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ENID AND THE PRINCE

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“So you called these ... pigs, didn’t you?” said the prince, rubbing his handsome jaw in thought. “Quite unusual. Of course I knew *of* pigs — they often featured in the Sunday afternoon spread, trussed up with an apple in their mouths — but it’s jolly different to meet them alive. Never imagined them to be quite this ... filthy.”

Enid sighed and raised her arm to wipe the sweat from her forehead. She’d been mucking out the pigs all morning and the palms of her hands were swollen with splinters from the spade. The summer sunshine had burnt her arms to the shoulder, and the hem of her dress, newly washed this morning, had gone from a pretty pastel cream to a dirty mud-brown. A tiny spark of jealousy struck her as she looked at the prince, clean and fresh-faced as he leant against the sty.

He was terribly handsome, with dark eyes, broad shoulders, and fashionably slick hair. Enid — along with all the other women in the kingdom — found him certifiably drool-worthy. Sadly, even Enid would have to admit that he wasn’t the brightest man around. The prince knew a lot of things about cutlery and dancing and croquet, but when she’d handed him a rake that morning and asked him to clean up the leaves, he’d stared at it as if it was a rare, foreign artifact.

When she went out to check on him later, she found him shaking the rake at the leaves as if trying to magic them away.

“You don’t want to give me a hand here, do you?” she asked hopefully. “You must have seen a spade before, and I could show you exactly—”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly. All that mud... This suit’s made from imported cotton. It’d cost me a fortune to get it cleaned.” He smiled brightly. “And you look like you’re doing such a marvellous job of it, I wouldn’t want to intrude. No, I think I’ll head off to find a nice tree to write poetry under. I’m finding the views here very inspiring. Nothing at all like a stuffy old castle, eh?”

He trotted off, humming to himself — one of the many court ballads written about him, no doubt. Enid growled as she went back to shoveling muck. When she’d married the prince, this was definitely not the happy-ever-after ending she’d anticipated.

The reason that Enid and the prince were still living on her parents’ farm in the middle of nowhere was because the prince’s mother did not like commoners. Not that she’d say as much aloud. Commoners paid taxes to the crown — the queen’s crown — so she couldn’t upset them. Most of the time, the queen hid her dislike well. Once a month, she even traveled through all the villages of the kingdom to wave and smile at the folk who crowded there to see her.

But when Enid and the prince announced their engagement, there’d been no hiding the queen’s anger.

“How dare you marry a girl like that, common as muck!” she’d screamed at her son. “Don’t talk to me about magic spells and true love and goblin promises and happily-ever-afters! If you’re so determined to marry her, then you can go and live with her — I won’t have you in my castle.”

And she’d thrown the prince out, with nothing to his name but three suitcases of frivolously fancy clothes and sixteen boxes of shoes.

It had all been very, very embarrassing, but it was really Enid’s own fault, as the house-goblin kept telling her.

“You wanted to marry a prince, remember?” said the goblin. “That was your birthday wish. Could have asked for anything in the world, but you wanted a prince...”

“Well, yes,” Enid grumbled. “But I expected that once I married a prince, my life would be completely different. I’d have lots of lovely dresses and go to balls and live in a castle and eat caviar all day...” She blushed as the goblin tittered behind his hand, and went on crossly, “Okay, so I’m not completely sure what it is that princesses really do, but I know that a princess definitely wouldn’t have spent all last night up to her knees in mud, fixing a broken fence so the sheep couldn’t escape.”

“So marrying a prince was more of a means to an end?” said the goblin. “I wish you’d specified that originally.”

Enid frowned. “You should have known,” she said. “We’ve been friends forever. You should know that sort of thing about a friend.”

The goblin looked sad for a moment. “You never said anything about wanting to live in a castle before,” he said. “You used to tell me that once you were grown up you’d go off and have adventures — kill dragons, fight evil warlords, and help the poor. Personally I think that would have been a lot more interesting than hanging about with old prissy-pants over there.”

He gestured with his thumb to where the handsome prince was snoozing by the fireside, drooling a little into his fur-lined cloak.

“You couldn’t give me another wish, could you?” Enid asked. “Maybe magic me up a nicer mother-in-law?”

