, Signora Lominari.” he said in a mock dignified way. One could tell his green eyes were still twinkling mischievously. I batted him on the shoulder and he guffawed and ushered me in. I always loved his rooms as much as mine, they were so beautiful and filled with treasures and his personality; the dark carpets with amber, scarlet, and black, bright walls of beige— yes, he had style, artistic grace. As was usual, the other guests were close friends of ours, being Ratsuba, a tapestry hand, Mygan, the head scribe, a very witty and cordial fellow, Sumsonq, the shrewd old librarian, but very good natured, Kyra, my apprentice herbalist, she and I were as close as sisters, her brother Mugen, another witty one, but usually quiet, and Anselmo's best friend, Ethyn, a gorgeous boy of twenty-one, soft features, grey eyes and black wavy hair. Once I was seated on a settle near the fireplace hearth, its

flames roaring with newfound ferocity, Ethyn gently offered me a glass of mulled wine, and I sipped its deep sweetness thoughtfully, peacefully drowsy, listening to Mygan and Sumsonq talk about recent events, and I noticed with a jab of pain that Ratsuba had cuddled and nudged her way up to Anselmo. Ethyn noticed, for he soon got up and leaned against the fireplace, his lean frame a silhouette. Then, he calmly sat beside me on the settle. The days of my young crush came flooding back like a wave, and I could even smell his spicy scent, like citrus, oranges and cloves. Ratsy was glaring icily at me, and I smiled sweetly in return, savoring the power of a feminine triumph. She and him used to be an item, as you should know. The cause of the breakup was that she didn't like the way he always cared for his younger brothers and sisters, all seven of them. I loved that about Ethyn, he always had a big heart.

The dull conversation eventually led to philosophy and psychology and Mugen and Mygan were stumbling over their words on topics that stretch the biggest brain. The topic came to what their opinion on true love was. I thought to myself: True love is a powerful friendship, that you would be willing to give your life in place of the one you love, that they would love you forever and never let you go, and to this, I realized, that I loved Anselmo.

Chapter 3: Last of the Lominari

Over the next few days, I worked on the book of poems Anselmo entrusted to me to illuminate. Other than teaching Kyra how monkshood is safely stored, I was pent, no, crammed into my workshop, but as much as I love painting, I knew I needed my daily sunshine soon, and so, cloaked like a rich lady,

I stepped into the Hearth for some well-deserved shopping. First, I visited Miko at the forge and helped him on the design of some intricate goldwear for a fine lady, and masculine but striking pieces for a lord. He handed me a small filigree ring, and it brought tears and memories flooding to my eyes, when I saw the crest upon the top. Long ago, as children, he, Anselmo, and I designed our family crest, being relatively related, and it had three sections for each one of us, the last of the Lominari family, the old coat of arms burning with our parents, and our cousins, Anselmo's parents. Anselmo chose a green eye on a background of black, for me, a crimson tiger paw print with a background of forget-me-nots, the meaning of "Forget me not, the Tigress!" while Miko chose his, as an ebony chess piece, the knight, on a backdrop of cream. Miko jolted me back to the present time, in the forge, by showing me his hand, the identical ring.

"I can't believe you still remembered!" I excitedly murmured.

"Yah, I couldn't really, but I had a sketch from it!" he jabbered almost excitedly. "Anselmo's ring is in this package too, along with a belated birthday present." he added, handing me a brown paper package, rather heavy too. Miko, always so thoughtful at age sixteen. Sweet sixteen! I thought about those days, as I headed down the street. In the crowded, sunbathed streets, people bustled, noisy, pleasant, and merry for the arrival of spring. Even in winter, the roads got no clearer, no fires were really needed, for every person radiated a cheery warmth, and the streets were scented with chimney smoke, cinnamon, and incense. Snow lay in drifts, light, cool, and fluffy, but now that the snow had melted and was flowing down the gutters, it carried the filth sashed out of upstairs windows. The Hearth was cleaning itself. I breathed in the cool breeze and darted, face happy, across the street to my favorite fabric shop. Inside it felt remarkably stuffy and gloomy, but Signora Zaneda, the shopkeeper, cleaned it of dust as to make the atmosphere a bit lighter, and it worked.

