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The Badlings

A novel by Ksenia Anske

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To Peter, for not being a badling. (Don't you ever.)

If you rip, tear, shred, bend, fold, deface, disfigure, smear, smudge, throw, drop, or in any other manner damage, mistreat, or show lack of respect towards this book, the consequences will be as awful as it is within my power to make them.

J.K. Rowling, *Quidditch Through the Ages*

Chapter 1. The Duck Pond

What if you found a book stuck in dirt? Would you take a peek inside, or would you chuck it at innocent ducks (provided there were any nearby)? You wouldn't do such a thing, would you? Because who throws books instead of reading them?

Meet Belladonna Monterey, or Bells, as she'd like you to call her—she has decided that Belladonna was too pompous a name for a scientist. See her dark flashing eyes? Her ponytail askew? Don't try talking to her, lest you want to be throttled.

On this sunny September morning Bells was mad. Mad at her mother, the famous opera singer Catarina Monterey, for calling her a "poor scientist." The argument started at Bells refusing to go to her Saturday choir practice and escalated further into a shouting match when Bells declared that under *no* circumstances would she ever become a singer.

"So you want to be a poor scientist?" Said Catarina, hands on her hips. It was her usual intimidating pose mimicked by Bells's little sister Maria from behind her mother's back.

"What does it matter if I'm poor?" Asked Bells, stung to the core.

Maria stuck out her tongue. Bells considered it beneath her to descend to the level of an eight-year-old's teasing and ignored her.

"Oh, it matters a great deal." Replied Catarina. "How do you propose to make a living? You have seven years left until you're on your own, *Belladonna*, and every year is precious."

"I told you I don't like that name. I want you to call me Bells."

Her mother's lips pressed together. "As I was saying, *Belladonna*, every year is precious. I've picked out an excellent stage name for you, and I expect you to thank me." Her demeanor softened. "You are destined to become a star, with my talent running in your blood. If you stop practicing now, you might never develop your voice."

"I don't want to develop a voice." Blurted Bells.

"You're a *girl*!" Exclaimed Catarina. "What future do you think you have in science?"

"Why does it matter that I'm a girl? I certainly have no inclination in prancing around in stupid period dresses and hollering my lungs out like you do." As soon as Bells said it, she regretted it.

Her mother looked hurt. "Is that what you think I do? Holler my lungs out?"

"I hate dresses." Bells said stubbornly. "I hate singing. I hate it that I'm a girl. I want to do science. Stop sticking your tongue out at me!" That was directed at her little sister.

"Mom, Belladonna is being mean." Maria whined.

"Shut up." Said Bells.

"You shut up."

"Stop torturing your sister." Snapped Catarina. "Look at her. She's younger than you, but she has the presence of mind to follow my advice."

Maria flashed a triumphant smile and twirled, showing off her pink gaudy dress, the type their mother liked to buy for them. Bells made a gagging noise. She hated pink or anything decidedly girly. She made sure to never wear dresses, and if she absolutely had to, she'd smear them with mud so thoroughly, her mother pronounced them as ruined.

"I see how you are. Well, go ahead." Relented Catarina. "If that is your choice. But don't come crawling back to me asking for money."

"Mom, I'm only eleven!"

"At your age I was already working, modeling and making a considerable sum for every photo shoot."

"I don't want my face plastered on a can of macaroni, thank you." Said Bells.

"I want to be a model." Said Maria.

Bells made a strangling motion, and that sent Maria behind her mother's vast skirt.

"What do you want, then?" Asked Catarina. "All I see you do is run around with those abominable boys, doing who knows what and coming home as dirty as no respectable girl ought to be."

Bells's face flushed. "I'll be as dirty as I want."

"Then get out of here. Out of my house!" Catarina waved her hand, her eyes throwing daggers. "Go live with your father, and don't you dare coming back unless you're clean and have changed your mind."

"Fine." Said Bells quietly. An iron determination rooted her to the spot. She flung her head high and professed in an injured tone, "I will make it on my own. You'll see."

Catarina blinked and took a step forward. "Belladonna Monterey, you're going to choir practice, and that is final."

"I'm not Belladonna, I'm Bells."

"Your name is Belladonna."

"No, it's not!" Bells shook so hard, her voice quivered. "I'm Bells, I'm Bells, *I'm Bells!*" She turned on her heel and stormed to the garage.

"Come back this instant!" Catarina shouted, but it was too late.

What do you do when you're mad? I'll tell you what Bells did. She grabbed her bike and took off. "I will run away, that's

what I'll do." She said through clenched teeth. "I'll find a way to make it. I don't need her. *That* will teach her how to call me a poor scientist."

She pedaled so fast her ponytail whipped in the wind and her eyes spilled over with angry tears. She rode to the duck pond where Peacock, Grand, and Rusty were already waiting for her. They have agreed the night before to try and jump from the roof of the abandoned one-story house near the park on Bells's dare that she would be the one who'd do it more times than any of them.

They called her.

Bells didn't respond. She dropped the bike and stomped to the stagnant pond water in search of something to hurl as far and as hard as possible. Her eyes fell on a brown corner sticking out of the mud. She kneeled, clasped it and pulled. Out came a thick leather-bound tome. It was as large as her choir teacher's musical notebook. Without a second thought Bells weighted it in her hands and, aiming carefully, chucked it right at the ducks, sending them flying with cries of displeasure.

"There," she said. "Now I feel better."

I imagine you want to know what happened next. Well, it was as expected.

The book landed by the growth of sedge. With an ominous creak, it flung open and lay still, as if waiting to be examined.

Bells frowned.

"Did it just...open on its own?" She walked up to it and bent over. An otherwise ordinary book with ordinarily printed words, it was huge and thick and bloated, containing way too many pages for its binding, all of them yellowing and uneven, as if borrowed from different manuscripts you might find in an antique store.

Bells thought she saw something move on top of the paper. She leaned and gasped, her mouth hanging open. It was the most peculiar sight. The page spread held a miniature landscape. A frozen lake and a dark forest around it, covered with snow that sparkled in the light of a tiny sun. It hung in midair, so close to Bells's face, she was tempted to touch it.

She blinked, and it was gone. All of it, the sun and the landscape. An old tattered book, albeit enormous, lay sprawled at her feet. Something prevented her from touching it. She stood up, gazing blankly, and touched her head instead. It felt warm, the normal temperature.

"That's it. I'm seeing things." She muttered.

"Hey, Bells!" Called Peacock.

"Hey!" Echoed Rusty. "We thought you chickened out. Man, we were waiting for you for like an hour already, right? I mean, come on, you said nine in the morning."

They were ambling over.

Grand made it first, panting from effort. "Um, Bells? Are you all right?" He puffed out his cheeks, taking a breath.

"Huh?" She looked at him and through him.

"Your eyes..." He started, uncertain.

"What's wrong with my eyes?"

"Nothing."

Grand's round face shone from perspiration. He wiped his hands, sticky from the doughnut, and patiently waited for an answer.

Bells called him Grand for his formidable girth and considerable presence. To the rest of the world he was known as George Palmeater. His mother, Daniela Palmeater, worked as a cosmetologist in a funeral home, and his father, Stanley Palmeater, died from heart failure a few years ago—"from being too fat," as his mother explained. He had two little bothers, Max and Teddy. They liked to climb him like a little mountain, twist his ears, pull his nose, and poke his sides. This instilled in Grand an admirable patience, as well as a caution in choices and a morbid obsession with death that could be only curbed by eating doughnuts.

"It's not what you think, okay?" Bells sniffled inconspicuously, coming back to her senses. "I'm not crying."

Grand's cheeks colored. "But your eyes..."

"You're seeing things." She glanced down again. "And I'm seeing things. I think. Pinch me, please?"

"Pinch you?" He rubbed his hands. "What happened?"

"Mom again." Said Bells in a tone that didn't invite further conversation. "Choir practice. Don't ask. Listen, Grand, do you think children can hallucinate? I mean, like, in the middle of the day for no reason at all?"

"Um. I don't know. I think, yes. But that would mean they have a psychological disorder of some sort, and if untreated it could lead to a condition known as schizophrenia, and then they would start hearing voices and seeing things and then they become paranoid and start—"

"Okay, I get the point," said Bells weakly. She burned with desire to look down, and made a concentrated effort not to. What if the landscape she saw was there again? What if it wasn't? Did that mean she was going crazy?

"Is that a book?" Asked Grand.

"Wait." She touched his arm. "Let me—"

"What's up, Bells?" Interrupted them Peacock.

The gangliest and the tallest of the boys, he slapped her shoulder in a way of a greeting and raked a hand through his

blue hair, a fauxhawk, the pride and glory of his appearance. Bells called him Peacock—Peter Sutton was his name—for his cockiness and exuberance. Changing hair color was his way of getting noticed among the many people present in his loony house. His father, a real estate agent, has gone off his marbles, in Peacock's opinion, and married a loud artist woman who recently moved into their tiny apartment together with five children from her two previous marriages.

"Okay, I have a favor to ask." Said Bells and pointed down. "Do you guys see what I see, or am I going crazy?"

"What the heck?" Peacock fell to his knees.

The landscape was back on top of the page spread, more pronounced this time. The snowy sky hung over it a silvery layer. Wind howled and raged over the miniscule forest.

"There are trees and a lake and everything!" Peacock's voice shook from excitement.

"Wow." Exclaimed Rusty, sniggering. "No way! Is this for real? That's like, nuts! Right, Bells?"

He sniggered a lot, and Bells pronounced him Rusty for his rusted out voice—his given name was Russell Jagoda. He also talked a lot, which, coupled with his small size and knobbly joints that never seemed to stop twitching, gave him an appearance of a monkey. His parents were killed in a car crash when he was six and the brunt of his childhood was spent in the

company of his Polish grandmother Agnieszka who walked dogs for a living and instilled in him the love for petting any animal, dangerous or not.

He stretched out his hand.

"Don't touch it!" Snapped Bells.

"Why not?" Asked Rusty.

"We don't know what it is." She twisted her ponytail. "I do know one thing, though. I'm not going crazy, since you guys can see the same thing I see. And that is a good thing, I suppose."

They crowded around the book, mouths agape.

"Where did you find it?" Asked Peacock.

"Right over there." Bells pointed to the spot where the ducks sat huddling, their beady eyes shining with malice at her outrageous behavior. "I thought someone has thrown it away. It looked and felt like a book when I pulled it out. I didn't know if would have this inside it."

"You found this?" Asked Grand. "On the ground?"

"Yeah, right where the ducks are. See? It was stuck in the mud, so I dug it out and..." She didn't finish, sensing her face tingle. "I didn't mean to throw it. I was just mad."

"But how is this possible?" Asked Rusty, edging closer.

"It's not," stated Bells. "Scientifically speaking, it's not possible for anything like this to exist."

"So, what you're saying is," offered Peacock, "this doesn't exist?" He nudged the book with his sneaker, and the winter on top of it wailed with such ferocity, they all recoiled.

"I suppose it is real," admitted Bells. "Only I don't understand how this would work. I can test it and tell you."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Asked Peacock.

"Like any respectable scientist would do, you dolt. Watch me." Bells squatted between him and Rusty and hovered her hand over the page.

"Hey, you told me not to touch it." Objected Rusty.

"Exactly. Because you wouldn't know how. Get out of my way." She nudged him aside. The air froze her palm, and after a few seconds she had to move her hand away. "It's cold. I can feel the low temperature on my skin. Because I trust my senses, I conclude that this is real." Then, spurred by a rush of an overwhelming curiosity, she touched the lake.

"What are you doing! Are you off your marbles?" Cried Peacock.

"Are you scared?" Challenged him Bells, forcing herself not to wince. The frost bit her fingers, and they got stuck to the ice. She tried pulling away and couldn't. The lake held her fast.

"Um, maybe this is not such a good idea, testing it." Ventured Grand. "I went into the freezer at my mom's work once,

you know, the mortuary freezer, and I touched one of the walls, and it was very cold and it looked like it was powdered with sugar, so I licked it and my tongue got stuck to it and—”

“Okay, we heard this story a thousand times.” Said Bells with a nervous chuckle.

“But this is a different one...” Said Grand, crestfallen. He was fond of sharing morbid accounts of stumbling into rooms full of corpses or eating lunch with his mother right next to a dead body freshly made up with makeup, or other unmentionable adventures that nobody except his friends could stomach.

“Well, I think this is very real, actually.” Said Bells, the first twinge of panic twisting her stomach. She couldn’t feel her fingers, and the freezing clutches of some mysterious force pulled her whole arm, so that she had to plop down on the ground, pretending like this was just what she was planning on doing all along.

Rusty edged up to her. “How does it feel, Bells? Can I touch it now?”

“No!” She cried a bit too suddenly. “I mean, yes, you can, after I’m done, okay?”

“You’re shaking.” Observed Grand. “Don’t you think you’ve tested it enough?”

Just then—oh, don’t you love these words, “just then”? They make your skin tingle, don’t they? You know something dreadful

will happen in a book and you start biting your fingers. Good job, because you are absolutely right. Something dreadful indeed was about to happen, and it happened very fast.

Clearly fed up with waiting, the book proceeded to act. In pulled Bells down like a magnet might pull a piece of metal, drawing her closer to the page so that her face was inches away from the silvery tide of snowflakes shimmering over the book. It burned her cheek, and she positively decided that this was the time to panic in earnest.

"It won't let me go!" She cried.

"What is?" Asked Peacock dumbly.

"The book, you blockhead! Don't you see?"

Another tug. Bells cried out, clawing at the dirt to stay put. And then she began to shrink. She looked up at the boys, too stunned to utter any noise or make any movement. Her eyes shone out like two frightened saucers.

For a silent second the boys gazed at her diminishing shape. She found her voice and shouted. "Help me!" It sounded high-pitched and unnatural. She was half her size now, a third, a quarter. She took a deep breath and added an insult, in the hopes of persuading them to move. "Get me out, you idiots! What are you looking at? Help!"

At last they unfroze and rushed to her aid.

Grand grabbed her ankle, Rusty seized her leg, and Peacock clasped her waist. Not that it did much good. Bells slipped right through their fingers and with a shriek of terror dwindled into a dot swept off by the snow.

A thick silence fell over the pond.

Let me pause here and describe the scene to you. A nice sunny autumn morning. A rarely visited corner of a park overgrown with yellowing maples. An old duck pond, complete with mossy stones and round lily leaves. A dozen shameless ducks—the very reason why not many people ventured here—gathered around the boys in hopes of scoring a few doughnut crumbs that smelled so cunningly sweet (Grand always fed them when he came here). Four bikes heaped over one another. A growth of sedge, a mound of dirt, a giant open book, and three eleven-year-old boys kneeling next to it, their faces lit with a mixture of amazement, bafflement, and fear.

Suddenly—horrible things always happen *suddenly* in books—a fierce wind was born out of nowhere. It rushed across the treetops, tearing off leaves and loose twigs. The sky scudded with clouds. The sun disappeared. Squawking, the ducks fled to the far end of the pond and huddled in a trembling mass of feathers. The coldness issuing from the book made a slurping noise as if satisfied after a meal. The wind died, and the noise stopped.

"She'd gone." Said Peacock incredulously. "It took her. It took Bells!"

"She shrunk! Did you see that? Is that crazy or what? What do we do now, huh?" Rusty scratched his head.

"I'm going in." Grand cautiously looked into the book.

"Going where?" Peacock's eyes widened. "In there? Are you nuts?"

"Hey, that would be cool, wouldn't it?" Added Rusty. "I'd be sacred to shrink like that, though."

"You guys do what you want. It got Bells, so I'm going after her." Said Grand resolutely, closed his eyes and placed his hand on the lake. The book greedily accepted him and in another moment he vanished, whisked away into the forest.

Peacock and Rusty stared at the spot where Grand was a second ago, then at each other.

"We can't just leave them, Peacock." Said Rusty. "I mean, I get it that it's scary, but we have to get them." He gingerly extended a finger and touched the page. "Hey, that tickles, stop!" But the book didn't intend to stop. Rusty rapidly diminished in size and disappeared.

The book creaked, as if mocking Peacock with its open pages, waiting.

"Rusty!" He cried. "What the heck? This is not happening. This is *not* happening. It can't be." The little hairs at the

nape of his neck stood up. "Okay, okay. I'm coming in, guys. I'm coming." He squinted his eyes shut and felt for the paper. The second his finger made contact with the lake, it sucked him in.

When that was done, the front cover lifted and shut close, startling the ducks and sending ripples across the pond.

"Happy reading, badlings," rustled the book and sank back into dirt, feeling rather accomplished with itself.

Chapter 2. The Talking Book

When you open a new book, hardly do you know where it will take you. That's the fun of reading. It might plunge you into dark foreboding places full of fire-breathing monsters, or it can take you into places frighteningly white and empty, like this one.

Bells rubbed her arms. Freezing wind cut through her clothes, flurries blew in her face. She took a step, slipped on the ice, and promptly fell down. The ground met her with a bone-chilling hospitality. She scrambled up, looking around, but there was nothing to see except drifting twirling snow.

"Hello?" Her voice sunk into silence.

"Anyone here?" She glanced up, fully expecting to see gigantic faces of her friends. There was only the sky swept over with a depressingly argent whiteness. In simpler words, snow, snow, and more snow.

"What is this place?" She pinched herself. The scenery didn't change one bit. In fact, it appeared even snowier. Bells sighed. "Okay, let's analyze this. Scientifically speaking, and based on the facts of what has just happened, I must be inside the book I found by the duck pond. Right? Right. I *am* inside it.

I grew smaller and it pulled me in, and it looks like a frozen lake with a forest around it. What does this mean? This means that maybe it's a part of the story written on these pages, and that means that *I* am now inside this story. That makes sense, doesn't it? What else could it be?" She didn't know whom she was talking to, but the sound of her voice gave her courage. "I'm not scared. I'm not scared at all. I will figure this out." She fell silent. The first twinge of fear slid into her stomach like a shard of ice.