“Do I look like I’m made of spells?” said the goblin, shaking his head. “Anyway, your late father and I had an agreement. Long ago, he saved my life from forest imps. Your birthday wish was his reward — well, that and my eternal servitude as his house-goblin. One wish for his daughter on the day of her eighteenth birthday, that’s what your father asked for. Not one wish and then a few more wishes when the first one didn’t turn out exactly the way she wanted.”

Enid threw up her hands. “What am I going to do?” she said. “I don’t want to be ordinary all my life.”

“Well, *Princess*,” said the goblin snidely, “I’m afraid it’s now all up to you.”

The next morning Enid was weeding the vegetable garden when a spiky red face popped up from behind a log and chattered its sharp

green teeth at her. It gave Enid such a shock that she smacked the little imp soundly over the head with her trowel.

The imp fell over into the cauliflowers, twitching. Its nasty teeth kept gnashing, even though it was out cold.

“Hm,” said Enid.

She scooped up the unconscious imp, stamped the mud off her Wellingtons, and went back into the farmhouse.

As she opened the front door a second imp leapt out at her from the coat rack. Enid whacked it out of the way. In the kitchen she dispatched the six imps she found sitting in the breadbox — smack, whack, smack, smack, smack, *whack* — and the two others she found fighting each other in the sink.

Enid went to the kitchen window and looked out. Hundreds of imps were running around the fields outside, little red dots moving across the green.

“Goblin?” she called.

The house-goblin crept out from his hiding place under one of the prince’s lace tea-cosies. “I’m sorry,” he babbled, wringing his knobbly green hands. “I didn’t know what to do! I know I’m supposed to protect the farmhouse, but there’s just so *many* of them. It’s an imp plague.”

“Hm,” said Enid, scratching her head. “I wonder where the prince is...”

She found the prince in the living room, frantically lighting matches. He was surrounded by two dozen imps of all shapes and sizes. They stood there quietly — no teeth-gnashing, no hissing or spitting. They seemed to be utterly transfixed by the flashes of fire that spluttered from his shaking hands.

“They’re all over the house, Enid,” said the prince, concentrating on his tinderbox. “I even found a couple hiding in my handkerchief drawer. Awful nasty things, aren’t they? Can’t abide them in the slightest.”

“What are you doing?” Enid asked. “Why aren’t they attacking you?”

“Oh, this thing with the matches? Jolly funny, isn’t it? I just read in one of my poetry books that imps are terrifically fond of fire. Jumbles their tiny brains with pleasure. Of course the effect will only last as

long as I can keep lighting matches.” He looked up sheepishly. “I say, Enid, it’d be spiffing helpful if you could, er, bop them all on the head while they’re distracted.”

Enid obliged him. Twenty-four smacks and whacks later, the prince put his tinderbox back in his pocket and brushed off his hands.

“There’s so many of them,” he said. “They’ll be all over the village soon. Those poor peasants. Life’s jolly rubbish for them anyway, without having a blasted imp invasion to deal with. What should we do?”

Enid looked at the prince, and then looked at her trowel. “I think,” she said, in a voice that surprised her with its firmness, “we’d better get out there and help.”

Two weeks after the imp incident, a messenger-girl turned up at the farm.

“I need to speak to Enid the Imp-Slayer,” she explained to the prince. “Where is she? It’s extremely urgent.”

The prince squinted down at the girl from the top of his ladder. He was currently in the middle of washing the farmhouse windows. Lately the prince had been doing his best to be more useful around the house. This was partly because he wanted to help Enid, but mainly because he’d discovered that he was actually quite good at doing practical things, as well as stuff like writing poetry and being fashionable. Spending three days chasing imps around the village armed with a trowel and a tinderbox had done wonders for the prince’s self-confidence.

“Enid the Imp-Slayer,” he said cheerfully, climbing down. “Is that what they’re calling her in the village? What a tip-top name for my dear wifey. Enid and her goblin are out the back fixing our cart. I’ll take you right to her.”

The prince led the messenger-girl along the muddy path to the shed where Enid was hammering away at the cart. The house-goblin sat on her shoulder and passed her nails.

“What-ho, wifey!” said the prince. “This young lass has come to—”

But the messenger-girl had already thrown herself to her knees at Enid’s feet. “Enid the Imp-Slayer,” she cried. “Please come and

help us! There's a dragon rampaging through the forests outside the village. If it reaches us, it's going to set fire to our crops and eat our livestock!"