"Ah, Gabriella, need a new costume?" she smiled graciously, rosy cheeks lit.

"Yes Signora," I replied, "King Morosca also sends his compliments on the fringe that you made for his ceremony robe."

"Ah, yes, the spun silver lace." she nodded, and pulled out a tape measure. I was shocked to see that my waist had increased by two inches in the past year. She just chortled and bustled around to pick out the colors to try. I went and stood on the fitting platform until she found the perfect colors. Finally, she gleefully brought two rolls of the floating veil material used to make my snake-dancers costumes. She held the cloth up to my face to compare the compatibility to my ivory skin.

"Beautiful!" she remarked, "Light blue and crimson." Walking out of the store, I smiled in delight. What a strange hand fate dealt. My next costume would be forget-me-not blue and scarlet.

Chapter 4: Court Life

Later that day, when the sun began to set and left a red, beautiful red, aura to the sky, I left to deliver Anselmo his gift from Miko. He greeted me at the door and I handed him the package, and as a little child opens a present from their grandparents, he unwrapped the gift and the same kind of smile covered his gentle face. The ring he slipped on, almost tearfully.

“It is indeed the very crest we designed!” he loved to state the obvious, just to get on my nerves.

“Yes, and look what else he gave you, three moons too late!” Even I didn't know what else Miko gave Anselmo, but I soon found out when he unwrapped the rest of it. I expected it to be another fine gold work of Miko's, but it was better. It was a leather sheath, beautifully burned with ivy and stags, and in the center of it, an eye with an iris of emerald, pupil of onyx, and indeed, it was a masterpiece, with a matching silver dagger (gold would be too malleable) with the same eye at its' hilt, onyx as the pommel, gold wound around the grip. I could tell that Anselmo was stunned and so was I; I quickly hugged him and ran to get ready for my performance tonight at the Spring Court Gathering.

* * *

As I walked into the hall, I was aware of my bare feet slapping on the ever-cold marble, and the thousands of candles on the walls, flickering warm light on the stolid alabaster statues and pillars; the thousands more of eyes watching me, and how they would think of me after this performance. What I dearly hoped they would see is a tall, solid, curly-haired snake-dancer, clothed in a short, floating midriff blouse of black, and a similar hip skirt with gilded belt and golden embroidery at the edges. The skirt itself was a full circle of floaty thin satin, and hung loosely to my calves, which from then on showed ankles with thick cuffs adorned with bells. One of my oldest and most precious costumes.

King Morosca sat on his high throne, at the end of the hall and beyond all the long tables laden with platters of delectable food, where all the nobles sat. He and the rest of Dextora loved their snake-dancers, or tale weavers, or whatever else people call us, for the viewers ask us to dance to the sad but loved tales of the old times, when fairy tale creatures were rampant in this city.

I approached and motioned for the musicians with their lutes, lyres, cymbals, and drums. They started with the slow bounding beat, I sang the solo.

*E tunai, E tunai yefeld
Dom dere, dom dere dua
Liebe, amore nebra hlitty,
Dom ere doah
loosta lief, ederma liebe
ederma liebe*

I sang this haunting melody in the old language of the city, when there were such things as dragons, elves, dwarves, and magic altogether. The song itself was a sad tragedy of two young lovers whose families bickered, and set one of the families' homes on fire, in which the two youths perished.

Swaying gently, I snapped into the dance, soaking up the beat, feeling the pulse, living the song in my movements. In Dextora, this was tradition. The drums beat syncopation, the lutes an ethereal melody, the other dancers chanting the verses softly. My gold veil tied to my fingers trailed my movements and added to the floating beauty of the dance. When the drums signaled the end beat, I motioned for the ending move, and all the dancers twirled and landed in a dramatic pose on the floor,

veils trailing behind us and floating back down just as the music ended. We bowed and I glanced around. Everyone was enthralled and the thousands of eyes glistened with renewed sadness; not one eye was dry, including mine.