Bells hopped from foot to foot and rubbed her hands. "Okay, okay. I'm okay." She panted, watching warm plumes of air escape her mouth and wondering how long Grand said it takes for someone to freeze to death. "I will be fine." Her head began to pound at the injustice of it all. "Why is it always me who has to test everything out? Why couldn't it be Peacock for a change?" It escaped her mind that it was she who insisting on being the first.

Bells kicked at the snow. "Great. Now I'm inside some stupid book that somehow opened up into this stupid place, and I have no clue how to get out of here." As she was talking, she noticed that the wind quieted down and every snowflake appeared to have grown ears, or else started falling slower, carefully listening to her every word.

A suspicious idea formed in her head.

"Hello?" She called.

There was no answer, but she thought she heard a rustle that could be the clearing of a throat or the creaking of the pages. The sound dissolved into nothing somewhere above her head and all was still again, as if watching her.

"Hello?" She repeated. "Naturally, just as my luck would have it, I'm alone here. But," she raised a finger, "if my theory is correct, if this is a story, there must be someone here, it must be a story about *someone*. But I don't see anyone, and that is very strange. What kind of a story is this, if it only has a lake and a forest in it? A stupid story, that's what. I get it. This book is dumb, that's what I think." She raised her voice, speaking louder. "It must have been such a boring and dull book, that someone got finally fed up with it and has thrown it away. In fact, I think this book is the most boring and uninteresting book of them all!"

The snow stopped. The wind died with a disgruntled sigh.

"Boring?" Rustled a papery voice over her head. "Did you call me *boring*?"

Bells heart plummeted, then sprung into her ears and pounded so hard, she thought she would faint.

"Er." She couldn't think of anything to say.

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Demanded the voice. "Or are you not only rude but deaf also?"

Bells swallowed. "Who is it?" She said timidly. "Is anyone here?" She looked about her, but there was nothing but the snow.

"You're blind, too? Oh, this is getting better by the minute."

Bells blinked and rubbed her eyes. "I don't see anyone. Where are you?"

"You saw me well enough to dig me out of the mud, did you not?" Inquired the voice. It spoke all around her, and Bells wished to drop through the ice and come out at some other end, anything but to hear this terrible creaking.

"I'm sorry, but do you mind—"

"Yes, I do mind. I mind very much." It waited.

"You're...the book I found?" Bells faltered. "You can *talk?*"

"So full of insults, boorish and uncultured. All of you are like that. How little respect and gratitude I see from you, for everything I do."

If it is possible for you to imagine, think of a book shaking its head. A crack ripped through the air, and the ice under Bells's feet shifted and groaned. A fissure ran through the surface of the lake and cut in a jagged line across the oval plateau fringed by the forest.

Bells cowered, expecting the worst, but nothing else happened. She cautiously looked up. "Er, book?"

No answer.

"Book? I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to throw you." She paused. "I was mad at my mom, and, well...I tend to throw things when I'm mad. It makes me feel better."

The voice huffed.

"I really *am* sorry. I promise."

Without the slightest warning—this is how bad things usually happen in books—the ground lifted and threw Bells off her feet. She sat back hard and cried out in pain.

"No, you're not. You're not sorry at all. You all say that, and none of you mean it." Hissed the voice.

The snow rolled around Bells in great dunes that formed lips of a mouth. "You're scared, that's what you are. You're trying to placate me. Well, it won't work. You will pay for your offense, you and your pitiful friends."

Bells swallowed. "My friends? They're *here*?"

"Maybe." The voice cracked up in a laughter that sounded like ripping paper.

"Where are they? How can I find them? There is nothing I can see for miles except ice and snow, and if I stay here any longer, I will freeze to death!" Cried Bells.

"Suits me." Said the voice.

"Who *are* you?" Asked Bells faintly.

"I see you don't have much of a brain. But then again, girls usually don't."

Bells choked on her breath. "Excuse me?"

"Excuse you?" Boomed the voice. "Excuse you? You, the most disrespectful annoying badling who dared to throw me—throw *me!*—like a piece of garbage, like an insignificant trifle, like a...like a..." The voice burbled with rage.

"Badling?" Repeated Bells. "What's a badling?" She stared at the snowy lips. They drew closer, and Bells stiffened, determined not to show that she was horrified.

"Do you have to know the meaning of everything?" Said the voice cunningly.

"Yes." Answered Bells, her whole body shaking. "I need to know what things mean, in order for me to understand them."

"How boring your life must be." Whispered the voice. "Where is your sense of wonder?"

"Facts are the only things that matter for a scientist." Said Bells, unable to take her eyes away from the rolls creeping closer to her feet and trying not to think about what would happen if they touched her.

"I see now why you wouldn't finish reading books." Concluded the voice.

"What books?"

"You don't even remember."

"I'm really cold." Squeaked Bells, shivering violently.

"Please. How do I get out of here?"

The voice tittered unpleasantly. "What makes you think you can?"

Bells gulped. "Can I?"

"Maybe. If you finish reading the pages you so heartlessly abandoned." Stated the voice cruelly.

"What pages?"

"The ones you're standing on!" Shouted the voice, and Bells cowered, shielding her eyes from its fury.

"But there are no words." She muttered, squinting down. She dark lines and cracks and bubbles encased in the slab of ice, but nothing else. "How do I read it?"

"Of course there aren't. You're *in* it." Said the voice and cackled, as if satisfied at last.

The noise chilled Bells's blood. She peered up from under her hand. "So what do I do?"

"Enough! You have tired me out. I will go nap now." And with this the voice whooshed up and away in a shower of sparkling crystals. The sky, a moment ago choked with heavy snow clouds, rapidly cleared to a cobalt dome. Hard sun indifferently shone down.

"Hello, book?" Called Bells. "Are you there?"

The sky gazed at her condescendingly.

"Grand? Guys?" Bells walked a short distance, then stopped, at once enveloped in a bitter exasperation. "Anyone?"

She took a deep breath and marched forward, although it might as well have been backward. The lake around her spread equally in every direction. Snow crunched under her feet. "So this crazy book is pissed off at me for throwing it at the ducks. It got me in here for punishment and wants me to read the pages I left unread. Okay. How do I do that?"

There wasn't anyone to answer, and after a while Bells stopped. She reached the edge of the woods, tall pines and firs burdened with snow, hunched under its weight like sullen giants. Bells blew on her hands and tucked them in her armpits.

"Okay, let me think. What book did I read that had a frozen lake in it?" Her memory refused to cooperate, her thoughts turned to churning sludge and her teeth chattered uncontrollably. "I can't think of anything." She wheezed. "I must keep walking, otherwise I *will* freeze to death." She waded in and out of the trees, calling names.

"Peacock? Grand? Rusty?"

She skirted a particularly thick fir and stumbled on something sprawled across the frigid ground. Whatever it was, it was warm and breathing and alive. Bells choked back a scream, thinking that it might be a sleeping polar bear or some other big predatory animal. White fur covered it from head to toe.

Only it wasn't fur, it was snow, and it fell off in clumps as the figure sat up and dazedly looked around.

"Um. Bells?"

Bells's face lit up. "Grand!"

"That is me." He blinked.

"Where is Peacock and Rusty?"

Grand heaved a sigh and gazed at their surroundings.

"They're back at the duck pond, I think."

"They are?" Bells's smile slipped a notch.

Grand struggled to standing, brushing the snow off his shirt.

"Listen," said Bells feverishly. "This book we're in, I talked to it. It can *talk*, Grand." Bells's tongue moved with difficulty. "It's angry at me for throwing it and for abandoning book pages, or something like that. It called me a badling. I suppose that means I'm bad. So, right now we're standing on a page of a book that I haven't finished reading, and I have to read it, although it doesn't have any words printed on it. There are the facts I have gathered so far."

"On a page of what?" Grand's face puckered in concentration.

"Sorry, I'm not making any sense, I know. This book we're in, the book I found at the duck pond, I talked to it. Can you believe it?"

"Sort of..." Said Grand slowly.

"Anyway, it said that Peacock and Rusty are here too. Maybe."

"I was hoping they'd go after me." Said Grand thoughtfully. Contrary to Bells whose face has attained a faint shade of blue, he didn't appear to be suffering from cold. His round cheeks blazed crimson. "I'm glad I have found you, Bells. Did the book tell you how to get out of here?"

"Not quite." Admitted Bells. "It got tired of my questions and went for a nap."

"A nap?" Grand smiled. "A book went for a nap?"

"That's what it said."

Grad frowned. "Um, that's not good. If we stay here much longer, we will grow so cold, we'll be tempted to lie down in the snow and our blood will chill and our hearts will beat slower and slower until—"

"Okay, Grand, I get it." Said Bells nervously. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Said Grand, nonplussed. "I'm scared of what will happen, that's all."

"Boys aren't supposed to be scared."

"That is not true." Grand looked her straight in the eye. "Everyone gets scared. It's okay to be scared. Girls always—"

"Don't talk to me about what girls do and don't. I'm a girl and I know better." Bells's face flushed and she felt a little warmer. "Let's go find them."

This new purpose filled her with energy. She grabbed Grand's hand, marveling at how possibly it could stay so warm in this temperature, and together they trudged along the bank crusted over with frost.

An echo of a voice trailed on the wind.

Bells gripped Grand's hand harder. "Did you hear that?" She took a deep breath and yelled, "Peacock? Rusty?"

"Bells?" Came from behind a snowdrift.

They bolted around it and quite suddenly collapsed into their friends. There were cries of pain, then cries of joy, and, once they have confirmed that all four of them were whole and uninjured, agitated bewilderment over what the book told Bells.

"That is insane," said Peacock, jumping for warmth.

"We're in a book! How cool is that?" Rusty's exuberance overshadowed his fright.

"Not cool at all. It would've been cool if it was warmer." Peacock said with feeling. "Are you interested in turning into an icicle, Rusty? I'm not."

Bells crossed her arms. "Well, nobody asked you to follow me."

"Oh, thanks." Peacock sniffled. His nose dripped, and he held himself in a desperate clutch. "We couldn't just leave you, could we?"

Bells squinted. "I bet you were the last one to get in."

"Yeah, he got in after me!" Said Rusty and sniggered.

Peacock gave him a murderous look.

"Guys, please." Grand put up his hands, the gesture he used on his two little brothers. "We need to figure out how to get out of here."

"Do we, really?" Peacock rolled his eyes, which was quite a task, as they felt frosted solid in their sockets. "Why hurry? I like it here. It's nice and warm and sunny."

Bells pursed her lips. "Peacock, stop it."

Suddenly Rusty gave a start. "Look, someone is coming."

"Where?" Bells squinted.

"There, see?" Rusty pointed at a rousing cloud of flurries that drifted toward them. It glided. It clopped. And then it snorted in high animal voices.

Chapter 3. The Ice Woman

Fear has big eyes. It makes it easy for authors to fool you. Never trust appearances on first sight, especially those in books. You see one thing, and just when you think you know what it is, it turns out to be something completely different.

To Rusty the eddy of snow looked like a swarm of running monkeys. Grand perceived a rider on an argent horse, a rider without a head. Peacock feared it could be vampire brides in torn disintegrating dresses. And only Bells saw it for what it was.

Pulled by three ivory horses, a sleigh carved from ice—pellucid, crisp, and shiny—swished along the lake, spraying snowdust from under its runners. A tall regal figure stood at the reins, wrapped in a fur coat and muff, a silver crown glistening on its head. It was a woman of frightening beauty, one that stabs you with cold and holds you hostage to its perfection, symmetrical, mathematical almost, and dead.

The horses reared and neighed to the sky. The woman shouted something and, noticing the children standing by the edge of the lake, changed direction, spurring the animals to veer to the left. Their cantering horseshoes clacked loudly against the ice,

sending an echo that broke off at the trees and died in the whoosh of the scattering crystals.

"Guys?" Said Bells nervously. "Chill. I know who it is."

"Yeah?" Asked Peacock breathlessly.

"I read this book to Maria and never got to the end because it became ridiculous, scientifically speaking. I remember now. I got disgusted and told her to finish it herself." She wrapped her arms around herself.

"Um. What book was it?" Asked Grand.

"The Snow Queen." Bells took a cautious step back, watching the horses close in on them. Their nostrils flared, plumes of warm air burst from them, and their eyes rotated wildly at each cry of the Snow Queen. "It's a fairy tale about this ice woman," added Bells, "she wants to freeze the whole world, you know, power and domination and all. She is charming, really, except if she kisses you, your heart turns into ice or some other nonsense like that."

Peacock has gone white. "Kisses you? Is that what she is going to do? Is that part of *reading* this page? Like, can we skip the kissing part?"

"I'd like to see her try!" Shrieked Rusty. With a cry of war he brandished a stick over his head.

"Where did you find that, Rusty?" Asked Bells.

"In the woods, where. We will just chase her off. That's what you do with angry animals, you poke them with a stick!" He stabbed the air with the stick a bit too vigorously and knocked himself off his feet.

"She is not an animal, Rusty." Said Grand with the tone of one who pronounces a death sentence. "Besides, if you fight her, you might make her want to kiss you, like Bells is saying, and then you will turn black from cold, and after a while—I'm not sure how long it takes, um, Bells? Does your heart turn to ice right away, or does it take a while?"

"I haven't read that part," said Bells through teeth. "And I don't think I want to know."

Grand sighed and opened his mouth to theorize some more, when Rusty interrupted him, pointing an enthusiastic finger. "Horses!"

"Rusty, no!" Cried Bells, but he already skidded down the slope and crouched up to the quivering breathing beasts that ogled him like some insane apparition that dared to come too close. Their hides were powdered with hoarfrost. Tiny icicles hung from their manes, mangled by the wind.

"Nice horses, nice little horses..." Whispered Rusty, stretching out his hand. The steed in the middle snorted so hard, Rusty staggered back and sat in the snow, a puzzled

expression spreading over his face. "You don't like to be petted?"

The steed gave him a stink-eye that clearly signified its protest to such obsequious proposition.

Rusty quailed and scuttled back to his friends.

"Do you *have* to pet everything that moves?" Scolded him Bells.

"But...horses..." Rusty fell silent.

The Snow Queen drew herself to a full height and stepped off the sleigh, her face an impassionate mask of a doll. Her eyes fell on Bells, and something glistened in them, a deeply hidden hunger.

Bells felt it and flinched under her gaze.

"Sweet children," said the Snow Queen melodically, almost singing, "are you cold? Come, I will warm you up." She smiled, if you can call the stretching of blue lips a smile.

"Uh, no, thank you." Said Peacock in a voice he didn't know he still had. "We're not that cold, actually."

"She is so pretty, though!" Exclaimed Rusty, gazing at the queen, utterly mesmerized.

Peacock seized his arm. "Don't listen to her, it's a trick. They're always kissing you in fairy tales, and then you end up dead."

"How would you know? Have you read it?" Rusty wrestled out of Peacock's hold. "Hey, Snow Queen! Is that true that if you kiss people, their hearts turn to ice?"

The queen regarded him, amused. "Would you like to find out?" She said sweetly. "Come, boy, let me wrap you in my cloak. You look like you're freezing."

Rusty grinned, the tips of his ears glowing.

An instinct told Bells that the queen didn't plan to do anything pleasant. She gathered a handful of snow and rolled it into a ball. It has melted in her hands to a perfectly round shape, and she hurled it at the queen with commendable precision. It hit her in the face and plastered over her eye like a white eye-patch.

Another snowball, thrown by Peacock, obliterated her other eye. The queen windmilled her arms, surprised, and backed into the sleigh. The snowballs pelted her. The horses whinnied and tossed their manes in distress, clawing at the ice. The queen flung her arms protectively over her head and cried, "Stop! I'm not going to hurt you. I'm trying to help!"

Bells scooped more snow with unfeeling hands. "Help? I don't believe you for a second." She straightened and paused mid-throw, an arm over her head.

The queen smiled, not in a cold sinister way, but in a warm friendly way, although how it was possible and where the change

came from, Bells couldn't fathom. She glanced around. The boys looked at her confusedly.

"I was good, wasn't it?" Said the queen with pride, peeling the snow off her face.

Bells blinked. "What?"

"Did I scare you?" Said the queen.

"Scared us?" Asked Bells airily. "Pfft. Not one bit." She dangerously weighted the snowball in her hand, as if about to chuck it.

"Oh yes, I did." Said the queen. "I'm sorry I had to be so...cold. But it was convincing, wasn't it?" She tossed back her head, and the jewels in the crown sparkled. "It's rather magnificent to be the Snow Queen. I can do things to those who won't obey me." She lifted her arms, as if to embrace the children. "If I breathe on you, you will frost over and turn blue and die." She approached Bells, who hastily retreated. "And if I kiss you, as you already know, your heart will become a lump of ice. The more I kiss you, the colder you get, until there is no living warmth in you left."

"That doesn't sound very pleasant." Said Bells.

The queen's face was so close to hers, she could see her marble-smooth skin, almost transparent, as if made of ice, and her dazzlingly white teeth beneath peeled lips. "Would you like to have a power like mine?"

"What for?" Asked Bells, looking at the boys for support. They weren't much help. Mouths open, they gaped at the queen, struck by her charming voice into a momentary daze.

"She's so pretty!" Said Rusty.

"I know..." Echoed Peacock, his mouth slack.

Grand didn't say anything, his cheeks were the color of ruddy sunset, steam coming off them in a visible mist.

The queen seemed to enjoy the attention. She sent them air kisses, picked up the stick Rusty dropped, and breathed on it. It immediately frosted over with intricate glittering swirls that typically form on the windows in the wintry mornings.

Suddenly a cough shook the sky and a voice rustled over their heads, "Ahem. What exactly are you doing?"

The Snow Queen paled, if that was possible with her already pallid complexion. "I woke Mad Tome."