Enid reached for another nail. "What am I supposed to do?" she said. "I'm Enid the Imp-Slayer, not Szensk the Warrior. I'm just a girl who knows how to handle a trowel. I don't know anything about dragons. Why don't you call the royal guard?"

The messenger-girl burst into tears. "We want *you*, Enid. We don't trust the royals. They might not send anyone. But you — you're one of us."

"I say!" said the prince, red-faced.

Enid sighed. "Fine," she said. "I guess I'll go get my trowel. Although I suppose in this case, a spade would be more appropriate..."

Enid stamped through the forest armed with a spade. The prince and the house-goblin brought up the rear. It didn't take long to find evidence of the dragon. Its fire-breath had left a burnt trail through the greenery like a scar.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Enid muttered. "I have better things to do with my time."

"What, better things than saving the village?" the goblin asked. "You always said you wanted to have adventures..." He broke off; it was hard to talk over the sound of Enid grinding her teeth.

Presently they found the dragon asleep under a tree. It was a rather small dragon, by dragon standards — barely the size of a carthorse. Bright green scales covered its back; its belly was yellow and sparkled like gold. Trails of black smoke sizzled from its nostrils into the summer air.

Enid smacked her shovel grimly against her hand. "Well, then," she said. "I hope this works, otherwise we'll all be in a lot of trouble."

"I've just had a spiffy idea," said the prince, catching her arm. "Back when I was a princeling, I read a terrific tale about this lad who used to tame dragons. Something to do with tickling them under the chin like you'd scratch a cat. Turns those lizards into putty in your hands."

Enid opened her mouth to snap at the prince — what a ridiculous notion! — when she remembered how well his imp idea had turned out. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“I positively am, Enid,” said the prince. “Shall I hold your spade for you?”

She passed him the spade, glared at the house-goblin, and stomped over to the dragon. She’d never owned a cat — you couldn’t count the red-eyed, feral tabbies that lived in the farm’s cellar and tried to scratch your ankles off if you got too close. Taking a deep breath, Enid put out her hand and gingerly scritchd at the dragon’s hairy green beard.

The dragon opened one luminous yellow eye and stared at her.

Enid waited.

The dragon snorted, purred and rubbed the top of its head against her stomach.

“I think it likes you,” said the prince cheerfully, clapping his hands. “I say, don’t you think that dragon’s about the right size to pull our cart?”

The fearsome warrior Szensk and his company of armed mercenaries had seen a lot of things in their time. In their travels they had braved armies, conquered islands, and brought castles crumbling to the ground. They had slain ice-giants, captured sea monsters, and stolen so much gold their packhorses could barely carry it all. But they had never before seen a wooden farm-cart being pulled by a bright green dragon. It was this sight that made Szensk and his men clatter to a standstill on the road to the queen’s castle.

Szensk blinked stupidly as the dragon ambled towards him. It wasn’t as big as most of the dragons he’d seen, but it was still a dragon. Should he run or fight or ... or *what*? Tentatively he raised his shield; behind him his men did likewise.

The farm-cart was driven by a muddy young woman wearing Wellington boots and a very dapper young man with nice hair. As they drew close, the young woman pulled on the dragon’s reins and the wooden cart halted. She peered down at Szensk.

“Hi,” said Szensk. “Er. Hullo.”

“Oh, great,” said the young woman, and Szensk noticed that what he’d thought was some sort of curious peasant hat was actually a house-goblin sitting on her head. “What are you lot here for? Planning to invade the village and set fire to the castle?”

This was Szensk’s exact plan, and he was ashamed to realise he was blushing. In addition to taming dragons, could this woman read his mind? “Who *are* you?” he asked.

“I’m Enid. From the farm up on the hill.”

Szensk frowned. “But are you—? Surely, you are someone famous. The great warrior of your people, perhaps. Or a stranger from a far away land. A heroine of ancient lore—”

“Nope,” said Enid, rolling her eyes. “I’m perfectly ordinary Enid-the-peasant. I’m just like everyone else around here.”

“Oh wifey, don’t be silly,” said the young man beside her. “You fought off that plague of imps with your trowel, remember?”