Once seated cross legged on my cushion with the musicians and dancers, we tucked into the steaming food laid in platters in our corner. I took just a few fruit to keep healthy. Gluttony was not on my priority list at the moment. The king gave his next command.

“ I hope all of you remember our last successful mission," he nodded staring around the silent, satisfied hall. “ now, ahem, my latest exploit is to go find the legendary dragon Dracona and plunder her vast loot. I know most of you think her but a child's tale, but peasants to the south have spotted her stealing livestock and burning crops. We have the exact location of her cave, and it should only take a few days at the most to find exactly where she is. This crop razing and animal slaughtering *must* be avenged!" And he banged his fist dramatically on the arm of his throne, and with this small speech, he had won our loyalty once more.

After the court had been dismissed, I stole away to the corridor with the best tapestries. Some, that I had made with the help of the tapestry hands. After searching awhile in the dim torchlight, I came to the one that I was looking for. Stitched carefully and talented, was a blue dragon roaring flames, standing on a cliff above her domain of trees.

Chapter 5 : Finished

I lay my quill down into the inkwell and salted the last page. I had completed the book. Closing the cover, I opened it to view my handiwork and to carefully examine for quality and technique. I was ecstatically pleased to see the beautiful vines, flowers, maidens, unicorns, and sparkling colors that had flown from *my* hand. Anselmo's flowery script copied down his imagination, and I had illustrated it in splendor. Lifting my hair off my sweaty neck, I stretched and glanced around the dusty, sunlit workshop. Undaunted vellum, it's velvety texture still white and pure lay scattered hither and yon, my mortar and pestle lay as if I had just stopped grinding the iris flowers for malachite green, quills and wolf hair brushes were strewn among the books. Oh the books I had! I heard a rap on the door, and Kyra peeked in.

“Oh my, aren't you a mess!" she teased, and shut the door behind her. I noticed she was carrying

traveling boxes.

“We need to pack if we are going on the exploit,” she stated matter-of-factly, “I thought you might want to bring all your books.” Kyra, always so thoughtful.

“Thank you, and have you finished simmering the tincture of peppermint for Signora Arnesta?” I asked. She positively choked.

“Errm, it's still on the stove!” And she bustled out of the room, leaving me in her wake, shaking my head.

* * *

Later as I pulled myself onto my gelding Gilial, I looked back at the palace, and thought of the journey ahead. I hid my face as Anselmo and Ratsuba passed, happily chatting. The caravan of covered wagons and horses started out slowly, all of the King's company riding horseback, plodding and ploughing through the busy cobblestone streets of the hearth. It was weird how you can live in a city all your life, but not really know anyone in it except for your family, all because you are in a higher class. This particular city was actually in a deep and huge valley, so the one entrance, and in our case, exit, was a canyon to the west, which had levels of gates in it for protection no other city could offer. Gilial seemed to enjoy himself, and often tossed his head when he noticed the crowd staring at his snowy locks and coat, silver horseshoes gleaming as they surfaced from the slush. My heart was heavy, for seeing Anselmo and Ratsuba both on his stallion gave me a great stab of pain in my breast, as if they had plunged a knife in my heart and slowly seeped it of blood. I looked away and realized that we had almost approached the first gates. King Morosca was clearly apparent on his glossy black steed prancing at the front, and the soldiers were so young! To think that these boys would go toss away their homes and lives in the Hearth to go battle a dragon in the king's service. Fools! But here I was, so young myself, but in my heart I knew that I needed to be on this trip, for all it might cost me. Once done with my pondering, we came outside the last gate, and the sight that met my glance was imponderable itself. For as far as the horizon, trees upon trees and birdsong! The notes that the tiny feathered birds warbled made no sense, and they did not sing songs like some of the aviary birds did, but it was so *natural* and *relieving*, like a fresh morning dew after a particularly stuffy night. The trees grew tall and thick, towering higher than our city, parting only where the wide dirt road lay, earthy and damp.