"Who?" Asked Bells.

"Act scared," she hissed at the children. "Go on. Now!" And she stuck out her arms and roused a biting wind that disguised them in a swirl of flurries.

It took them a moment.

"Oh no!" Cried Bells and clasped her face in mock distress. "She is going to get us!"

"We better run!" Picked up Peacock.

"You are so scary!" Rusty waited for Grand to add something.

"Um," said Grand confusedly.

"Run, run." Said the queen through teeth, and together, slipping and sliding, they took off into undefined whiteness until the ground under their feet changed from smooth to coarse, and they collapsed on the edge of the lake at the foot of the looming woods. The queen ushered them on. They wove between rows of pines and firs and at last stopped out of breath in a murky shadow of a fir that spread its braches over their heads like a canopy. Through the trees the lake shone like a steel knife blade. A cutting wind blew wisps of snowflakes. Faint gallop steadily grew louder, and in the next moment a sleigh drawn by the horses came to a halt, waiting for their queen.

Bells breathed out great puffs of air. "Why...should we...trust you?" She asked, gulping.

"What choice do you have?" Said the queen sweetly.

"Snow Queen, where are you?" Bellowed the voice above.

The queen grimaced painfully. "Unfortunately, I need to be going."

"Wait!" Cried Bells. "Who is Mad Tome?"

"Shhh!" The queen pressed a finger to her lips.

"I heard that." Boomed the voice above. It rustled through the trees, whirring nearer.

"Is that...the book talking?" Asked Peacock.

The Snow Queen shrunk and said quickly. "We're done now, so you can go to the next page. Go, before it gets really mad!"

"I'm *beyond* mad now." The voice wailed, and large heaps of snow plopped on children's heads, shaken from the boughs overhead. They didn't have time to scream. The ground bulged and careened, then rose as if a gigantic page it was sitting on began turning. Bells and the boys fell over one another and rolled through the trees to a flat glade where they slammed into the base of a dirt wall.

Snow bunged Bells's eyes and mouth. Her hands clenched into claws. She dug herself out with stubborn determination and sat up, reeling. "Guys? Are you okay?"

"Sort of." Said Peacock, tossing snow off his hair.

Rusty crawled out of a heap and was peering up. "Whoa!" He said, reaching out to touch it. "What is that?"

It was a wall of soil, moist and brown and littered with ends of roots that stuck out like crooked bones. It stretched from left to right in an endless peat brown line, and up into the misty blue of the sky, as if the world of snow and frost and ice had been neatly cut off and thrust against the edge of an earth divider.

Bells cautiously peaked up.

"We're underground, and this is mud. The mud by the duck pond." She said breathlessly and turned to the boys. "Guys, we can dig ourselves out!"

"Oh no, you can't." Said the rustling voice above and sent goose bumps along her back. "You are staying until I decide to let you go. Or not." It cackled.

"Mad Tome?" Asked Bells. "Is that your name?"

"Mad Tome? Is there no end to your insults, you despicable badling?" Shouted Mad Tome. "Who told you this? The Snow Queen? Blast her. Blast them all. Sometimes I think retirement might be not such a bad idea after all, then I can nap all I want and not have to deal with any of you anymore." It uttered a series of growls no doubt professing outrage at such injustice-whatever it was. "I see freezing hasn't cured you of your insolence. How about you bake in the sun and suffer from thirst? Or, better," it dropped its voice to a whisper, "get impaled on a lance, the old-fashioned way?" This was followed by a volley of horrid cackles.

Bells and the boys exchanged a glance. Their faces turned grey, and for a good reason. The forest floor slipped from underneath them, and they tumbled headlong onto the next page that felt as hot as a fired up furnace impatiently waiting to fry them alive.

Chapter 4. The Petulant Donkey

A good book waits for you to feel comfortable with the story to surprise you with an unforeseen twist. Not Mad Tome. Being a *bad* book, it liked to rudely catapult its readers from page to page without so much as a pause to catch their breath or to take a bite of a doughnut (not that it offered any).

And so it was that instead of munching on something sweet, Grand found himself chewing sand. He energetically spit it out. Close by Peacock and Rusty did the same. There was no sign of Bells, but plenty of windswept barren land—not quite a desert, but close enough. Bleached grassless knolls rippled into infinity, bright sky held a blinding sun, and the air was so hot and dry, it made them cough.

"What the heck is this place?" Said Peacock, wiping his mouth. His hands tingled, and his nose burned from the heat, thawing after being frozen numb.

"Where is Bells?" Said Grand with alarm.

"Bells?" Picked up Rusty.

"Bells!" They called in a chorus.

"Here!" Came a feeble voice.

A moment later Bells slid down the slope of a bare hill. She descended in a cloud of dust and, caught by inertia, failed to veer aside and rammed straight into the boys. They yelped. Bells squealed. It took them a while to disentangle. Finally they lay sprawled on their backs, breathless, gradually sinking into the warmth the way you sink into a bath that's too hot but so pleasant that you don't mind your skin burning and lower yourself in, bit by bit, with a quiet sigh.

"Ahhh." Said Bells.

"Ahhh." Echoed Peacock.

"Ahhh." Breathed Grand and Rusty.

They looked at each other and giggled.

The buzzing sensation of heat was so enjoyable that for a while none of them spoke. All they did was feel their hands and feet hum and their minds melt and their bodies relax. This lasted a few minutes, then it became too much. They started sweating.

Bells sat up and redid her ponytail.

Peacock stretched out, yawning wide.

"Stop it." She said crossly, suppressing her own yawn, her eyes watering.

"I can't stop it." Replied Peacock lazily. "I can't control nature. I feel sleepy and I yawn and that's that."

"Well, you must. Otherwise we're never getting out of here."

"Why should we?" said Peacock with hidden sarcasm. "I feel comfortable. Don't you?"

Bells didn't take the bait.

"Um." Grand mopped his glistening face. "Not really."

"Is this a desert? Are we in a desert?" Asked Rusty, his eyes already shining with the fervor of exploration.

"It's not a desert, Rusty." Corrected him Bells. "A desert is made of sand, endless sand dunes, and this is dry land. See? There are clumps of grass growing. I know they look dead and brown, but they are growing, that means there is water here, so it's more of a steppe or a prairie."

Rusty knotted his brows. "What's a steppe?"

"An arid grassland devoid of any vegetation." Said Bells slowly. "Do I have to explain everything to you?"

"Either way it's bad," said Grand with a dejected sigh.

"There must be scorpions here, or snakes. They will bite us, and the poison will spread and make the bite marks look like red balloons oozing pus and in our deathly convulsions we wouldn't even—"

"If you won't stop, I will bite you instead of a snake." Said Bells with feeling. "My venom is worse than that of a cobra, did you know that?"

"I have no doubt." Snorted Peacock.

"Snakes? Where?" Rusty jumped up and scrambled up the hill, sending down rivulets of grit.

Bells clasped her forehead. "He'll get us in trouble, I have a feeling he will."

"Don't let the scorpions eat you!" Called Peacock after him.

"I'll only take a look, I'll be right back!" Came Rusty's voice from above.

They watched him climb to the top and crawl around, peering at the ground and poking it with his finger. Their eyes met and their carefully tucked away fear lurked to the surface.

"Do you think..." started Grand, "...do you think we could really die of thirst and hunger here?"

"This is not logical." Said Bells after a pause, gazing into nowhere.

"What?" Asked Peacock.

"It's not making any sense." Reflected Bells, and the boys huddled closer to her. "So, we're in a book, and it's called Mad Tome. I don't know if it's its proper title, but it sounds like it got very upset at hearing it. Since the Snow Queen called it like that, it must be its name or nickname. Makes sense?"

The boys nodded.

"Okay," continued Bells, a tad encouraged. "Let's apply logic to this. If Mad Tome is a book about the Snow Queen—the fairy tale I didn't finish reading to Maria—then the next page after the one we were on should've been covered with snow, right? It should be winter here, not summer in some wasteland."

"What are you saying?" Asked Peacock, interested.

"I'm saying that this is not an ordinary book. Well, naturally, it isn't because it somehow managed to shrink us and get us inside of itself, but also because it's not a coherent story. One page was from the Snow Queen, and this page I think is from some other story."

"Um, that would explain why its name is Mad Tome." Said Grand timidly.

Bells stared at him. "How so?"

"I think," Grand licked the sweat off his lips, "maybe it's made of pages from different stories, it can't be called any one story in particular, so it has its own name."

"That's exactly what I thought," said Bells breathlessly. "I thought its made up of pages from different stories." She looked at Grand with a new appreciation. He sucked in his cheeks, attempting to hide their rising color.

"What is a tome anyway?" Blurted Peacock. "Is it a nickname for Tom or something?"

"No, Peacock, use your brain." Said Bells sternly. "A tome is a thick book. And it's mad because, well, I suppose it has gone mad and that's why they call it Mad Tome."

The ground underneath them trembled.

The children started, staring at each other.

"Holy cow." Peacock's pupils nearly popped. He gripped onto the dirt as if it would make him stay put. The tremor passed.

"This is crazy. Did it...hear us?"

"It said it didn't like its name," said Grand.

"So what is it we have to do again, to get out of here?"

"Read the pages, as far as I understand." Said Bells. "Only I don't know how we can do it, maybe we should dig and there will be words underneath?"

"But the Snow Queen said we were done with her page."
Supplied Grand.

Bells's mouth opened. She stared at her friend, and finally professed. "Grand, you're a genius. That's it!"

"What is?" Peacock's question went unanswered. "Don't you hate it when she does this?" He asked Grand.

Grand shrugged, and then a timid smile crept to his lips.

"We don't need to read it," croaked Bells, her voice breaking, "all we have to do is live through the page. I mean, we're *inside* it. So all we have to do is..." She didn't finish, but looked over the boys and across the dry cracked valley. She

noticed the silence. Apart from their own voices and the hissing of an occasional breeze, no other noises reached them, and Bells's stomach gave an unpleasant jolt. They were in the middle of nowhere, with no water or food. She suddenly felt very thirsty. "I think," she began, shaking a little, "because I didn't finish reading some books' pages, Mad Tome is punishing me by making me live through them. But then why are you here with me? I don't remember reading this book...do any of you know what this story is? Did any of you abandon it?"

Grand and Peacock shook their heads no.

"Great." Said Bells and crossed her arms.

"If we stay here much longer," observed Grand, "we can fry alive. In my mom's funeral home they have this incinerator, and when the relatives want their dead to be cremated, they—"

Bells silenced him with a murderous look. "Can we not talk about dead people?"

"Guys!" On top of the hill Rusty was waving both arms.

"Look who is here!"

Bells puffed out her cheeks. "What now?"

Next to Rusty stood a plump dappled donkey, happily masticating a wad of grass. It brayed and galloped down the hillock until it stopped right by the children's feet. Rusty caught on to it, beaming, as if it was the most exciting thing

in the world to bring a donkey to his friends stranded in the wasteland of an unpredictable book that was obviously mad.

"Hello badlings." Said the donkey, spitting out cud.
"Feeling warm yet?"

Bells's mouth opened. "A talking donkey. Why am I not surprised."

"Um." Said Grand, feeling his forehead. "I think we all had a heat stroke and are delirious. Soon we will lose our consciousness and—" Bells nudged him.

The donkey studied the children as if they were new toys to play with. "Who of you would like to be a donkey?" It asked.

Peacock gaped. "Why would any of us want to be a donkey?"

The donkey pouted, sticking out one moist lower lip. "I was going to risk my precious position to help you. Maybe I shouldn't bother. And you said your friends are nice," it looked up at Rusty accusingly.

"They are nice." He said. "This is Bells, Peacock, and Grand." He grinned. "Guys, this is Dapple."

Dapple hiccupped and brayed something that sounded like laughter. "Peacock? That's a *funny* name."

"What's so funny about it?" Peacock smoothed his hair, giving Bells an angry eye.

She didn't notice and said slowly, "can...everything talk in here?"

Dapple balked. "What do you mean, everything? I'm not a thing, I'm a person."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was assuming," Bells deadpanned. "A person?"

"This is so irritating." Dapple flicked his ears. "I must confess, I'm getting tired of this...camouflage." He plodded closer to them, speaking quieter and throwing cautious glances around. "I'm not really a donkey." He waddled even closer. "You help us, we help you. Do we have a deal?"

"Help with what?" Asked Bells.

"Would you like to get out of here?" Offered Dapple, baring his yellowish cutters.

"Yes." Answered Bells uneasily.

"The deal is this. Mad Tome is getting madder and madder, and we're afraid of what it might do next. Do you want to get home?"

They nodded.

"Well, we'd like to get home too. And—"

"Home where?" Interrupted Peacock.

Dapple riveted up his eyes, and there was a flicker of sorrow in them. "Promise me you won't breathe a word about this to Mad Tome."

"Promise." Said Peacock in a single breath.

"We promise." Picked up Bells and Grand and Rusty.

Dapple waited for a beat and said, "we want you to *destroy* it." When none of the children comprehended what he meant, he added, "Mad Tome."

"What?" Said Bells incredulously. "How?"

"Why?" Said Peacock.

"Right now?" Said Rusty.

"Will we die in the process?" Said Grand.

There was a tremor that sounded like the crackling of bones in a huge mouth yawning somewhere in the sky. Blood drained out of Dapple's muzzle, if you can imagine what that looked like. He raised his head and brayed. "There you are! I found you! My master will bring his master, and he will skewer you on his spear!"

"Skewer us?" Repeated Bells, startled by this sudden change.

"It's terrible that I can't help you!" Continued Dapple. "There is absolutely nothing I can do! Prepare for your torturous and imminent death!" He winked and cantered off, clattering along the stretch of packed dirt.

The ground rumbled alarmingly. A harsh wind beat on them, throwing fine gravel in their faces, and a rustling voice announced overhead, "That's enough, Dapple! Next thing you know, you'll tell them who you are. Can't rely on any of you these days, how very annoying."

"Guys?" Rusty pointed at the knolls. They formed a mouth that sneered in the most unpleasant manner.

"Hey, Mad Tome!" He called. His friends shushed him, but it was too late. "How was the nap?"

The mouth migrated close and asked with sinister glee, "You have anything against naps, you brazen badling?"

"Nope." Rusty backtracked. "I love naps, actually. My grandma and I, we always take naps on weekends."

"Perhaps I should separate you four, to make it a bit more fun. What do you say?"

Before Rusty could answer, Mad Tome's mouth disappeared. In its place the ground swelled into an enormous hand that seized him by the scruff of his shirt and tossed him across the wasteland to the edge of the page, where the ground peeled off, curled, and swiped him out of sight.

"Rusty!" Cried Bells and together with Peacock and Grand rushed after him, Mad Tome forgotten. It was an easy idea, but not an easy going. Their feet slipped on the dry soil. By the time they made it to the spot where Rusty vanished, the page was back in its place. The lowland butted against a moist earth wall, the same one they saw on the previous page.

"Where did he go?" Asked Bells incredulously.

"Um, to another page?" Mused Grand.

She fell to her knees. "Let's go after him."

"And how do you suggest we do that?" Asked Peacock, his voice a bit too high pitched for comfort.

"Dig, you dunce." She reported without looking.

Disgust distorted Peacock's features. "Dig?"

"Don't you get it?" Bells placed her hands on her hips. "We're on a page, so underneath all this dirt there must be paper. That means, if we dig, we might lift it and get to the next page." She scraped the hard-packed dirt with her nails, which proved to be useless, as the ground was impossible to penetrate.

"I don't think it will do any good." Said Grand with a tinge of panic.

"That's right, at least one of you is wise." Rustled Mad Tome. "How about some bloodletting, since freezing and frying you doesn't make you more agreeable?"

Bells leapt up, fuming. "Are you going to keep throwing us from page to page?" She shouted.

"Oh, feisty, are we?" Mad Tome cackled. "I must say, despite your naïve impertinence, immaturity, and foolishness, you are providing me with entertainment. If you keep going like this, I might even skip my naps to watch you *closer*."

The page heaved. Bells pitched forward, toppled over the boys, and they all rolled downward, into the widening gap by the mud wall. It opened with grim familiarity, welcoming three

screaming children into its depths. The last thing they saw before hurling onto the next page was a sneering face made of grit and bleached by the hot steppe sun.

Chapter 5. The Psychotic Puppy

It's unadvisable to delegate your tasks to those who abhor you. Instead of complying they will most likely make you fail. Mad Tome wrongly concluded that the book characters would obey its commands. On the contrary, bereft of their rightful volumes, they conspired against it from day one.

Pretending to be unaware of a new presence on its page, an enormous puppy spied on Rusty. Tail high and ears alert, it pranced around the patch of thistle and chewed on one of the purple flowers—for distraction, or for vitamins, or for whatever it was dogs usually chewed on things.

Rusty lay sprawled on the turf. It smelled fresh and moist, as if recently sprinkled with rain. With a groan he propped himself up on his elbows, reeling. It took him a moment to remember who he was.

"Rusty." He said, testing his voice. "That sounds familiar. It's my name, right? I think it is. No, wait...my name is Russell Jagoda. Rusty is my nickname. I must have bonked my head pretty hard." He absentmindedly stroked the grass and gazed around at the giant flowers. "Is this a prehistoric wood or something?" He stared dumbly at the blades as tall as trees hung

with globules of dew. At the nudge of his foot one of them quivered, slid, and, gathering speed, burst over his head, drenching him in the process.

"Right," he said, licking off the water, "I was thirsty anyway."

He grabbed onto the grass and pulled himself up. Around him towered fragrant flowers that spread their petals in a canopy of colors. Shafts of sunlight pierced through the greenish haze, and the air smelled so enticing, Rusty's thoughts muddled and his nose took over.

"It smells like grandma's jam..." He said to himself. "I wonder what I'm doing here." He shook his head, trying to clear it. "We were at the duck pond waiting for Bells, right? But what happened after?" Nobody answered, but somebody looked at him. Rusty sensed the stare on his back and twisted around.