“Pfft, that? That wasn’t a big deal. You just think it is because you’re a prince. You said it was amazing and exciting when I showed you where milk came from, for goodness sake.”

Szensk chewed his lip as the couple chattered on. Invading the village had seemed like a bright idea when he had first thought of it. From the outside it looked like such a quiet place, filled with simple, honest folk who’d never wielded a sword in their life. Szensk had also heard that the peasants in these parts didn’t much like their queen — an uppity woman, according to rumour, who couldn’t care less if her citizens lived or died. He’d been certain the peasants would help him and his men pull down the stones of her castle and loot it for treasures.

But if the queen was gracious enough to let her son marry a commoner, and if the commoners went riding about on carts pulled by dragons and fought off imp hordes with gardening implements... Szensk swallowed.

Perhaps it was best, he decided, to leave while the going was good.

“It was nice to meet you both,” he said, gesturing frantically for his company to retreat, “but I’m afraid we’ll have to be on our way now. Good luck to you and your, er, dragon.”

“I say,” said the prince, as Szensk and the mercenaries marched quickly for the village gates. “I rather fancy that man was Szensk

the Warrior. You know, that awful ruffian who spends his time conquering places and burning things down and stealing people's money. Mother's always been terribly worried he'd show up here one day." He stroked his handsome jaw. "Lucky you scared him off, Enid."

"Me? What's scary about ordinary old me?"

"To begin with, you aren't *that* ordinary," the house-goblin pointed out. "What with the prince marrying and the imp slaying and the dragon taming... If you really think about it, Enid..."

He trailed off. He could tell from the smile on her face that Enid was *already* thinking about it.

Enid was tying the last of her luggage to the top of the cart when the queen came wading up the muddy path to the farmhouse.

"What-ho, Enid," said the queen nervously. She looked so out of place in her fine furs and layered silk skirts that Enid wanted to laugh. "Lovely day, isn't it."

Enid pulled the last knot tight. "What do you want?"

The queen shuffled her feet in the muck. "I believe I underestimated you, Enid," she said eventually. "The story of your great deeds has traveled all round the kingdom. You've saved us three times over. That's proof enough for me that somewhere under those shabby clothes lies the heart of a princess."

"Hm," said Enid.

"I'd love to welcome you properly into the bosom of our family," said the queen. "Come and live with me in the castle. We'll get you dressed up and princess-pretty in no time at all, a belle fit for a royal ball!"

Enid looked down at her ever-faithful Wellingtons — and then at the queen, slipping and sliding in the mud in her fancy jewelled shoes.

"Can't," said Enid simply. "Sorry. Got somewhere else to be."

The queen frowned. "Somewhere more important than the royal castle? And where, pray, might that be?"

Enid shrugged. "We're not exactly sure yet. But I'm sure we'll know when we find it."

She looked past the queen toward the old barn. The prince was heading towards them, leading the dragon by its bridle. The house-

goblin squatted on his shoulder like a pirate's parrot. Enid smiled to herself. The prince still wasn't the brightest of men — but he was *nice*, and he thought she was brave, and he was good with animals ... and for a man she'd married on the whim of a wish, Enid figured she could've done much worse.

"Hullo Mumsy," said the prince, as he coaxed the dragon into position at the front of the cart. "Jolly nice to see you here. Shame we've got to trot, though, if we're to get over the mountains by dusk. But I'll be sure to drop by when we get back. I can read you some poems about our adventures."

"Over the mountains?" the queen spluttered. "Adventures?"

"*Spiffy* adventures," said the prince, nodding. He held out his hand to Enid. "Are you coming, wifey?"

Enid was.

"But don't you want to live in the castle, Enid?" the queen cried, as the cart clattered by. "Isn't that what you've always wished?"

Enid turned around in her seat to watch the queen and the farmhouse, as they grew smaller and further away.

"We're off to seek our fortune," sang the prince, and nudged Enid in the side. "This'll sound terrifically silly, wifey, but I've always sort-of-kind-of-wished I could do something like this. Escape from the castle and tramp off to worlds unknown, without a care in the world. What do you think?"

"Yes, what *do* you think, Enid," the house-goblin wanted to know.

Enid laughed. "I think," she said finally, "that some people just don't *need* wishes."