We set up camp near a waterfall, and I and Kyra had a tent to ourselves, but we were busy scavenging the woods for herbs, that we never unpacked our things, and simply slept where we fell on the grass in the tent, for we were truly exhausted.

Chapter 6: They *are* Real!

Screams woke us in the morning, and alarmed, we ran outside to see the pandemonium like every other rubberneck. Maids carrying sloshing buckets of water panted into the camp, running from the

direction of the falls.

“Blue women! In the water!” one gasped, and trembled, fluttering like a candle flame exposed to wind. I noticed Sumsong approach slowly, and narrow his eyes as if in thought, and he spoke to the girl gently.

“Blue, you say? And did they have scaly faces and long webbed fingers too?” The crowd assumed he was making fun of her, and started laughing uproariously.

“SILENCE!!!!!!” he boomed. Sometimes he came across more intimidating than King Morosca. The maid nodded. “These are water nymphs.” he concluded after a short session of pondering, “Although almost all of you consider them imaginary, *do not*, by *any* circumstances, let a handsome man approach the pool, for they will seize him to their deep, watery domains, forever there for him to remain.”

Only one person tittered; I knew at once it must have been Ratsuba; the no good.....

* * *

Later on, stranger and stranger things began to occur. I could swear I saw a small, glowing being with silver wings, tip over my mulled cider, and then when I blinked, she disappeared. Anselmo told me that he also saw one of these fairies, but he gave it a thimble of the drink, and it happily flew off. I am not sure if he was joking with me or not..we'll find out soon enough. Ever since hearing about the man-snatching water nymphs floating down in the pool, you can sense that everyone is on edge; gorgeous youths, for they fear getting dragged down, and their girlfriends, for just that same reason, plus a little undignified jealousy on their part.

Chapter 7: Dracona

Over the next few weeks, we never turned back, but as we plodded onward, more of those fairytale beings were sighted. Lots of fairies and gnomes, tree nymphs, birds of paradise, peacocks, or just about anything strange and beautiful dwelled in the forest; except for elves. We saw none of the handsome immortals, but they would be too fast to spot anyway. As King Morosca's stargazers told him, we were nearing the dragon's lair, so we camped on a hill in a clearing. A few minutes later, she arrived.

Our campfires must have brought her, but she swooped down in all the splendor stories described dragons. Ruby scales glinted in the dark, and gave her a fiery, pulsing look, and exaggerated quite fiercely with her sparkling emerald eyes that shone power and malice.

“Morosca!!!!” Dracona sneered. Like a subdued child, Morosca trodded obediently from his tent and stared in awe at her massive regality. She spoke again, hard and raspy.

“Your have come here to hunt me, no doubt, but as you see, I can easily burn you, your loyal followers, and your huge city in one flamed breath.” He nodded in comprehension, speechless.

“Instead,” she offered, “I will take two of your youth as my servants. They shall serve me, and I will not eat them as long as they perform and complete the tasks I give them, understand?!”

I shuddered, and her huge frame seemed to shine with a brilliant fear.

“Beautiful!....” I whispered, my word lost to the warm breeze.

* * *

Inside his tent, Morosca was tearing his hair in frustration. I could have done the same myself if I had not been as full of sangfroid as I was.

“IEEEEE!” he screeched, very un-kingly. “Who do I choose?!”

* * *

Later, it was indeed announced who were the two unlucky ones that were to go to Dracona, and a most possible premature death in the pit of her stomach. Morosca looked oddly pale and old, his eyes hollow and faraway. I felt pity for him. He cleared his throat, and we all stood, hearts throbbing into our throats, our dinners about to be revealed in an ungainly way.

“Kyra....and Ethyn...” he croaked. It was as if he were handing out death sentences to his very own children. We all heard him. Ethyn set his face, but Kyra blanched and her eyes pooled tears.