By a thistle of epic proportions sat a puppy of equally epic proportions. Soft curly fur covered it from a sniffing nose to a wagging tail. Its large round eyes blinked in friendly curiosity.

They stared at each other for a second, then the puppy pounced on a stick and pushed it with a paw toward Rusty, its tongue lolling.

"Puppy!" Cried Rusty and grinned. "You want to play? Is that what you want, huh?"

The puppy yelped delightedly and said, "please pardon me if this looks silly, but I absolutely have to have at least one good catching game before I do anything serious. If you don't mind. It's been too long, and I'm itching for a bit of exercise." It crouched, waiting.

It was impossible to grin any wider, but Rusty managed it. "You talk?" He asked, and then it him. "Wait. The donkey talked too. The donkey on the other page...Dapple." His stomach turned. "Bells! I remember! We got into this book, this, what's its name." He snapped his fingers. "Mad Tome! That's it... Grand? Guys? Where is everyone? How did I get here?"

His words drifted into the murmur of flowers.

The puppy watched him, one ear twitching.

Rusty clenched and unclenched his hands. "We were in this desert with the donkey, and then Mad Tome threw us here, right? Then where is everyone? Come on, guys, it's not funny anymore." He ambled around, poking behind grass stalks and calling his friends' names. But the more he did it, the more he was certain that he was alone.

He plopped down by the puppy and scratched its huge paw. "I guess it's only me. Hey, puppy, do you have any idea why I'm here alone?"

"I'm pretty sure I do," obliged the puppy. "You must have pissed off Mad Tome enough to make you want to suffer." It

sniffed and stuck its nose so close to Rusty's face, he thought he'd suffocate in puppy breath. "I've been instructed to bite you to pieces. Well," it explained, prompted by Rusty's horrified expression, "it said I should bite you enough to keep you alive and functioning. Horrible, I know. But that's Mad Tome for you. It is the reason we want you to tear *it* to pieces, before you...well." It bit its tongue, quite literally.

"Dapple said the same thing," croaked Rusty. As adorable as the puppy was, the two gigantic rows of teeth at close distance looked like merciless mandibles that promised a blood-dripping bone-crushing death.

In his distress Rusty dug his nails into a stalk of grass. Instantly it shook. Terror stole over Rusty and he crouched, recalling with perfect clarity their miserable tribulations from the duck pond to the frozen lake to the scorching steppe to Mad Tome's dirt arm that flung him here.

"Did I...wake Mad Tome from napping?" He whispered.

"On ho, it's busy watching your friends," yapped the puppy.

"But...the grass..."

"Oh, don't mind it. It's upset at you."

"Upset at me? Why?"

"*Why?*" The puppy sized Rusty up and down. "You're leaning on it!"

"Oh. Sorry, grass." Rusty edged away, then stopped, confounded. "But there is grass everywhere! How can I not touch it, should I hang in the air or something?"

"You could've asked it politely." Said the puppy.

"Ask the grass? Right. Hey, grass, I'm sorry I leaned on you. I mean, there is nothing else to lean on."

"Yes, there is." Swished the grass. "Lean on the puppy."

At this the puppy barked at the grass, and the grass slapped it on the hide. The thistle clapped its spiky leaves, urging on the spectacle.

"Look at this." Said one flower head to another. "They're fighting again."

"How childish." The other flower shook and doused Rusty with a squall of dewdrops.

"Right." Said Rusty, wiping his face. "They're all nuts here. I need to go find Bells and the guys." He resolutely stalked around the thistle, only to be picked up by the puppy and placed back to where he began.

"You're not going anywhere." Said the puppy warningly, and this time its large eyes didn't have any friendliness in them. "You're staying here."

"Hey!" Cried Rusty, brandishing his fists. "What's your problem? Let me go."

"You like animals, don't you?" Asked the puppy cunningly.

Rusty knotted his brows. "How do you know?"

"Dapple told me. Well, if you like animals so much, would you like to become a puppy?"

"What?" Rusty frowned. "Why?"

The puppy's cute muzzle bristled, and for a second he changed into an uncontrollable psychotic beast. "Why not?" He snarled, clutching his teeth by Rusty's nose and making him jump. "Look at me. I'm cute and soft and fluffy, am I not?"

Rusty swallowed, backing off. "Sure thing. Nice puppy, nice little puppy."

"Well, if you like me so much, what's wrong with being a puppy?" It advanced, sniffing the air with a dangerous determination.

"Nothing, nothing at all," stammered Rusty, feeling behind him for the treacherous grass stalk that shifted and squirmed. "I didn't say there was anything wrong with being a puppy. I love puppies. My grandma delivers puppies. She walks dogs, too, all kinds of dogs, and I help her. I wash them and feed them and clean their paws with a warm towel when they're back and..." He gulped.

"Do you?" Asked the puppy dreamily.

"Totally." Said Rusty a bit bolder. "I cut up raw pieces of meat, so tender and juicy, and I feed them right off my hand."

The puppy rolled up its eyes, fantasizing. "Tell me more."

"Right." Rusty tromped into the thistle and stifled a cry from brushing against one of its thorns. "I scratch behind their ears and I part their fur and snip the fleas and...and..." He hiccupped.

The puppy opened its eyes and stared down with disgust. "Fleas?" It barked. "I don't have any fleas!"

"Sorry, sorry. Said the wrong thing. Good puppy, nice puppy..." Rusty's eyes darted left and right in search of an escape.

"Go on, badling." Said the puppy demandingly.

Rusty balked. "Wait. Dapple called us badlings too, and Mad Tome. What does it—"

A shrill whistle cut him off.

The puppy flattened its ears and huddled close to the ground, its tail limp.

"Who is that?" Asked Rusty.

"Quiet," and the puppy was upon him, growling in his face, "or I will bite you, and you *will* replace me, want it or not."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rusty wiggled from under it, but the puppy overwhelmed him with its size and weight.

The whistle trilled impatiently over the flowers.

"You better go to her," creaked the thistle, speaking up for the first time, its purple hooks revolving like multiple tongues.

"I could do it right here, right now," growled the puppy, saliva dripping over its jaws, "and be free. Free of you," it reared its head at the thistle, "and your thorns and these stupid flowers that talk gibberish from morning till night. I'm sick of you, if you must know."

"Oh, are you?" The cluster of flowers, so peaceful and aromatic, in an instant tensed and darkened and beat on the puppy with all the ferocity of a carnivorous plant deprived of dinner.

Rusty wisely used the ensuing commotion to his advantage and tore off into the greenery without looking back.

"I'll never pet another puppy again," he panted to himself, climbing over monstrously large roots and skirting patches of grass that rose to the sky and disappeared in the sweet haze. "Forget it. That thing was scary as balls. I wonder what book this is, it sure is one nutty story."

For how long he ran like this, he couldn't tell, but at last his heart pounded so loud in his ears that he had to stop and bend, to catch his breath. A series of whistles behind him spurred him on. Bolting blindly, he ran into a spongy leg of what he thought must've been some other animal bent on rending him apart or talking him into becoming one or worse, swallowing him whole. Rusty squinted his eyes shut and tumbled to the

ground, hands over his face in the desperate attempt to ward off whatever menace awaited him.

When nothing sniffed or licked him, he opened one eye.

"Mushroom." He said, staring at the fleshy stalk crowned with a brown cap. Elegant gills fanned out from its center to the outward edges, reminding him of a bike wheel. It smelled pungent and earthy, and Rusty patiently waited for it to talk, searching for eyes or a mouth or some kind of an organ that would make it possible.

When it did talk, it talked from above, first coughing and then saying nasally, "Who are you?"

Rusty drew himself up and craned his neck, but the mushroom's cap came to his nose and even when he tottered on tiptoe, he couldn't see whom he was talking to.

"If only I was a little bit taller," he sighed.

The mushroom or whatever it was that was talking to Rusty coughed as if it chocked on its own words.

"What do you mean? It is wrong." It announced.

"What is wrong?" Asked Rusty, confused.

"You said the wrong line. That's not what you ought to say. You ought to say, 'I hardly know.'"

Rusty scratched his head. "I'm not sure I understand?"

"Wrong again!" Said whatever sat on the mushroom. There was a shuffling noise, and suddenly Rusty was staring into a pair of

blue eyes that belonged to a face that was so velvety smooth and violet-blue and inhuman, he knew immediately what story he got in, and it gave him some comfort, as I'm sure it did to you, because I'm positive that you know *without a doubt* what page it was and from what story.

But we shall leave Rusty to his conversation and get back to Bells and Peacock and Grand who have been deposited into a tale so desolate and wretched, it didn't promise anything good apart from what Mad Tome already predicted—plenty of unsightly and messy bloodletting.

Chapter 6. The Red Menace

Books die every day, just like people do, together with the characters that live inside them. It can be a slow demise, with page after page falling out in sorrow of not being read anymore. Or it can be a brutal execution via ripping.

Terrible, wouldn't you say? I agree. Let us shelve this depressing subject for a while and focus on three dots rushing through the air. As you know, these would be Bells, Peacock, and Grand. Hollering in fright, they landed at the foot of a somber wall that girded a palace of many turrets and towers gripped by dead vines. A couple naked trees flanked an iron gate beyond which a path led to a porch and a pair of massive doors. The last ray of sun colored everything ruddy, and the narrow windows seemed to scrutinize the intruders with many dead eyes.

Bells shivered and glanced at the boys. Her dread reflected in their faces. Not only have they lost Rusty, they appeared to have landed in some morose and fearsome story. On top of it, they were hungry, thirsty, and sore.

"Where did it send us now?" Asked Peacock, picking bits of gravel out of his scraped hands.

Grand sighed. The impact didn't have as devastating an effect on him as it did on his friend. "Um," he said, rubbing his forehead, "I don't know, but it doesn't look friendly."

Peacock kicked a stone with his foot. "This is dumb. I don't like it. What did that donkey mean by not being a donkey? And how are we supposed to destroy this thing? Mad Tome or whatever?"

Grand shrugged.

"I might have an idea." Voiced Bells brightly, dusting herself off and redoing her ponytail.

Peacock cocked a brow. "Care to share?"

"I'll have to think about it first," she stated, "see if it makes sense."

"Well, hurry up then." He snapped.

Bells propped her hands on her hips and said heatedly, "Look, Peacock. Forgive me for being blunt, but can you be any more egotistic? First we need to find out where Mad Tome has sent Rusty and get him back. Don't you think?"

Peacock glared at her. "Leave it to a girl to slobber guilt all over you to make you feel even worse." He crossed his arms.

"Oh, we're talking about girls all of a sudden, are we?" Hissed Bells. "Okay, let me tell you something." She advanced at him. "For a *boy* you're sometimes too much of an incontinent sissy. I thought boys were supposed to be braver than girls, you

know, valiant knights that brandish swords around and protect us, feeble maidens, with fierce cries of war?"

Peacock blenched. "What the heck, Bells?"

Sensing her victory, Bells continued. "I'm not saying you will stay a coward your whole life. There is hope for you yet. I'm just worried about Rusty, okay? It's not like he will drop on our heads. We need to actively look for him. What if he is being devoured alive by some monster right now? Did you think about that?"

A faint smile played on Grand's lips. "I thought I was the only one thinking about morbid things."

Bells hastily cleared her throat, "I do too, *sometimes*. For the purpose of examining facts."

"Don't tell me you're not scared," said Peacock, motioning to the castle. "This place gives me the creeps. Look at it!"

"Scared?" Asked Bells with forced bravado. "Pfft. Not at all."

"You're not scared of dying?" Said Peacock incredulously.

"Nope." Lied Bells. "When Death shows up, I will punch him in the face and tell him he can beat it."

Peacock snorted. "Spoken by a true scientist."

Bells opened her mouth to retort and closed it. "It is beneath me to descend to your level of petty bickering." She turned on her heel and decidedly stalked to the gate. Unlocked,

it swung open on a first try with a grating noise that sent goose bumps along her arms. She raised her head and pranced inside, turning and looking at the boys.

"Coming?"

"Are you crazy?" Cried Peacock. "Where are you going?"

"Inside, where else?"

"Don't you think it's a better idea to find the edge of the page and dig?"

"Dig with what? With bare hands?"

"Bells is right." Reflected Grand. "There might be tools there. And food."

"Food?" Exploded Peacock. "How can you think about *food*?"

A crow landed on one of the towers and croaked loudly. They children jumped from fright.

"Shoo! Go away!" Peacock picked up a stone and flung it at the bird. It took off, but not before swooping so close to their heads that they felt their hair stir.

They froze, gaping after it.

Grand came to first. "Um." He began cautiously. "We need to get going. My mom says it's no good talking about doing things. She says people who *do* things have no time to talk. That's why she loves her job. She doesn't talk to dead people, and they don't talk to her. They accept her, and she makes them look nice. She really does," he said, answering their astounded

stares, "I saw it. It's the last thing she can do for them, to make them lie all pretty in a coffin and—" He checked himself. "Sorry. Got carried away."

"No," squeaked Bells, "it's okay."

"Yeah," added Peacock in a rather high-pitched voice, "we don't mind at all."

"You don't?" Grand smiled sheepishly.

"Listen, it's better to *hear* your stories about corpses in giant refrigerators than to *be* in one." Said Peacock with feeling, swallowing hard.

"Guys." Said Bells.

A couple windows lit up with a sickly reddish glare.

"There is definitely someone inside." She whispered.

"Still want to go in?" Asked Peacock.

Bells didn't answer, pointing mutely to the gate. The boys followed her trembling finger and saw an appearance that almost made them soil their pants.

Between the black silhouettes of the trees hovered a figure in a red cloak. Its hood hung so low, they couldn't see the face underneath. It was walking in a strange fashion—it glided over the ground, as if weightless.

The children couldn't move, mortified.

The figure drew closer.

They could hear its shallow breath and the swish of the cloak. Where it passed icky splodges of blood glistened on the path. The figure circled them at an arm's length, cracked open the doors and slunk inside.

Bells shook all over. "Who was *that*?"

"Does it matter?" Peacock croaked, "let's get out of here."

"But we must go in," she insisted.

"How is that going to help us?"

"We'll live though this page and get to the next one. At least we'll keep moving and looking. Who knows, maybe Rusty is there."

"Oh yeah? And what if some medieval maniac will make us into mincemeat? Didn't Mad Tome say something about bloodletting or whatever?"

"There won't be any bloodletting." Said Grand suddenly.

They stared at him.

"I read this book. I know what it is," he said quietly, "it will be worse than bloodletting."

Bells and Peacock stole a glance at each other.

"How much worse?" Breathed Bells.

"Well, it's one of Poe's stories, about Red Death." Said Grand, licking his lips. "I can't recall the title of the story, but it's about this disease. It's like a plague. If you're infected, you get sores all over your body, then you start

having boils, they grow and burst and leak pus and blood, and then—”

The doors flung open. There stood a regal man dressed in rich velvet and wearing a domino mask. “Welcome, new badlings!” He boomed. “Please, do come in, it’s getting rather chilly outside. You will catch a cold, and we can’t have that, can we?”

“There it is again, *badlings*.” Muttered Bells, backing off.

Grand and Peacock joined her, taking step after step without taking their eyes off the man, until they bumped into a pair of hideously smiling lackeys who pushed them back toward the doors. Bells stumbled, grabbing onto Grand. Peacock made a series of incoherent gulps. They stood rooted to the ground, clasping each other’s hands and shaking.

Noises of muffled merriment drifted through the door. Behind the man the entry hall milled with people dressed in extravagant outfits and masks over their faces. Those who noticed the children stopped and studied them.

Bells and the boys exchanged a frightened glance.

The man didn’t appear to be insane or murderous, quite the opposite. He instilled a sense of wealth and prosperity. He beckoned them with his gloved hand into the warmth and the light and the smells of food, and that won their internal argument. Not that they had much of a choice. Pushed from behind by the lackeys and led upfront by Grand—or, rather, by his rumbling

stomach—Bells and Peacock climbed the steps and walked into the strangest assortment of individuals they have ever witnessed in their lives.

Chapter 7. The Creepy Masquerade

Life goes out of a book that has lost all of its pages, unless you collect them and rebind them in a new cover. But if you tear or crumple or disfigure even one page, its characters will suffer mutilation and hanker for revenge. Imagine them lurking on ruined paper, looking for you.

It's an unsettling thought, and it flitted through Peacock's mind for reasons I'm not going to disclose. Not yet.

He quailed, reluctant to go further. Endless pairs of eyes fastened on him. Eyes of pomaded partygoers dressed in wigs, ladies in gowns, jugglers in leotards, magicians, musicians, dancers, performers, stoutly matrons sipping drinks and gossiping in sibilant whispers. Everyone present wore a mask, which made the entire congregation seem eccentric and eerie.

Peacock swallowed, unsuccessfully trying to hide behind Grand's broad back.

The children hurried behind the man in velvet, gawking at the costumes and the getups and the lavish disguises the kind you see in illustrated history books.

"Prince Prospero," hazarded the voices around—"Who do you bring in our midst, Prince Prospero?—Why are they unmasked?—Where is their respect for our etiquette?—How dare they—"

"Who speaks?" Inquired Prince Prospero boldly with an authority of one in command. "Be grateful. I'm bringing you new badlings. Soon we shall divide them amongst ourselves and you will thank me for my generosity. Now hush!"

The voices dropped and the crowd parted for them like a silky feathery river, murmuring and groveling.

"Divide us?" Breathed Peacock into Grand's back.

"I don't like it either," threw Grand over his shoulder.

Peacock felt an insuperable urge to talk, anything but to be one on one with his thoughts. "What is this, murders' ball?" He ventured. "Are they going to quarter us, is that why they're wearing masks?"

"No, they're not going to quarter us, although it was a pretty common practice on those days." Explained Grand patiently. "They're wearing masks because it's a masquerade."