“Please! Please, No!” she cried as she and Ethyn were pulled to a tent, ropes binding their limbs. Her brother Mugen looked as if he had just aged twenty years. I wanted to run and drag her away, to protest for her young life...she was *my* friend! Not some dinner to Dracona, and there was no possibility of her ever surviving those tasks. I had to save her and Ethyn. All of a sudden, everything foolish made sense, and I knew the stupidest thing to do.

Chapter 8: A Very Stupid Idea

I lay shivering on Dracona's doorstep, more or less a slab of cold rock. The beautiful night that had appealed to me a few hours ago now seemed sinister, cold, and cruel. Ethyn wasn't fairing much better. I think he was in shock, for he did not even wince when Morosca's men strung us up on stakes like slaughter meat. The chains bit metallic fangs into my forearms, and a trickle of warm blood ran down my soiled sleeve. This had to be the stupidest idea possible, even if it was saving Kyra, Ethyn, and me.

* * *

The next morning, I woke up to find myself unbound, lying on a pallet of straw on a stone-flagged floor. I concluded that somehow we had been brought into her cave. Before I could finish my pondering, a tall, tanned regal boy of about twenty-five opened the gate to my cell and handed me a chunk of heavy, wholesome bread.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Prince Terrance of Macini,” he answered properly, “I serve Dracona.” Without waiting for my parched lips to move, he quickly added, “and Ethyn is alright.”

I was glad to hear it, but couldn't help wondering how he knew Ethyn's name. He motioned for me

to follow, and I did, leaving the small, dank cell behind happily. After going down a huge length of a carved out, stone hallway, I saw Dracona glittering in her throne room, awaiting me. Ethyn stood in the center, quite revived to his old self, with a new, fresh set of clothes.

“Ah, the second one!” she purred. Smoke was twirling cautiously out of her nostrils. “Terrance!” she barked impatiently. He gracefully strode forward and handed me a scroll.

When I broke the seal and unrolled it, I scanned it quickly, looking up, perplexed. The text was in the ancient language that, luckily, I was fluent in because of the need to recite whole songs in it. All it read was :

*Et alv e ootsop orythwyrd,
mey hod irst wyre,
En eternam somnyp*

Translated from the Ancient Language, it read:

*And half a footstep northward
my head rests here,
in eternal slumber.*

Or something to that effect. I looked into Dracona's cold eyes, hoping to glimpse what game she was playing at.

“What does this riddle mean?” I asked icily, uncertain of this new development.

“It is your first task.” she answered slyly. “Figure it out, and the two next to come, and I will not eat you or Ethyn, Lady Lominari.” I shot a malignant glance at Ethyn, questioning if he told our identities, but he looked as shocked as I, to see two strangers that know us down to our last names.

Before I could ask anything of it, Terrance led Ethyn and I out the front of the cave.

“Solve the riddle before nightfall and return with the answer.” he said simply.

“But what if we fail?” Ethyn questioned. In reply, Terrance grimaced.

“You really don't want to know.” he reassured and handed us clean cloaks, made of a heavy, leaf green, scratchy wool.

Evidently, Dracona liked her games, but possibly she did not know that I did too.

Chapter 9: Cabbage Head

Sitting on a rock outside, we tried to figure the riddle out. Ethyn was definitely puzzled, but so was I.

“Half a step northward?” He thought out loud.

“Hmm, maybe we're talking about a different race here...” I mumbled. Suddenly inspiration hit me.

“What if it's talking about a troll?!” As the myth goes, a troll can run a league in several minutes, whereas for a human it would take a while. Thus, the humans gave the name “footstep” to a troll's league. Ethyn's face shone, and we stepped to the north to continue the quest.

* * *

Using arithmetic, he calculated just how far we would need to go, and from standing on a cliff, we saw the point of destination. It was a huge block of sandstone, higher than the trees around it.

“Okay, we gotta go pick up a dead troll's head, bring it back....and live.” he sighed.

“Yeah...I hope. Anyway, this has to be done by sundown, so I suggest that we run this like a relay. Okay, you can run one and a half miles to the thing, because you are more athletic, of course, and I will come slowly, you run it back, and I will run it to Dracona, and you walk the rest of the way back.” He nodded and we agreed that this was the best way to do it.