Peacock raked his hair, not convinced.

From the mass of characters one starkly stood out. It was a man in a black cape made of sooty silk that folded down the way leathery wings would, each wrinkle a rigid bone. His face was hidden behind a hideous animal mask frozen in a snarl.

"Is that a *bat*?" Asked Peacock.

"No, it's a nice cuddly puppy." Said Bells, unnerved.

When Peacock regarded her with a pair of huge eyes, completely confounded, she relented. "Okay, chill, it was a joke. Obviously, it's a man in a costume of a bat with a bat mask. What else could it be? See how he has wings on his back?"

"Why is he following us?"

"He's not following us." Reassured him Bells. "Why would he be following us? You're just paranoid."

"Yes, he is." Insisted Peacock, anxiously watching the man's cape flicker among the guests. The man, sensing the stare, hissed, and Peacock shrunk back, his heart beating wildly.

The prince led them on through a vista of rooms, each a new dazzling color: blue, purple, green, orange, white, violet. At last they entered a spacious suite decorated in black. Everything was black here, everything except the windows, their blood-tinted panes glowing disturbingly red.

Price Prospero stopped so abruptly, Peacock slammed into him and felt his knees give out. He searched his friends' faces.

"This is hideous." Said Bells in a loud whisper, blanching.

"What is this place?" Peacock stared at Grand.

Grand began to answer but got interrupted by a heavy chime of a clock that shook the walls. It rung out one creepy ding and stilled. Thick silence enveloped the palace.

Prince Prospero gazed back over their heads and demanded, "I'm in position. Get on with it already. We do not have the luxury to dally."

Whom he spoke to Peacock couldn't see, no matter how far up he stretched. Masked guests blocked the view. They pressed through the doorway and circled around them, steadily edging closer.

The clock struck two.

"What the heck?" Croaked Peacock. "Is it going to strike midnight and they'll kill us or something?"

Grand opened his mouth, again with no success.

As illogical as it may sound, the clock appeared to mock Peacock, waiting for him to be on the precipice of finding out more about this tale and taking the chance away at the last second. A couple more chimes shook the air.

"Is everyone present?" Prince Prospero opened his arms and swept them around the room.

Masked figures answered in a potpourri of obedient hungry cries. "We are, Prince—We are ready—Bestow on us your generosity—We cannot wait any longer, have pity—Must we suffer so?—Do not prolong our torment, we beg you, it is but unbearable!"

The clock appeared to have lost its patience and struck several deafening ding-dongs in a row. This didn't faze the

characters one bit. They continued to jabber and jostle and draw further in to get a better look at the children and to touch them with a quivering extended finger or even lick them with a grating tongue, which Peacock, to his horror, saw flick out of a mouth of a monkey. Several of them knuckled to and fro between skirts, crude masks stretched over their furry muzzles.

"Holy cow." Peacock gripped Bells's arm. "Did you see that?"

She flinched, "did I see what?"

"Monkeys!"

His exclamation drowned in the next angry chime.

"I do believe the time has come!" Began the prince, as soon as the echoes died. "Hereby I shall decree—"

The clock, apparently very upset at hardly anyone paying attention to its horrifying performance, sounded out the rest of the twelve hours.

"We hear you, loud and clear." Called Prince Prospero.

The clock added another chime. Spitefully.

"That is thirteen, which is a trifle too much." Observed the prince calmly. "Wouldn't you agree?"

The clock plinked something and stopped, satisfied. All noise died. The music stopped. Voices quieted and fizzled out. A somber silence hung in the room, and through it strode the

figure in red. Its face was finally visible: it wore a mask of death.

Prince Prospero bowed in welcome and said, "At last! I was beginning to think you have insulted me by rescinding your duties. Badlings, I'd like for you to meet Red Death. Red Death, these are—"

"Do pardon me for interruption." Droned the Red Death in spine-chillingly dead tones. "I bring you urgent tidings."

"Tidings of what nature?" Inquired the prince regally. "Is it still napping? How long do we have?"

"Half of an hour at the most." Was the Red Death's answer.

The characters murmured uneasily. "This is a tiresome affair—Why do we have to wait?—Let's grab them for ourselves—What right do *they* have to decide—Do our desires count for nothing?—I daresay—"

"Silence!" Rung out a woman's voice, followed by a stomp of a foot that brought a sudden calm to the fidgeting assembly.

"The Snow Queen!" Cried Bells, forgetting herself.

The Snow Queen didn't grant a single glance in her direction. Drawn up to her full height, she strode into the circle and addressed Prince Prospero sternly, "Enough of this amusement. I want my share and I want it *now*." She threw a chilling glance at Bells, her ice-blue eyes hard as stones.

"I was the first to come here, and I have the right to go first. I pick the girl." She reached out and seized Bells's wrist in a freezing grip.

Bells cried from surprise. "Ow! Let me go!"

"I beg to differ," said the man in the bat mask, noiselessly appearing next to the Snow Queen. "If anyone in here has any claim on them, it will be me."

"Them?" The queen repeated, her bluish lips curling. "You cannot claim all of them. Take the one who caused you damage and be off with you, you bloodthirsty vagrant!"

"Is this a new diversion to your boredom, my icy dame," said the man softly, "calling me names?"

Peacock noticed with horror the man's colorless hand emerged from under his cloak and crept toward the icy hand that held Bells, his eyes holding the queen's attention hostage.

"Do not attempt to draw me into one of your witty games," said the Snow Queen, "I know exactly what you're scheming. Today we decide on the division of the loot. First they destroy Mad Tome, then and only then will you get your share. Do you understand me, or would you like me to repeat it one more time, Dracula dear?"

Whatever Dracula answered, Peacock didn't hear. His ears felt stuffed with cotton, and his stomach flopped and dropped to

his feet, bursting to pieces. "Dracula?" He wheezed to no one in particular. "It's...Dracula?"

"Excuse me, but if you want us to destroy Mad Tome," said Bells through clenched teeth, "you better let me go, because you will break my wrist." She wriggled her arm, attempting to shake off the Snow Queen's hold.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said the queen, her expression promptly changing from indifferent to the one wrecked with worry. "Come. Let me warm you up."

"Time." Pronounced the Red Death. "Time is scarce."

"Indeed it is." Declared Prince Prospero. "I decree we rejoice in our fortune. For years we have suffered, held captive, but enough of our lament. Welcome freedom!" He thrust one hand in the air and with the other pushed the children forward.

There were cries of excitement, mixed with clanging teeth and hungry slurps.

"Four lucky badlings get to shed the chains of their unjustified confinement and return to their homes whilst the rest of us wait to be avenged!" The prince foamed at the mouth.

"Avenged?" Mumbled Peacock. "What for?"

"For the crimes we did not commit." Helpfully supplied Dracula. He stood close behind Peacock, and his cold breath gave

him deathly chills. "You, on the other hand, very well know what you are guilty of, *badling*."

Peacock gulped. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Would you like me to remind you?" Hissed Dracula, and Peacock thought that in the next second he would faint. He couldn't tell if he imagined it, or if the floor throbbed under his feet, and the wind slammed into the blood-stained windowpanes, and the trees outside groaned alarmingly. Nobody seemed to notice the disturbance except him. He reached up and felt his forehead.

"We shall see each other again soon." Hissed Dracula. "Farewell." And he ploughed through the throng of characters, vanishing from sight.

"Was that really Dracula?" Asked Bells breathlessly.

Peacock nodded.

"What was he talking to you about?"

Meanwhile, the crowd perched on the edge of a riot. Their patience grew ragged, and the children pressed into each other's backs, surrounded from all sides with greedy gleaming eyes.

"Enough with this nonsense." A tall stocky man in a worn travel getup pushed through, towering over Peacock. His heavy steps shook the floor. Peacock felt dizzy, staring. The man appeared quite ordinary, if not for his formidable size and his beard. Blue beard. It spread from his chin to his waist, a bushy

treasure that stabbed Peacock with envy. His own blue hair paled by comparison.

"Upon my beard," boomed the man, his eyes popping out of their sockets, "this one is perfect for me." And he unceremoniously seized Peacock by the scruff of his shirt, lifting him clear off the ground.

"Put him down, Bluebeard!" Shouted the Snow Queen.

"Who are you to tell me what to do? Go freeze at your lake, scanty witch."

The Snow Queen bared her teeth and breathed on Bluebeard, frosting up his beard.

Frightened cries erupted, but Bluebeard thundered over them. "You think you can scare me with a little bit of cold? I don't give a sodden rat skin over what you lot decided, you hear me? I came to take what is rightfully mine, and that's that. What are you going to do, tear me to pieces? I'd like to see you try." He rudely shoved the mob apart and marched off, his heavy boots punctuating every step with a bang.

Peacock gasped for air, his throat locked in panic.

"Peacock!" Cried Bells and rushed after him, but the Snow Queen tightened her grip and yanked her back.

Without a word Grand lunged forth, only to be tripped over by Dapple the donkey.

The floor trembled once more, only it wasn't Bluebeard's tromping that unsettled it. The earth under the palace rumbled and hummed.

"It's awake." Said the Red Death.

"Quick!" Cried Prince Prospero.

The Red Death hustled over. The prince took out a dagger and thrust it forth with the words, "Unmask yourself!"

The Red Death swept his cloak over him, and the prince collapsed to the floor with a shriek.

What happened next Peacock couldn't see. Bluebeard rushed him out of the room against the tide of panicked guests, dragged him through the entry hall and out the massive doors. It was not until they made it through the gate and to the dirt wall at bottom of the hill that he let go.

"Sit still, and don't you dare running away. I'll break your spine like that." Bluebeard snapped his fingers, and Peacock nodded, horror flooding him like poison.

Bluebeard tucked his precious beard under his belt and bent over, groping for the edge of the page.

Shivering all over, Peacock saw tendrils of mist rise from the gap, when the noise behind him made him jump and look back. Preceded by the roar that rocked the tumult of voices, down the hill came Grand, pumping his thick legs at a frightening pace, one arm outstretched, another tugging Bells behind him, both of

their faces gaping in a scream. The tumult of masked figures pursued them, with the Snow Queen in the lead.

Bluebeard heaved up the page and reached for Peacock at the same time that Grand and Bells ran into him, knocking him off his feet and falling into the yawning void below.

Bluebeard thrust out an arm to catch them and was brushed aside by the Snow Queen. She dove after the children and was late, slamming her head into the page that closed in her face.

The children were out of reach, at least for the moment, tumbling into a damp foul-smelling cave.

Chapter 8. The Forbidden Dungeon

Don't think that the longer the book, the more gripping its story. Some very short tales have penetrated the minds of generations and remained there, unwilling to leave. People like to call them "classics," although there is nothing *classic* in them, but plenty of blood, murders, and treachery.

The children were presently rushing toward one such tale. Murky fog whooshed past them, or they whooshed past murky fog, it was hard to tell. Occasionally strange shapes floated out of it, a cold arm brushed them, a face sneered at them, or a teathy maw snapped right by their noses.

The lower they hurtled, the chillier it got. Even Grand's typically warm hands lost all feeling. A fine layer of dew formed on his hair. At one point he thought they would fall like this forever, sinking further and further into a uniform greyness that clung to them like spider webs.

It was spider webs.

They shot through a tangle of dusty silk ropes that considerably slowed down their descent and landed on a stone floor with a muffled thwack.

Shaken, bruised, and disoriented, none of them moved for a while.

Grand was the first to stir. He patted the stone under his cheek, groaned, and rolled to his side. The darkness pressed on his eyes and he blinked. Weak light trickled in from a barred window high up by the ceiling. The room was dank and drafty, and it smelled foul, the way a moldy basement would smell if opened after years of brooding in its own filth. Grand stood up, took a step and abruptly stopped. His worst nightmares have materialized right by his feet, splayed along the wall in a neat, gruesome row. He stopped breathing. A single line of cold sweat rolled down his nose and hung at the very tip. He willed himself to lift his arm and wipe it off, and couldn't.

"Grand?" Said Bells's voice from the darkness.

"Um." He managed, the sound of his voice startling him so much, he nearly jumped.

"Oh, good, you're here. Peacock?"

Peacock coughed. "I'm okay."

"Just making sure." Said Bells. "It's so dark in here, I can't see a thing. Where are we, do you know?" There were shuffling noises of Bells gathering herself together and attempting to get up.

Grand swayed and instinctively grasped onto Bells.

"Are you okay?" She asked, groping for him. "Your hands are cold!"

Grand opened and closer his mouth. No sound came out.

"I don't remember your hands ever being cold. What's wrong?" Inquired Bells, glancing around until her eyes fell down and she stifled a shriek.

"What is it?" Said Peacock, wiggling in between them. "Why are you...shaking..." He trailed off.

Grand didn't answer. He forgot about his friends. Nothing existed for him except the nightmares he had every time after visiting his mother at the funeral home. They were always the same: he entered the mortuary fridge, and someone turned off the lights and slammed the door shut, locking him in. For the rest of the dream Grand blundered around the room, walking into dead people's clammy arms. He would panic and wake up drenched in cold sweat, his heart pounding like a hammer.

"Grand." Bells tugged on his hand. "Grand!"

He remained silent and motionless, rooted to the spot.

Bells dug her nails into his palm. He didn't flinch.

"Peacock, come on." She squeaked, her voice catching. "Help me get him out of this daze!"

Peacock stumbled backward, retching into his hand.

"Please, guys, don't fall apart on me now. We need to...we need..." Bells held it, held it, and lost it, hanging onto Grand's shoulder so as not to faint.

Right by their feet, on the cobblestone floor blackened by wear and grime, stood a wooden block with an ax wedged into it. Next to it, carefully arranged along the wall, lay bodies of five dead women, their unseeing eyes open, their hair caked with gore, their stiff feet peeking out from under the hems of white nightgowns. Over them hung a sweet cloying odor of spoiled meat.

Grand made a concentrated effort and moved his foot. It touched a stagnant pool of something sticky, and he refused to think about what exactly it might be. He sensed his body turn wooden and cold, and wondered if he'd be able to walk again. Bells clenched fingers became a part of his shoulder, and Peacock bumped into a wall and pressed into it, barely breathing.

Who knows for how long they would've been paralyzed if not for hurried footsteps echoing from far above. Someone skipped down the stairs, skittered the length of the hallway, and halted by the door on the other side.

Grand slowly turned his head and stared at it.

A key turned in the lock. The door swung open and there stood a young woman with a candle in her hand. The flame threw dancing shadows on her organza-veiled face. She entered the

room, her dress skirt trailing over the cobbles, saw the dead bodies, the children standing over them, dropped the key and the candle and screamed.

This must have had an inspirational effect on Bells, because she let go of Grand's shoulder and screamed as loud if not louder than the woman.

Their voices joined, bounding off the walls with a dull echo. After a good few seconds of this they stopped and proceeded gawking at each other in pitch-black darkness.

The young woman picked up the candle, struck the flint and lighted it again. The smell of burning and melting wax blotted out the putrefying tang. The woman studied them with a disgusted expression, as if it was not the bodies that smelled but the children.

"Well?" She inquired. "What book are you from and what are you doing on my page? I don't remember inviting anyone."

"Er." Bells said hesitantly. "We're not from...any book?"

The woman tensed. "Do not lie to me."

Bells flushed at this injustice. "I'm not lying! Grand, tell her."

"It's only a story," muttered Grand to himself. "A story of Bluebeard. This is the dungeon where he kills his wives. It's not real, so there is nothing to be afraid of." Bright flame after-images danced in his eyes. He blinked, looking over the

dead women, and it seemed to him that one of them lifted her head and winked, but when he squinted to see better, she appeared to be as dead as before.

"Only a story," he mumbled.

"Nice taste, Grand." Said Bells. "Charming bedtime reading, I should say."

"It's actually a fairy tale." Explained Grand.

"This? A *fairy* tale?" Incredibly, Bells chuckled.

"Well?" Prompted the woman. "Explain yourselves. You." She pointed to Peacock. "Why are you not saying anything?"

Peacock coughed into his fist. "Sorry, lady, I'm seriously sick." He said. "I'm going to puke."

One of the dead wives tucked in her legs, perhaps in an attempt to avoid being puked on, or for some other reason.

Peacock gulped. "Did she just...move?"

"Are you going to answer me or not?" Said the woman impatiently. "I don't have all day, you know."

"It's this Bluebeard guy," began Peacock, "he said I was perfect for him. I guess he wanted me to replace him or something? He must have liked my blue hair." Peacock nervously ran a hand through it, as if holding on to it would've made him less scared.

"He did, did he?" The woman smirked. "Without consulting me, of course. I understand. You must be the new badlings." Her cheeks contracted and she sucked in air, appraising them.

Something sniggered on the floor.

"What are you laughing at?" Demanded the woman.

"Oh, it's you. We're laughing at you, Boulotte. You take your role so seriously." Said a dull voice that sent chills along the children's backs.

"Is that...*them* talking?" Asked Peacock, his eyes huge. "They're not really dead, are they?" He began edging toward the door.

"I don't think so," said Grand, following him. "I think they are acting like they're dead. It's good that they aren't. For a moment I thought I was in the mortuary fridge at my mom's work—it's where they store the corpses so they won't decompose before the funeral and—"

Bells put a hand on his shoulder. "Do you mind? I'd rather not think about anything decaying just now." She forced a smile. "And sorry for screaming. I hope I wasn't too loud."

"Funny to hear you apologize." Managed Peacock, attempting to sound sarcastic. "Isn't that what girls do when they're scared?" He faltered under Bells's stare that indicated her burning desire to throttle him right there and then.

While Boulotte was absorbed in a muffled conversation with Bluebeard's dead wives, Grand and after him Bells and Peacock stealthily tiptoed through the doorway and snuck out into a narrow hallway lit by torches.

"Where do you think you're going?" Called Boulotte. She waved the candle, and in its flickering light they saw the dead wives struggle up.

The children glanced at one another.

"Um," ventured Grand. "You know how you're supposed to escape mortal danger in books?"

"Yeah?" Said Bells and Peacock as one.

"I think now is the time." He took a cautious step back.

All three of them were mortified, and all three of them wanted to escape from this dreadful place, but a strange pull of morbid curiosity held them hostage, and instead of running they stayed put, staring at the doorway with a mix of horror and amazement.

First a pale foot emerged from the darkness, then the nightgown, and finally a peaked grey face of one of the dead wives. She carefully held her head together with both hands, as it was cleaved in two by an ax and it made her look rather asymmetrical.

Bells made a noise that was close to a squeak.

Grand took another step back and slammed into a wall.

Peacock heaved, wheezing.

The rest of the dead wives piled out.

"Stop it, Eleonore." Said one of them, peeling her dead lips apart with her fingers to make them move. "You're scaring the children."

"They're not children," snorted Eleonore, "they're *badlings*. I'm taking that one." She pointed a decomposing finger at Grand.

"How dare Bluebeard claim one without telling *me*," said Boulotte. Her eyes narrowed, and she hefted the candle as if ready to hurl it. "I'm taking the girl."

"He told *me*," said Eleonore proudly.

Boulotte gasped. "He told *you*, but he didn't tell me?"

"Of course he did," teased Eleonore, "I was his *favorite*."

"Liar." Hissed another dead wife. "It was *I* who was his favorite. I was the first one."

"Little do you know, Rosalinde," smirked the wife behind her. "When we married, he told me how lazy you were. He said you never cooked for him and never darned his shirts. He even said you never—"

"Shut up, Blanche!"

Their quarrel escalated into shouting and soon they were grabbing each other's hair and pulling and tearing and snarling.

Bells watched them with a grimace of distaste. "That is precisely why I want to be a scientist and not some wife cooking dinners and mending shirts." She stated.

The wives heard her and stopped fighting.

"What did you say about wives, badling?" Asked Boulotte.

"Er, nothing." Bells quickly smiled, and glanced at the boys. "Guys? I think we have a bad reputation here."

"I think," said Grand, "it's time to flee."

"Agreed." Wheezed Peacock.

"Get them!" Shouted Boulotte.

Pursued by five dead wives and one living one, the children bolted into darkness.

Chapter 9. Bluebeard's Revenge

There must be an ancient hostility between a book and its characters for them to turn against it. It rarely happens to good books, but it's what happened to Mad Tome, the *bad* book that didn't care for its inhabitants. Not one bit. Yawning, it sensed unrest on one of its pages and didn't bother investigate, too lazy to rouse from a nap.

Meanwhile the unrest escalated to a deadly chase. Six women hunted for three badlings in the bowls of Bluebeard's grim cold chateau.

Stumbling and panting, Bells came to a winding staircase and hopped up the steps two at a time.

"Where are we running?" Wheezed Peacock.

"No idea." She answered, leaping up. "Out of here?"

Grand was last, huffing and sweating and cursing his jiggling body. His stomach grumbled, and he made himself think of doughnuts to move faster.

They reached the top step, crashed through a door and found themselves in a vast hall bedecked with medieval décor: suits of armor, lances, shields, tall candelabras with hundreds of candles in them spitting and crackling. The shifting light they

cast on the walls didn't offer much comfort. On the contrary, it made the shadows look alive and creepy.

Bells waited for Grand to labor out, banged the door behind him shut and leaned on it, talking in bursts. "Come...help me...hold it."

Peacock pushed at it with both hands, but it was Grand's broad back that saved them. He slumped into it, shuddering under sudden blows from the other side. Muffled screams trickled through and after a while faded. The pounding stopped too, and they heard retreating steps.

"I'm sure this is not over yet," said Bells with conviction. "A castle is a like a maze—there is always another way."

"I hate castles." Moaned Peacock.

"I bet there is some food here." Blurted Grand. "Maybe they won't mind us getting some. Maybe they'll take pity on us and feed us."

"Are you insane?" Peacock stared at him. "How can you talk about food when we just saw butchered bodies? How can you even...doesn't it make you queasy?"

Grand shrugged. "I have lunch with my mom all the time."

"Yeah, I hears that before. I'll believe it when I see it." Peacock covered his mouth, heaving into it.

Suddenly somewhere high under the vaulted ceiling a harsh cry rebounded, followed by the sound of bare feet slapping on the stone.

"They're over there!" Cried Bells.

"But what about food..." Started Grand, looking around in hopes of finding a way into the castle's kitchens.

"I'd rather die of hunger than be killed by a bunch of mad women." Said Peacock and took off after Bells.

"Grand!" She shouted. "You coming?"

"I guess." He lumbered away just when the dead wives gathered on the balcony overlooking the hall.

"There they are!" Boulotte pointed down with her now extinguished candle. "Get them!"

Spooked into a sprint, the children flew across the hall to a pair of ornate windows that flanked the door so big, a giant could pass through it. Outside in the gathering dusk the rain whipped and wailed.

Bells lifted the heavy ring, pushed, and dashed out. She got instantly drenched and backed off under the awning.

A horse whinnied behind the fence, and a carriage manned by a swarthy driver sped into the court, halting abruptly right by the porch. Out jumped Bluebeard.

He ogled the children, evidently surprised. "Upon my beard, I bargained for one and got three. Boulotte will be happy."

"Look, Bluebeard." Stammered Bells, wiping the water off her face. "Can you tell us what you intend to do with us?"

"No use talking to him." Peacock snatched her hand and dragged her past Bluebeard. It was a futile attempt at an escape. Bluebeard swept them into his powerful arms and stood them back on the porch as if they didn't weigh an ounce.

"What do you want?" Said Peacock hoarsely. "What did we do to you?"

"You found Mad Tome." Boomed Bluebeard. "It worked." He beamed, showing rows of crooked teeth through his bushy beard. "We have been waiting for this to for years. And finally we caught you, four badlings, and three of you are in my hands. I wanted you to feel what I felt," his tone dropped a dangerous low, "alone and scared, in the dungeon. Alas, the ritual must wait. I shall do it right here, on these very steps that have suffered my wary feet for I have forgotten how long." He reached under his coat and took out an ax, spitting on it and sliding his thumb along the blade. "Should be sharp enough."

"Um," said Grand, his mouth hanging open, "are you going to split our heads with this?"

"Oh, there is no need to be *that* dramatic," said Bluebeard amiably, "unless you want me to?"

The door creaked open and out stepped disheveled Boulotte, red in the face from running around. "There they are! Wretched

scoundrels." Then she saw her husband. "Bluebeard! How on earth will you explain this, I'd like to know?"

Bluebeard smiled apologetically, shrinking under her fiery stare. "Boulotte, my dearest, I missed you so. Here, this is for you." He produced a crumpled bouquet of bluebells from one of his bottomless coat pockets, still holding an ax in his other hand. "Look, I brought us badlings. One for you, one for me, one for Eleonore. Won't that make her happy?" He talked in a simpering voice that dripped with artificial sweetness.

Grand beetled his brows, then rubbed his face, then his nose, and then timidly said, "I don't think you're the real Bluebeard. Real Bluebeard wouldn't talk like that. Real Bluebeard almost killed his wife, he wasn't scared of her. And you are not his wife," he shifted his probing gaze to Boulotte, whose cheeks sprouted blotches.

"Do it, before he talks any more." She hissed. "I should've grabbed my scissors, I knew I should've." She patted her corset and her skirt.

"What would you know." Bristled Bluebeard at Grand. "Have you read my story? What page did you stop on?"

"I didn't," explained Grand. "My mom read fairy tales to me when I was little, but when she got to Bluebeard she said it was too scary and wouldn't read it. So I snuck out of bed at night and read it myself."

Bluebeard's eyes widened. "Then why are you here?"

"Because of me," volunteered Bells. "I haven't finished reading The Snow Queen. Mad Tome said I have to read the page I stopped on, so I did. I mean, I *lived* through it. We all did. See? There is no reason for you to be mad at us, especially if you want us to destroy Mad Tome. I think I have an idea about how to do it, if only you could help us find our friend Rusty." She stretched her lips into a smile, not taking her eyes off the ax.

And then—it always happens in stories just when you thought things were going to go smoothly—the court jolted and tilted to the side, throwing everyone off balance. Bells dropped into mud, Peacock spread-eagled next to her, and Grand sat down hard on the steps.

Before long a rustling voice announced from the sky. "Can't nap in peace without one of you betraying me. I know what you're after, Bluebeard, you spoiled nasty badling."

"Mad Tome." Breathed Bells in horror.

Grand followed her gaze. The rain fell down so hard, he had to squint to detect a shadowy mouth hanging above them.

"Do you?" Yelled Bluebeard into the sky, his knuckles white, his ax trembling. "A fat lot of nonsense you know, you brainless piece of carton. I should've done this a long time ago." He grunted, heaved the ax and with a cry brought it down

on the ground. It sunk into wet mud like into butter and must have touched something sensitive, as Mad Tome shrieked unnaturally high, filling the clouds with whistling echoes and shaking every windowpane in the chateau.

Bluebeard, grinning wide into his beard, wrenched the ax out and brought it down, again and again and again.

Boulotte screamed and dashed down the steps, throwing herself on Bluebeard's arm. He shook her off like a fly and meted out another blow.

Mad Tome squirmed and bellowed, sending shivers through the page that felt like an earthquake. The walls crumbled, the roof shingles shifted and fell, sinking into puddles like darts, and where Bluebeard has struck the ground it cracked, the resulting fracture widening with an alarming speed.

Grand seized Bells by one hand, Peacock by another, and dragged them into the maze of the garden that surrounded the estate. Tall trimmed hedges formed labyrinthine paths. They ran blindly, hearing Bluebeard's shouts and Mad Tome's threats. The overcast sky flashed an ominous yellow and ear-splitting thunder crashed on their heads. Fierce wind picked up dirt and wet leaves and flung it in their faces.

Bells shielded her eyes. "Where are we going?"

"He's breaking...the page," wheezed Grand. "We must get...to the edge."

"Why?" Panted Peacock.

"To hold on...to the dirt wall," spoke Grand with difficulty, drawing short breaths, "when the page...turns."

"That's brilliant!" Exclaimed Bells.

"Look out!" Cried Peacock.

The garden issued a terrible rending noise, as if the page was tearing in half. In a moment a dark line ran down the path and it split, leaving Peacock and Bells on one side, and Grand on the other.

"Grand!" Bells reached for him over the widening gulch and grabbed air.

"Hang on, we'll jump over!" Peacock crouched, but Bells stopped him. The gap was too wide. With a final resounding groan, the page tore in two. Peacock flailed his arms to retain balance.

Grand stood still, as if carved from wood. The page side he stood on pulsed, jolted, and he toppled headfirst into the void.

"Grand, no!" Screamed Bells. She crawled to the ragged edge and gasped. Instead of layers of soil the chasm opened up into layers of pages stacked like floors of a building if you cut it in half. She could see fringes of landscapes: mountains, forests, rivers, dales. Some were farther away, some close enough to see characters milling about and staring up in distress.

From down below, maybe five layers deep, an enormous bird spread its wings and took off.

"Is that an *elephant*?" Asked Peacock dumbly.

The bird riveted a pair of mean orange eyes at him as if it heard him and redoubled its speed. In a pair of powerful claws it held an elephant that wiggled its trunk and helplessly pedaled the air. The bird opened its beak and issued a deafening screech.

Bells covered her ears, losing her hold in the process. The last thing she glimpsed was Peacock lunging for her, and then they were airborne and falling directly into the path of the feathery flying monstrosity.

Chapter 10. The Missing Head

Ever find yourself rereading the same page over and over again?
Over and over and over and over...how dull and repetitive.
Envision the toil the characters have to go through to
tirelessly act it out. They'd rather you turn the page, unless
you're a badling, in which case you're prey for Mad Tome.

Grand loved morbid stories, the gorier the better, but
there was one he couldn't bring himself to read. He simply
couldn't turn the page. Each time he tried, he shuddered in
horror and set the book aside. How fortunate for him to drop
exactly into it.

The moon shone on a prairie like an eye of a cyclops. The
grasses chirruped and clacked. The nocturnal rodents scurried on
their nightly business. A stag grazed nearby, flicking its ears
to and fro. All seemed peaceful, yet a sense of dread encircled
Grand's throat with cold slimy fingers.

"Bells?" He said probingly.

No answer.

He cleared his throat and tried again. "Peacock?"

Whirring silence.

Grand's stomach lurched with panic and beads of sweat stood out on his nose. He sat still for some time, taking in his surroundings, then quietly said to himself, "I'm alone, I guess, but there is nothing to worry about. This is just a book. It's not real, it's the product of a writer's imagination."

The night around him appeared to have a diametrically opposite opinion.

The peaceful chirring was disturbed by a new divagation: a clop of hooves against a rocky dell. A horse was struggling up a hill in a steady gait, a horse with a heavy load. Grand looked for the source of the noise. His legs went soft, his lungs collapsed, and he promptly thumped back into the grass. For ahead of him indeed appeared a horse. A man was sitting on it, a perfectly ordinary man in leather boots and a travel cloak, if not for one missing detail.

He had no head.

He *did* have it, but not on his shoulders, where one would expect it. He held it in his hands, and Grand thought that it was his luck to come here on an empty stomach, because it shrunk to the size of a nut, and if there was anything in it, it would've surely escaped him.

The deer stopped grazing, jerked its head, and dashed away, plunging through a shallow river. The rodents promptly hid in

their holes. Whatever breeze whispered through the grass, hiccupped and died.

The horse whinnied, trotting straight at Grand.

"Um," he uttered, unable to move.

"I won't look, I won't look," he mumbled, but as the horse brushed by—he could stretch out his arm and touch it, if he wanted to (not that he dreamed of doing it, it was Rusty who was prone to petting unacquainted horses)—despite his best self-restraining effort, Grand glanced at the head between the man's hands, saw one of its glassy eyes wink at him, and fainted.

Time passed.

Some more time passed.

Then some more time passed.

The nightlife, spooked by the presence of an unusual guest, quietly resumed. Shrews dug holes. Mice escaped owls. A prairie dog cautiously sniffed at the warm breathing shape unceremoniously splayed right over its burrow. The shape smelled like doughnuts, and the prairie dog followed its nose to Grand's pocket. It was about to steal the leftover crumbs, when Grand groaned and sat up, clasping his head.

The prairie dog peeped his complaint and scuttled off.

Grand, oblivious to this minor disturbance, scrambled to standing. His head reeled, and his fingers tingled. The night stretched around him, unperturbed. He was about to take a step

when soft plodding ascended the tussocky hill, and Grand witnessed with horror the same horse and the same headless rider bypassing him in exactly the same fashion. This time he didn't faint, but merely stood nailed to the ground, watching them cross the river and gallop away, a stark silhouette against the flat prairie silvered by the moon.

"He blinked at me," said Grand.

He watched them disappear. A wolf's howl brought him back to his senses. He crawled into a cluster of grass and sat in it like in a hovel, scrunching his eyes and listening.

The howling stopped. A cicada chirred in his ear. Startled, he snatched at it. It hopped to another grass stalk, chirruped once, as if giggling, and continued its irritating chatter.

Grand held his head. "I want a doughnut. I *need* a doughnut. If there was ever a time in my life when eating a doughnut needed justification, then this must be it." He sighed. "Why couldn't I land somewhere where there is food?"

The sound of his voice gave him comfort, and he continued a tad more cheerful. "I guess Bluebeard was upset at Mad Tome, to hack it like that. So he's a badling too..." Grand massaged his nose, thinking aloud. "Do book characters read books? I guess they do. I guess characters in books can read books, and inside those books characters can read books, and inside those books..." His stomach rumbled, diverting his attention. "If I

sit here much longer, I will expire from hunger. I'll get thinner and thinner. I will eat insects and get so bony that even the wolf won't bother with me, and then—" He abruptly stopped.

Canter reached his ears and he shrunk deeper into his shelter, watching the horse's legs flash past. He waited until the splashing of the water faded, drew a breath and whispered, "I think this page is repeating itself."

A burning desire to share this new insight with his friends trampled his fears. He lumbered up, energized. Unfortunately, at the same moment the horrendous silhouette of the headless rider crested the ridge, and Grand flopped into the grass like a sack of potatoes.

"This is ridiculous," he said.

The head's winking eyes seemed to be mocking him, daring him, waiting for his meticulous patience to run out. It wasn't Grand's patience that expired in the end, it was his overwhelming desire to find Bells, Peacock, and Rusty.

"Poor Rusty," said Grand to himself, "I hope he didn't get eaten by some beast." This regrettable picture gave him a surge of bravery.

"A badling! What a surprise," twanged a voice.

Grand whirled around.

The horse stood right behind him, and the head in the rider's hands flashed a predatory grin.

Grand's tongue filled his mouth. An indistinct moan struggled up and out of his throat.

"Do I look *that* ugly?" Said the head, a trifle offended. "I was handsome in my time, every woman told me so."

"Um," managed Grand, feeling his armpits grow wet.

"But I digress, as usual. My memory is not the same nowadays. I wonder if it has to do with the fact that my head is no longer on my shoulders." It laughed at its own joke.

Sweat rolled down the sides of Grand's face, but he didn't dare wipe it. It was one thing watching the head wink, and quite another see it animated and talking, held fast in two dead hands like stuffed cabbage with eyes and a mouth.

"Are you a badling too?" Hazarded Grand finally.

The head curled its lips and said softly, "why do you ask?"

Grand shrugged. "I guess I'm curious."

"Who told you this?"

"Nobody." Answered Grand. "Mad Tome called Bluebeard a badling, and I thought...I thought maybe you are one too."

"Mad Tome?" The head snorted. "That dumb bundle of paper is mad indeed." It regarded Grand through narrowed eyes.

Grand stood still, willing his luck to continue.