* * *

As I walked down the path to the sandstone hulk, I heard Ethyn's returning footsteps. He was carrying a giant, granite head! It was quite ugly. I didn't stop to think, but just grabbed it and ran the fastest I had ever ran, back to Dracona's lair. On the way back, I ran through shrubs, prickly nettles, and almost a beehive if I hadn't taken a beeline to the right. Upon entering, I proudly handed the bust to Terrance, while still wheezing from the run on the path. Ethyn followed up a few minutes later.

Dracona looked positively happy, if a dragon could be, but at the same time sadistic. One could only think of the next task. Just as I thought of this, she spoke in her raspy, silky voice.

“Your next task will be slightly harder. You are to gather me one bird of every species dwelling in my forest.” I positively groaned, but really, I could tell that Ethyn and I were on the same page to defeating this shimmering wonder. I still had the chunk of bread from this morning in my pocket, and later on, settled on a pillow in a warmer cell with Ethyn, we made the plans about the next day.

Chapter 10: A Wild Dragon

In the morning when Terrance came to wake us, I got the chance to ask him about himself, and how a prince like him came to this position.

“My father was disappointed that I wanted to go see the wild dragons, since the last dragon riders were deceased. He repelled my idea, so I ran away. Dracona, who is a wild dragon, found me, and I told her I was willing to serve her as long as I got immortality and youthfulness, like an elf. I have been this way for hundreds of years, and I have heard that Macini had fallen to another country.” After this tale I was shocked and a little bit appalled. This beautiful prince was like.....as old as an ancestor! After Ethyn woke up, I also told him what Terrance said. His reaction was more subdued than mine.

“Hah! I knew something was amiss about him! Have you ever seen him eat *anything*?” he gloated, rubbing his hands in glee. At the mention of food I saw two loaves of bread and a pitcher of water at the gate. I instructed Ethyn to save half the bread and to drink plenty of water, seeing that later on, we would need the bread for the task.

We went out the cave as the same as the day before, only that this time, I looked around and found a dry, thin reed. This I punched several small holes in to make a flute. A bird call was in order. Anselmo could do a bird call that brought the feathery balls, bombing down from the aviary rafters to perch on his shoulders. I wondered if a mock version would work on these slightly dim-witted forest birds. While I got ready, Ethyn spread the crumbs of the bread on the dirt of the cliff-top. Everything was perfect.

Starting out, I played a few lines of bird-calling music. Three different colored birds started pecking at the crumbs. After about an hour of the repetition, we had flocks of the birds pecking around our ankles and devouring the bread like beasts rather than birds. These birds had never tasted bread before, and the effect was quite pleasing. Ethyn doled out more crumbs, grinning, and started sorting the feathered-fluff balls with beaks, while they snapped at his fingers and refused to budge, but how he managed to get them grouped, I'll never understand. When after 3 hours of continued bird-calling, we suspected that we had all the types of birds in the forest. Taking one from each grouping, Ethyn tied a long piece of wild grass to the ankles of each. We proceeded up to the lair, with little birds and big birds, birds of all colors and shapes trailing behind, eager for more crumbs. This time, Dracona's smile was even wider, exhibiting sharp, brilliant teeth, filed to perfect points. One could only fear of what she was going to ask for next.

Chapter 11: No Title For an Insane Request

“Now this,” Ethyn gasped, “has to be the craziest task in the history of all dragons.” She had put us to scraping the gummed gunk off the dungeon floors. At least one inch of sticky filth covered the stone-flagged dankness. It smelled awful. No rags or water pails, or anything, was given to us to get this stuff up. We were forced to use our hands, and we had to get the *whole* dungeon done before the end of the day. It was already afternoon, and we had only gotten a portion plus the stone steps done. Suddenly, inspiration hit me on the head.