"We all are." Said the head at last. "I see no reason to hide it from you, as you will become one of us soon. In fact, I think I will make you mine this very moment." It stretched out its arms, and Grand thought his legs wouldn't hold him up anymore.

"Ah, curse me!" Exclaimed the head vexedly. "My hands are tied. I tell you what, badling, drop to your knees and crawl by my boots. Right by the spurs, over there, if you would be so nimble."

"What..." Grand stammered, "do you mean, you will make me yours? I don't...I don't want to be yours. I'm my own."

"Did no one explain your role to you?"

Grand shook his head.

"Of course they didn't. They were scared you'd flee. Well, there is nowhere for you to go here, badling, as there was nowhere for me to go when I got here myself."

Grand rubbed his face. "You're not," he hesitated, "The Headless Horseman. You're not the *real* Headless Horseman."

"Don't I look scary enough?" Asked the head doubtfully.

"You look plenty scary to me." Said Grand with as much assurance as he could muster, considering the circumstances.

"Good." Said head gravely. "I was beginning to worry." And then it added in a whisper, "it's my first time turning a badling. Don't tell anyone, okay?"

"I won't." Agreed Grand, although he didn't quite understand what he agreed to.

The head sneered, pleased. "You never finished reading the book, did you?"

Grand sighed. "I couldn't. I honestly tried, but I got too scared."

"How scared did you get?" Asked the head interestedly.

"Um, that picture on the cover, it would sit in front of my eyes, and then I started reading the first page, about the stag in the prairie, and the wrongness of it all. It was so terrifying that my hands started shaking and I closed the book and tried not to think about it."

"Go on." Said the head with bated breath. "What else?"

"I don't know," said Grand, shrugging. "I ate a doughnut to make myself feel better."

The head looked disappointed. "That's all?"

"I had bad dreams." Admitted Grand.

"Nightmares, I hope?" Inquired the head.

"Awful ones."

"Oh, well, that settles it. That's good enough for me." The head proclaimed cheerily. "You belong here, badling. You belong in this book."

The horse whinnied impatiently, tramping the ground.

"If you'll pardon me but for a moment, I have to enact the page again." Said the head eagerly, as if it was lonely and wanted more conversation. "Wait for me and don't go anywhere."

Grand patiently stood without moving, watching the horse gallop away. The wolf howled, and after a short while once more the horseman rode down the hill and stopped in front of him.

"May I ask you a question?" Said Grand shyly. "Before you...turn me into yourself?"

"Shoot." The head seemed to be in high spirits.

Grand smiled sheepishly, secretly pleased that the horseman bit his bait. "Why do you want us to destroy Mad Tome?"

The head looked at him, astounded. "Nobody told you?"

Grand spread his arms, willing his face into disappointment.

"To get home, of course! Don't you want to get home?"

"I do." Agreed Grand, and risked another question. "How old are you?"

"Twelve." Said the head, sniffing. "Only I've been twelve for so many years now, I don't know how old I am anymore. But don't despair, I'll come and visit you sometime. It's not bad here. You get to scare readers out of their pants, it's a lot of fun."

Grand allowed himself to smile, and ventured further.

"Then...what happens if your page gets ripped?"

The head turned grey, if it was possible, because it was already grey and dead looking. "You die."

Grand's mouth opened. "But..." He gulped. "My friends are still there."

"The other badlings?" Asked the head. "Oh, don't worry about them. Before they turn into one of *us*, they're safe. You're safe. For now." It sneered.

Grand let out air. "Then Bluebeard must be dead." He said sadly. "I wonder if his dead wives are double-dead. Is that even possible?"

"Bluebeard is dead?" Cried the head.

Grand licked his lips, sensing a seed of an idea form in his mind. "He ripped his own page. I mean, he split it with an ax." He demonstrated the motion.

"He *what*?" The head gasped. "But that's suicide! Why didn't you tell me? That is grave news!"

Grand shrugged. "Sorry."

The head chewed on its lips. "That changes things. We cannot tarry. On your knees, badling!" It commanded.

"But if I have my head cut off and my hands tied just like yours, how will I help my friends destroy Mad Tome?" Said Grand smartly.

The head appeared stumped. "I didn't think about that. You're hurting my head with your talking. On your knees!"

Grand couldn't come up with another objection, and his thumping heart scrambled his mind. He thought of every story he has read, anything that had monsters in it and how to fight them, and it came to him. He needed to climb on the horse. If he did that, he'd be like one of those heroes riding the beast and making it impossible for the beast to snatch him.

With an unexpected adroitness he sprung up and lunged for the horse. Alas, his body betrayed him, and what looked as a magnificent leap in his mind ended up being a clumsy shove at the animal that startled and reared, neighing its offense.

"Ah, this is how you repay me for kindness!" Screamed the head and urged the horse to charge.

Grand jumped up and ran for his life. He has never run so fast before. He positively flew, smashing through grassland like a rhinoceros gone berserk.

"Stop!" Cried the head. "You can't run away from me!"

Grand could see the edge of the page ahead, tucked into the earthy wall: it moved. Just as the horse caught up to him, the ground lifted. The horse nickered happily and shot forward like a bullet.

"Wait, you dumb steed! Get back!"

But there was no help for it.

The horse skidded to a halt. An enormous hand emerged from the gap and with a single finger scratched it behind its ears.

The horse rolled up its eyes in evident pleasure, and then whinnied in a hurt tone two very coherent sentences. "I'm not dumb," was the first one, addressed to the horseman, and the second one was, "and after all these years you don't know squat about riding horses."

The head bulged out its eyes, stunned.

Meanwhile, without losing a mote of precious time, the hand felt about until it bumped into Grand. It opened, spreading apart all of its five monstrous fingers, gently plucked him off the page and whisked him away into a story where Rusty has already made himself comfortable.

Chapter 11. Giant Birds And Giant Diamonds

Every book has characters—as without them there would be no books—but not every character likes to stay put. It gets lonesome and boring, particularly if the story hasn't been read for a while. Tired of waiting, those best equipped for travel get swept by wanderlust and take off to other pages for afternoon visits.

At the moment, however, Bells would've preferred to aimlessly dawdle on the same page doing absolutely nothing as opposed to straddling a feathery back of an unidentified wing-flapping brute. She didn't dare open her eyes since slamming into its moving body. It stopped her unfettered fall and swiftly carried her downward.

"I'm not dead," she thought, shivering. "I'm okay. I will most certainly catch a cold because I'm wet from the rain, but I'm alive." Then a terrible thought pierced her. "Grand!" Her heart jolted. "Peacock! And where *is* Rusty, I wonder? How will I find them now?" She gripped the feathers harder. "I hope this monster bird won't eat me once it discovers I'm riding it. That would be a great end to *my* story."

The soporific whistle of the wind calmed her somewhat, until she heard a thin whining noise underneath. It came in bursts. It sounded like Peacock screaming.

It was Peacock screaming.

"Peacock!" Bells opened her eyes a tiny slit. Rushing air burned them, and two wet lines crawled to her ears. She blinked the moisture away, listening. Another noise broke through the drone—it came from below—a desperate pitiful trumpeting. A shrill screech silenced it, and Bells was convinced that her eardrums have burst.

"That was an elephant crying," she muttered, "poor thing. This stupid flying barbarian caught an elephant and is planning to eat it." She considered kicking it, but thought it would've been unwise in her position. Behind her erupted a volley of upset exclamations.

"And that is *definitely* Peacock," she said, smiling.

Two quivering hands clasped her back.

Bells flinched at the touch of damp clothes on her skin. Still, she grinned. It was the most welcome change of events since she fell into the abyss. Her nose started dripping. A series of sneezes racked her.

Peacock pulled closer. "We're going to fall!" He screamed into her ear. "This crazy thing will shake us down, and we're going to fall and die!"

Strangely, Peacock's panicky outburst gave Bells back her iron confidence. Somehow things would turn out all right. She rolled her eyes, which made her feel even better, swiped her nose on her shoulder and twisted back as far as she could.

"Can you stop freaking out?" She shouted. "I'm so glad you're with me, but please don't spoil it!"

"What?" Yelled Peacock. "I can't hear you!"

"Stop screaming in my ear, you'll make me deaf!"

"What?"

"Shut up, you ninny!"

It has finally produced the desired effect, and Bells exhaled in relief. "Boys," she said to herself, putting all kinds of meanings into a single word and sniffing.

Peacock promptly pinched her.

Bells yelped. "Oww! What was that for?" She shouted. "I thought you said you couldn't hear me?"

"I can't!" Stressed Peacock. "But I'll pinch you again, if you won't stop calling me names!"

"Since when is that an issue?" Yelled Bells. "I've always called you names, and you never had a problem with that! Would you prefer me to call you a *sissy*?"

Peacock pinched her again, but Bells was ready. She tossed her head back with determined vigor.

There was a dull knock. Bells eyes watered, but it was worth it.

"Ouch!" Cried Peacock.

Bells waited.

No pinches or acerbic commentary followed. "That is how you deal with obstinate boys," she said proudly to herself. Elated by her victory and by Peacock's company, she decided to survey their surroundings. The view stunned her. Wet clothes, aching ears, and stuffed nose momentarily forgotten, she gawked in amazed agitation.

They were clinging to the back of a giant bird, its plumage peat brown and glossy, its wingspan as wide as a house. In the turquoise void beneath them lay a limpid ocean. It lapped at a single rocky island, a squat solitary mountain its only attraction. One of its snowy peaks harbored a nest from which a trio of enormous chicks cried for food with their cavernous maws. They looked like dots from this height, but there was no doubt in Bells's mind as to what they were. She supplied the missing details with her fomented imagination.

Apparently Peacock also glimpsed this astonishing vista. He gripped Bells so hard she thought her ribs would break.

"Peacock!" She yelled. "You're hurting me!"

"Sorry!" His hold slackened. "This is insane. Where are we?"

Bells took a deep breath and shuddered. "Like I know?"

"You're the one who reads most books!"

"And you're the one who likes others to think for you!"

Peacock fell quiet.

They dove into warmer air. The sky blinded them with azure intensity. The bird slowed and careered around the peak in diminishing circles, then suddenly swooped down. Bells's stomach fluttered. They were dropping altitude and nearing the nest.

"We need to rip it." Said Bells to herself.

"What?" Shouted Peacock.

"Nothing!" Answered Bells. Any explanations over the rush of air seemed impossible.

"Look, a giant nest!" Peacock added.

"Is it? I think it's rather small." Said Bells sarcastically. Her remark got lost in the wind.

The craggy valley surrounding the mountain appeared desolate, with no sign of trees or vegetation of any kind. But something crawled along its gulches. As they flew lower, Bells saw packs of rhinos and elephants, and a few monstrous serpents that undulated like huge worms, clearly on a hunt.

Bells shivered from disgust. "What a bizarre assortment of animal life." She said to herself. "I wish I could stay here and study it, as revolting as it is."

"It's about to drop us!" Cried Peacock.

Bells silenced him with a jab in the ribs.

The bird screeched, rocking right above the nest. In the midst of broken shells and bleached animal bones squatted three chicks the size of little dragons. They squeaked, demanding to be fed much like the ducks did at the duck pond.

The bird opened its talons and the elephant crashed down.

The chicks didn't ask themselves to dinner twice. They pounced and began to devour it. Bells heard terrible sounds of skin rending, bone snapping, and blood slurping. She felt light-headed from the constant up-and-down motion and sick from the shock of this feast. "I'm a scientist," she muttered, "scientists are not supposed to faint when witnessing the lawful course of nature."

In the meantime the bird, having delivered the coveted victual to her offspring, alighted on the edge of the nest and folded its wings.

With a shriek Bells and Peacock slipped off its back.

If not for the ledge of tangled branches over the precipice below, they would've plummeted to their unquestionable deaths. Instead they rebounded and summersaulted into the nest, rolling to a stop on a surprisingly soft surface of moss, dawn, and animal skins amply decorated with huge bird droppings and, strangely, raw natural diamonds. In the middle of this horrendous interior three hungry nestlings were picking away at

the remains of the pachyderm. The thing was gone in minutes, its limbs ripped apart, its carcass stripped, and the insatiable vultures immediately demanded more.

Bells crept past them to the shadowy spot behind a pile of elephant skulls. Peacock hesitantly followed.

The mother bird screeched and took off to procure another juicy creature. The squall of air it produced was so powerful that Bells's ponytail whipped her face. The enormous wingspan covered the sky like a dark cloud. As it cleared, the diamonds sparkled in the sun, and suddenly Bells knew where they were.

"We're in one of stories about Sinbad the Sailor." She said, her eyes shining. She picked up one of the stones and twirled it in her fingers. "In the valley of diamonds. Merchants would throw huge pieces of meat down the mountain slopes so the diamonds would stick to them and then wait for Roc birds to pick them up and carry them to their nests. They'd wait for the birds to fly off, show up and collect the gems. That's it, Peacock. We must be in one of those nests! That was a Roc bird, and these are Roc chicks. They eat elephants and rhinos and snakes." She paused and added under her breath, "I'm not sure if they eat people. Can't remember reading about that. I hope they don't." She pocketed the stone and picked up a couple more.

Peacock stared at her, his pupils so huge, they seemed to fill his whole face. "Snakes? Did you say, snakes?" He twisted around, examining every inch of the spot he sat on.

"They're huge, Peacock. Ginormous." Explained Bells. "You'd see them if they were here."

Peacock couldn't find words to answer, pointing.

The three chicks turned their attention to the newcomers, appraising them for edibility.

"Don't move," said Bells in a weak voice. She huddled closer to Peacock. He gripped her hand.

The chicks tilted their heads in that jerky avian fashion and blinked. The tension seemed unbearable.

"They look real to me." Said Peacock.

"What?" Bells glanced at him.

Peacock nodded at the birds. "The chicks. You said they're made of rock."

"Oh. No, not that rock. Roc. R-O-C. That's what they're called."

One of the chicks pecked the air and halted, giving them a scrutinizing eye. Bells and Peacock crouched lower, flattening themselves to the floor.

"They've seen us," whispered Peacock. "They'll eat us."

"No they won't." Hissed Bells. "Stop freaking out. Let's focus on getting out of here."

"Oh yeah? And where will we go? Jump off the mountain and smash our skulls on the rocks?"

"Will you stop fretting?" Said Bells with feeling. "They haven't eaten us yet, have they? They don't even think we're food. But if you keep squirming like a worm, I'm sure they will."

The chicks appeared to be listening.

"What happens next?" Asked Peacock.

"What?" Bells stared at him. "What happens where?"

"Here! You read this book, didn't you?"

"Some of it." Admitted Bells, pink creeping up her cheeks. "I flipped through it at the library, mostly for pictures."

"What book is it?" Demanded Peacock, fidgeting and raking his hair that has lost its luster and hung over his brow in damp cords.

"It's one of One Thousand and One Night's stories. The Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor or something like that."

"So what happens next?"

Bells's face grew hot and for a moment she forgot about the danger they were in. "Listen, Peacock, you're starting to really annoy me. Aren't you worried about Grand? And about Rusty? Don't you ever wonder what happened to them?"

Peacock blinked at her. "Why would I worry?"

Bells balked. "Because...because...how can you not?"

"You girls worry too much." Declared Peacock.

"Oh, we do, do we?" Bells propped her hands on her hips.

"Well, that is very *manly* of you to say, the boy who's about to pee his pants, scared out of his mind because some birdies might peck him death!"

She has noticed a curious silence and looked up.

The three chicks towered over them.

"No, continue." Said one of them in a broken screech.

"Yeah, like, it's very entertaining." Said another.

Bells and Peacock stared.

"Dude, you scared them." Said the third with conviction.

"What if they die of fright now?"

"What? No, I didn't." Rebuked the first. "You did."

"Anyway." Said the second. "What are you doing here?"

"They're new badlings, Mother said." Explained the third.

"Are you?" Inquired the first.

Bells eyed with horror the scaly legs the size of tree trunks, the sharp claws, the powerful beaks, and the orange unblinking eyes. Three pairs of them riveted in their direction.

"We are." Said Bells finally.

"Dude, that's awesome. Mother must've gotten you for us."

Its fuzzy head wrinkled as if in thought. "Why aren't there three of you? How are we supposed to share you?"

Bells and Peacock gulped.

"Why do we need to share them?" Asked the third chick.

"I'll get this one, and you guys can have the other one."

"That's not how it works!" Protested the second chick.

"You're not getting anything, Haroun." Said the first.

Haroun sulked, his orange eyes full of grudge. "I'll get you for this, Hinbad."

Hinbad ignored him. "Anyway, as I was saying--"

"We should wait for Mother, that's the rules." Said the second chick quickly.

"Don't interrupt me, Hussain." Said Hinbad and snapped his beak warningly. "As I was saying--"

"Dude, take it easy." Hussain spread his wings and set his legs wide apart, taking an aggressive stance.

"Here comes Mother." Announced Haroun. "We missed our chance, you idiots."

A large shadow covered them.

"It's not Mother, it's Alice!" Screeched Hinbad.

A queer thing occurred. The mountain tilted. The nest shifted and slipped a notch, sending all three Roc chicks into a massive hysteria of squawking and fluttering and clawing.

The same hand that whisked Grand away from the horrendous headless rider now hovered above the nest and, scattering the pile of skulls and crumbling moss and twigs, scooped up Bells and Peacock and deposited them into a lush meadow overgrown with

flowering thistle, burdock, and mushrooms. Huge floppy mushrooms, the cap of one of them prominently occupied by a blue caterpillar puffing out rings of smoke.

Chapter 12. The Badlings In Wonderland

Look closely at your bookshelf. Are you sure every book is where you left it? Doesn't one seem to protrude a bit more from the rest? I thought so. It wants to be noticed. The more you read it, the thicker it will get, bursting with pride. And the books you haven't touched in years will get thinner and thinner until they perish.