“OUCH!” I rubbed the sore spot on my noggin where the gate had swung out and a bar had hit me there. I saw the hinges, and that idea popped in my head. As Ethyn stared in wonder, I quickly remove the nail things out of the rest of the hinges. Pulling the gate off where it had previously been, I turned it sideways, then longways, and used it to scrape the gunk off the stretch of floor. Ethyn quickly ran to do the same. Soon, we had the greasy glop piled onto a moldy blanket we found in a cell. All that was left on the stone was the slimy remains, which we put a torch to, so it would warm up and liquify more, then we dug out another blanket from my old cell and polished the rest until it shined. We smiled in triumph at the gleaming dungeon floor.

When Terrance walked in at the end of the day and found us fast asleep on the pallets in Ethyn's cell, a pile of muck at the top of the stairs outside the door, and two slimy looking gates replaced onto their original mountings, he smiled slightly, and went to tell Dracona, who was then feasting on a side of beef, prepared by the kitchen dwarves.

* * *

The next morning, we were invited to come into Dracona's personal chambers, or two huge halls to house her massive, scaly-ness. Inside, it looked absolutely astonishing. Rich carpets, posh tapestries depicting her wondrous ruling of her domain, and gold items, everywhere! It was really a lair, with any gold trinket of any value, up to solid gold statues embellished with twinkling jewels that were worth kingdoms. Everything about dragons loving treasure was true...well, more than true; it was like an addiction to them.

Her massive-ness took up a large scarlet cushion, and lay there contentedly, like a cat, slitted emerald eyes watching us approach. Two dwarves brought out a platter of sumptuous food for us, and a keg of wine with two delicate glasses. I tasted the veal cautiously, lest she would dare to poison it, but it was exquisitely seasoned and Ethyn and I couldn't but help digging in for seconds and thirds. The wine was also good; well cured and with a rich, sweet flavor.

“You do understand that you completed my tasks?” she purred. “Which in that case, I will give you each one wish.” This was the point of no return. What we wished for could end up being a curse. I racked my brain, thinking of what to wish for; what I always wanted.

“I wish to become a sorceress.” I stated. Ethyn knew my reason for this almost insane wish. He also wished for something that would also come in use.

“I wish to become a dragon rider.” Dracona was pleased with us. That was evident.

“You both shall receive what you want, thanks to my generosity. Gabriella, you shall take the book of sorcery with you when you leave. Ethyn, you will travel to the elves, where they have wild dragons that they are training, and you will become a rider with my consent; the world needs to know of the old times. I just have one request for the both of you,” she closed her emerald eyes and lay her long neck on her long talons. “I would like both of you to rule Dextora fairly, and introduce the old ways and creatures into its culture once more. A child's dream is not complete without the fairy tales that formed it. You have my permission to leave for your home.

Chapter 12: Returning Heroes

Over the next few weeks, we left Dracona's lair with Terrance, destined for the Elves. Our experience there was beautiful, for not only was I taught in sorcery, Ethyn was bonded with a dragon named Sobahos, and they trained with elves to be dragon riders. It was our mission now, to return the fairytales to the world they came from. The elves lived in the trees and were impeccably fast, strong, and smart. We completed the training and Sobahos and Ethyn, flew us home to Dextora. We stayed with the elves a total of three years.

* * *

Upon returning, we flapped down noisily onto the top of Morosca's castle. This brought everyone in a 75 ft. radius running to see what had happened. People from the streets looked up and screamed, seeing a young lady wearing beautiful robes, a young man dressed the same, and a giant, aquamarine dragon spurting flames, which that both the youths were perched on. Morosca, his guards, and a number of scribes soon turned up, still wheezing from the journey up the many staircases, twisting up onto the roof, where we landed. He approached, face pale and gasping deeply.

“Gabriella??! Ethyn?!!!” He was shocked, and more of the court bustled up to see what everyone was gawking at. People gasped, and I spotted Ratsuba and Anselmo, a few years older. Kyra had grown beautifully. Mugen grew, but only in a beard. Mygan looked stressed. Sumsonq was nowhere to be found. I later learned he had died in the previous year, at the age of precisely one-hundred.

A feast was ordered on the spot, and later, Ethyn was forced to recount everything that had gone on. Morosca made another speech, like the one that had brought us through all this trouble.

“My friends and their friends,” he spoke solemnly, “I was the one that brought these two so much misery, but they did complete the tasks set by Dracona. I vow, here and now that we honor Dracona's wishes, and give the throne up to the new rulers who will bring the old life back to Dextora, unlike what my family did for generations, wiping it out. If a count is in order....so if you are for the new ruling, speak aye.” The vote was unanimous. We were declared new rulers of Dextora.

* * *

After the feast, I retreated to my old Artista. When I opened the door, no dust globs met my eyes. Everything was polished as if I had only been gone for a day. A fire was even crackling merrily in the fireplace. Evidently, Kyra hoped I would return, and had the chambers cleaned daily. When I opened the oak paneled door to my workshop, someone had arranged everything neatly. The vellum was stacked in a tray, brushes and quills in glass jars, books stacked and crammed onto new bookshelves....it was perfect.

As I brushed out my hair in the mirror, Ethyn stepped in and walked towards me.

“Do you need me for something?” I asked.

“Yes, I need to tell you something important...” he replied, and I knew at once, from all my novel-reading, what this was about.

Chapter 13: Drinks All Around!

Our wedding was spectacular. He was twenty-five, I was twenty-one. My dress was of beautiful white linen, made by Signora Zaneda, or course. The people in attendance were the rest of the court, and Miko, who had married Kyra in my absence. I held a bouquet of roses, the scent intoxicating and romantic, and I was nervous.

The priest married us, and I finally lost the name of Gabriella Lominari. Now, I was Mrs. Ethyn Macini. It was wonderful to just sit around in the hall afterward while people came up and hugged him, kissed me, and gave us presents, and, coincidentally, that Terrance knew that Ethyn was a Macini, making him royalty of the very same Macini that Terrance had come from those hundreds of years ago. We found out that Macini had been taken over by Morosca's great, great, great grandfather, and that the royal family there had fled to a large city, what we know as Dextora. But anyway.....I was with the man that loved me, and stuck with me through all our adventures. The man I had always loved in my heart was now mine.

It didn't matter that I thought I had loved Anselmo. He was just a friend, and more of a brother than someone I loved. Anyway, Ratsuba was going to run him down a financial well that would eventually be dry. I didn't worry about a thing, and neither did my new husband. I would always stick with Ethyn even if the plague hit Dextora.

Hah, me, a queen....from a middle class family, leaving me orphaned, being pulled to the very top of society, ruling a country....yes, I could understand if you disliked this tale. But for me, this is my life.

Epilogue: Sweet Endings

You may wonder what happened to all the people we knew. Well here it is:

- **Ethyn and I** had many more adventures, and as a sorceress, I brought all the mystical creatures from the forest back into our lives. Ethyn and Sobahos traveled back to the elves to strike up negotiations about reuniting our cultures, and many learned and studious elves traveled back with the other elven riders to Dextora, where the second language taught in academies was the ancient language, which we were determined to bring back.
- **Ratsuba and Anselmo** eventually did run dry of money after Ratsuba was determined to spend all of it on rich foods and clothes. She turned exceedingly fat and pudgy, resembling a....well, resembling a fat rat. Anselmo never married her, they just lived together, much to the distaste of the populace, and they were run out of town after refusing to get married legally.
- **Miko and Kyra** moved to go live with Terrance and Dracona, where Miko made Dracona lovely gold things, which she adored, and Kyra, a practiced herbalist, discovered an herb that she found would heal most injuries. She patented the juice and made a fortune off of it, which later on, they used to build a castle which Mugen was architect of. I am happy to report that it did not fall apart until a natural cause several hundreds of years later.
- **Mugen and Mygan** still bickered about politics, like they used to. Mugen, as was told, went on to be the architect who designed Kyra and Miko's home. Mygan, well he went on being court head scribe, and took down all the information about Ethyn's steadfast ruling.

So ends the tale, of Gabriella Lominari.