Lucky for Alice, her story had never been abandoned, and she certainly didn't plan to abandon it herself, although she wasn't who she *thought* she was, forgetting it on purpose.

She lowered Bells and Peacock at the foot of the mushroom and examined them with her large round eyes.

"What the heck." Said Peacock, backing off.

Bells stood with her mouth open, staring.

Alice loomed over them like a giant doll in a powder blue dress, her wavy hair combed back, her face alert and curious.

"You poor things," she said at last, "those dreadful birds must've scared you silly. Why, I'm sure by now you don't know *what* to think about us anymore. It must be so confusing." She pouted. "You sad creatures. Well, *I* don't approve of what they want to do. *I* certainly don't want to go wandering about in

other stories. *I'm* perfectly fine here, and here is where I intend to stay, so, you see, you don't need to fear me." She waited for them to answer.

"Are you...Alice?" Asked Bells. "Alice from—"

"Wonderland? Why, yes, I *am*." Answered Alice politely. "Or that was my name this morning. You see, I have changed so many times since then, I'm not quite sure about myself anymore."

"Holy cow," said Peacock, "you talk just like her."

"I *am* her." Said Alice petulantly.

"You never know," confessed Peacock, "some of you seem to be replacements."

"Do I look like a replacement to you?" Asked Alice, and the light in her eyes glinted with a carefully concealed fury.

Peacock balked, sensing the hostility. "No, not at all. You look very Alicy. I mean, Alice-like. I mean, like a proper Alice."

Alice smiled triumphantly. "Thank you, Peacock. And you must be Bells?"

"I am." Said Bells, impressed. "How do you know?"

"Your friends Grand and Rusty told me."

"They did?" Bells brightened. "Are they here?"

"They are, as a matter of fact." Said Alice importantly. "I brought them here myself. It's so much nicer to be in *my* story

than in any other, particularly the one that has dead wives chasing you all over the chateau."

Bells's eyebrows went up. "You *know*?"

"Everyone knows. News spreads fast though Mad Tome. Besides, Bluebeard told me himself. He floated by on his way out." Alice sighed deeply. "Poor chap."

"What happened?" Asked Bells, barely breathing.

"Why do you care?" Interrupted Peacock. "You saw what happened, he axed it. I don't see the use of talking about it. If we're supposed to destroy Mad Tome, let's get on with it and not stand here talking all day. How do you *girls* get anything done is beyond me." He nervously glanced around.

Bells and Alice regarded him sternly.

"How rude." Said Alice.

"Don't mind him, please." Bells waved a dismissive hand.

"He's a *boy*."

"And that makes you better than me how?" Bristled Peacock.

Bells propped a hand on her hip. "I didn't say I'm better than you."

"Maybe you didn't say it, but you thought about it." He scoffed, palming his hair.

"Nonsense." Snapped Bells.

"Grand told me that you two like to fight." Observed Alice.

"He is the one who always starts it." Explained Bells.

"I just don't understand what we're doing here," said Peacock quickly. "I'd like to find a way to get out and get home, you know?"

"Home?" Repeated Alice wonderingly. "This is your home. You don't need any other home. What's wrong with a meadow full of flowers, and grass, and mushrooms?"

Peacock glanced at Bells.

She licked her lips and stretched them into a smile. "Nothing, nothing is wrong with it, Alice. We love your story, and this page, it's so summery and nice and warm, we would love to stay here with you." And then she added in a lower voice. "Forever."

"You would?" Asked Alice, tilting her head to the side.

"Of course!" Pronounced Bells loudly. "Could there be anything better than Wonderland?"

"Well, I suppose you're right." Said Alice happily. "Then you would like to stay with me, in my story?"

"Yes." Nodded Bells and stepped on Peacock's foot.

It took him a moment. "Yes!" He piped up, raising both brows at Bells in question.

"Would you like me to give you a tour?" Asked Alice.

"Actually, would it be possible for all of us to go on tour? We'd love to go together with Grand and Rusty, if you

don't mind, to share this one of a kind experience." Said Bells, willing her face to appear innocent.

A couple of strangled noises came from the midst of a thistle growth, and Bells saw Alice flick her eyes to it and then quickly recover herself to a sweet blameless girl.

"I let them take a stroll around on their own," she explained absently, "I should think they'll be back very soon, so there is no reason to worry. We don't have to wait for them, do we?"

A polite cough floated from the mushroom, and a creaky voice said, "We have a visitor."

A sudden gust of wind hit them without warning. Leaves and petals danced around them in a mad swirl, and then the meadow shuddered and lurched.

"Mad Tome." Gasped Bells.

Peacock paled.

Alice's cheerful demeanor slid off her face. "It's here." She said in a small voice. "I must hide you at once."

"Hide us?" Repeated Peacock.

"Puppy?" Called Alice, stuck two fingers in her mouth and expertly whistled. "Come here, puppy!"

A big fluffy thing gamboled out from behind the thistle and roved its eyes over Bells and Peacock. It would've been a cute gesture if not for the broken capillaries in the whites of its

eyes and their bulging appearance. The puppy looked quite mad, and when it groaned, revealing two rows of sharp milk teeth, there was no doubt as to what it intended to do if the children attempted to flee.

"Watch over the badlings for me." Commanded Alice.

"That's one big puppy," demurred Peacock, quite amazed.

The puppy gave him the look of death.

Alice petted it, then turned to startled Bells and said, "if you'll excuse me, I must go talk to Mad Tome." And then she added in a hasty whisper. "Or it might think I'm planning something. I sure *do* hope it doesn't." She made to stand up.

"Wait!" Called Bells. "What about our friends?"

"You'll join them soon enough." Said Alice mysteriously and stormed off across the meadow and into the forest. Her head hovered above the tree crowns.

"Hello, Mad Tome." She said nicely to the sky. "How are you this morning?"

"Oh, don't ask." Mad Tome rustled. "Terrible, simply terrible."

"I thought you looked rather sad." Echoed him Alice. She threw a quick glance over her shoulder, and the puppy growled, pushing Bells and Peacock with its nose to the thistle.

They rapidly moved ahead, flinching at the wet nudge.

"The badlings have been misbehaving lately." Mad Tome heaved to Alice. "I fear mutiny, or worse," it dropped its voice to a sigh. "They might go to war. Bluebeard injured me severely. It stuck an ax in his page, the hotheaded duffer! I'm hurting, Alice, hurting so bad! And the pages, all these pages make me feel bloated, I can hardly hold them inside the covers." Its cloudy lips settled next to Alice's ear and appeared to be relaying further information.

Peacock touched Bells's shoulder. "Why is she talking to it like that?"

The puppy growled, and Bells didn't dare to answer. Not that she knew how to answer. She was puzzled herself, but she didn't like the glint she saw in Alice's eyes, and the groans she heard coming again from the thistle.

"Did you hear that?" Whispered Peacock.

"Pardon me, but I must warn you." Said the puppy impatiently. "If you won't keep quiet, I will bite you, and then you will understand what it's like to beg for scraps and scratch for flees and chase a stupid stick, pretending like it's the height of doggy entertainment." It sneered not unkindly.

Peacock chocked. "It talks." He stated.

"Obviously." Added Bells.

"I asked you to be quiet," yapped the puppy.

Bells and Peacock nodded agreement, both sizing up the teeth in the puppy's maw, which was large enough to swallow them whole.

Meanwhile, Alice appeared to have sufficiently soothed Mad Tome. It regaled something else and with an inaudible farewell dissolved into nothing.

"I must go to the beginning of the page," she called to the puppy over the woods, "but I will be back. Don't forget what I asked you to do."

"Puppy do this, puppy do that," grumbled the puppy. "I'm tired of this." It snapped its jaws so close to Bells she jumped.

Someone coughed on the mushroom cap and said, "I saw that."

The puppy's ears drooped, and it sat on its tail. "I can bite you in two in no time," it threatened, "stupid worm."

"Do so," said the voice. "I would be glad to grow four legs instead of these six pitiful stumps and ten useless prolegs that are more a decoration than a locomotion."

"The caterpillar!" Gaspd Bells.

Peacock peered at the mushroom. "Holy...wow. Bells? It's smoking a pipe!"

"I beg to differ," said the caterpillar, crawling to the edge with its whole wrinkly body. "It's a hookah." It said it in an upset tone and blew smoke right into Peacock's face.

Peacock coughed, waving it off.

The thistle shook and someone moaned again. Bells's patience snapped. She glanced at the puppy content licking grime out of its paws, at the caterpillar dazed in the veil of smoke, at Peacock rubbing his eyes, darted to the scrub of thorny thicket, and parted the stems.

On the patch of dirt, covered with leaves, cocooned in lilac silk and gagged lay Grand and Rusty, staring mutely at Bells and rotating their eyes, indicting a whole tumult of emotions, joy and relief and panic and shock.

"Peacock!" Screamed Bells. "Come here, quick!"

A volley of rushed steps later, Peacock appeared next to her, and behind him the wet nose of the puppy.

"Help me!" Bells fell to her knees, clawing at the cocoons to no avail. Her hands slid and burned. The shells were made of silk, smooth and tough, and Bells glanced up at Peacock.

"Find something sharp!" She said.

"So that it what you've been doing, you nasty purple grub," barked the puppy, nosing in. "You have been saving them for yourself! Wait until Alice find out. Alice!" It backed off and out of the greenery, yelping its head off. "Alice!"

Grand and Rusty wiggled, impatient to get out of their predicament and, impossibly, grinning like two lunatics despite their gags.

"Teeth!" Cried Peacock. "Do it with your teeth!"

They fell on their friends, biting holes in the their woven contraptions, sticking in fingers and pulling and tugging and yanking. Peacock kept slashing and slitting at the silk, while Bells leaned over Grand and chewed through the rope tied around his head, pulling the gag out of his mouth.

Grand coughed with gusto, sitting up.

"Are you okay?" Asked Bells.

"Um." Said Grand, rubbing his mouth. "Got my head almost chopped off and then almost turned into a caterpillar, but still alive. So I guess I am okay." His cheeks colored red.

Bells grinned. "I was so worried about you!"

"That she was." Confirmed Peacock, freeing Rusty from the gag. "Rattled my head off about how insensitive I was not to worry as much as her. Girls." He finished, giving Bells a sly look.

"Shut up," she scolded him. "That's not what I said at all."

"Peacock! Bells!" Exclaimed Rusty, shifting his jaw to make sure it worked and twisting his arms and kneading his wrists. "Guys! Man, I'm so happy to see you! I thought I'd never see you again. That puppy is nuts! It wanted to bite me. And that—"

"Okay, Rusty, you can tell us later. We need to get out here before she gets back." Spoke Bells with alarm. "Obviously we can't trust anyone here. They're all fakes."

"But where have you been?" Gushed Rusty. "You have to tell me about the pages you got onto. I've been stuck here since that gormless book threw me here from the desert. And guess what. Grand got into The Headless Horseman—he has no head, it's dead and he holds it in his hands, right? So he wanted to cut Grand's head off. The nerve the guys has, I tell you."

Bells looked at Grand with a new appreciation. "For real?"

"For real." Confirmed Grand proudly, sweating a little.

"Hear this!" Shouted Rusty, spluttering saliva. "So this book we're in? It's called Mad Tome, I know for sure," he lowered his voice, "and we're supposed to destroy it."

"We know, Rusty." Said Peacock impatiently. "I vote we go look for the edge of the page before that giant girl mashes us into pulp or something."

"Agreed." Said Bells.

She poked her head out of the thistle and choked back a cry of surprise. "Alice is small again." He said in a loud whisper.

Alice, the same size as Bells, was standing on tiptoe next to the mushroom, talking to the caterpillar.

"It's because the page is repeating itself," said Grand smartly, wiping his face with a sleeve.

"What do you mean?" Asked Bells.

"It happened to me in The Headless Horseman," said Grand, "it kept replaying itself, because there is only so much story written on the same page. The horseman kept riding by, again and again."

"That must've been horrifying." Said Bells compassionately.

Then Alice nodded, and the caterpillar slid off and toward them. In the background Alice was feeling around the mushroom.

"She's about to eat a piece of it," commented Grand. "When she does, she will grow large and then she can mush us into pulp, like you were saying, Peacock."

Peacock gulped. "What exactly are we waiting for?"

"Not what. Who." Said the caterpillar, groveling up.

"What do you mean?" Asked Peacock.

The caterpillar puffed a ring of smoke and said, "I don't mean, I say, and I'm not mean, but what I do mean is what I say, and I say you are waiting for me."

The children looked at each other.

"What are you trying to tell us?" Said Bells.

"I'm not trying, I'm saying," stressed the caterpillar, "that I'm too slow to weave you four into cocoons before Alice gets her hands on you, and I most certainly don't wish for her to have you if I can't, and I will show you my hole."

"What hole?" Asked Rusty dumbly.

"The hollow hole." Said the caterpillar. "I bore it when I was bored, to wriggle through the pages."

"You mean to say..." began Bells.

"I don't mean, I say!" The caterpillar shrunk back, offended. "It's over there. Suit yourselves." It proclaimed, slid across the patch of dirt and crawled in under a leaf.

"What was that about?" Asked Peacock.

"Look! It's a hole!" Cried Rusty, diving in and disappearing in a flash.

"Rusty!" Bells called.

A shadow covered them.

"I thought I told you to guard them!" Said Alice's voice from high above.

"I beg your pardon, I did." Yapped the puppy.

"Then how do you explain this?" She leaned and parted the thistle.

Bells shrieked, beckoning to Grand and Peacock, who dashed after her into the caterpillar's hole. It was quite spacious and dry, but not spacious enough for the puppy to reach them. He snapped and growled and barked hysterically, sticking in his nose and pawing at the dirt, sending clouds of it on top of their heads.

They rapidly descended down the tunnel that bore through this page to the next one like a wormhole in an apple, all

twisted and pitted and dark, faint ghostly shapes around them quivering and curling and fizzing in the murky air, whispering in their ears, "badlings...look, here come new badlings...where are you off to...stay with us...we are in no hurry...we have no pages...won't you talk to us...we are so lonely..."

Chapter 13. Down The Caterpillar Hole

How fascinating would it be to visit all the books you have read! You know perfectly well who lives on their pages, but what about *between* them? What about those who get lost, torn, or disfigured? Where do they go?

Bells and the boys were in the middle of finding that out.

They crept after the caterpillar on their hands and knees through tunnel after tunnel of dirt. Scattered light that seeped out of nowhere glimmered on their faces, illuminating enough of the haze to see the walls of the hole, rough and streaked with roots. Only they weren't alone. The murk brimmed with shapes and apparitions. Some hung around in a lumpy cumulus that moved along with the children. Others clung to the debris like moss to a cave.

"What the heck are these?" Whispered Peacock.

"They're like jellyfish!" Said Rusty, unable to keep his voice down. "Ever swam into jellyfish in the sea?"

"Um." Ventured Grand. "I think it's not a good idea to touch them."

Rusty tore his hand away automatically. "Why not, man? They're so cool and slimy, and look, I think they like it."

"Excuse me, caterpillar?" Said Bells into the burrow. Her words fell flat in the echoless silence. "Caterpillar?" She halted, and Peacock bumped into her.

"What's the holdup?" He asked.

"Hang on." Bells cleared her throat, trying to ignore a yawning face next to her that coruscated one moment, another darkled, apparently enjoying her confusion and attempts to ignore it.

"Caterpillar? Hello?" She turned to the boys. "I think he's gone, guys. He's not answering and I don't see him anywhere."

"Fantastic." Commented Peacock. "What are we going to do now?"

"Move forward, you dupe. What else?"

"Hey, I thought we agreed on not calling me names."

Bells regarded Peacock with a stink eye. "We didn't agree on anything, and I will keep calling you names until you stop asking stupid questions and acting like a coward."

Peacock was about to parry, but a ghostly figure sallied up to him and hung directly in front of his face. He quailed, paling. "Shoo. Shoo!" He waved it away and uttered a horrified whimper, his fingers passing through its gelatinous surface.

"There is my proof," said Bells to herself and rolled her eyes, just to solidify the feeling of superiority.

"Rusty, you sure it's not going to bite off your hand?"

Asked Grand worriedly.

Rusty, unperturbed, an exuberant grin splitting his face in half, was petting something teathy and horrendous. It didn't exactly have a body or any kind of a presence, except an ethereal head that seemed to enjoy the attention. It tilted back so Rusty could scratch whatever was left of its neck.

"Over here...yes, right here...a bit to the left..." It directed him in a dull nasal voice. "Ohh...this feels so good...I haven't been properly scratched in a millennia..."

"You're not alone...move over...it's our turn now..." Murmured the voices around, voices belonging to a cluster of phantoms that were eager for some tenderness.

It took for Grand to pull Rusty by the hand, breaking this lovely exchange of pleasantries to a pouty dismay of the wraiths that immediately wafted after Rusty, nuzzling to him in an effort to receive another dose of affection.

Bells passed compressed air through her lips and stopped again.

To the left and to the right branched out more burrows and hollows and dens and passages dug out in hard soil. The farther she looked, the more of them she saw, their passage becoming a reticulation of caves.

"You know what?" Said Bells, thinking out loud. "Maybe it's a good thing that we're here. At least we can rest for a bit and think, without every character trying to catch us or Mad Tome throwing us from page to page."

"Do you have any idea why they're trying to do that?" Asked Peacock in a sugary tone. He even made a conciliatory face, but Bells deemed it beneath her to turn and look. She could sense his mollifying urge with the skin on her back.

"Cut it out, Peacock." She threw over her shoulder.

"No, seriously." He said without a trace of sarcasm.

Bells sighed. "I can only guess." She said uncertainly.

"And? What did you guess so far?"

"You just don't like to tax your brain with thinking, do you?" She sensed a change in the air. The diaphanous shapes huddled and tensed.

"I think," said Bells a little louder, "these are *ghosts*."

There was a general susurrations of agreement.

"Ghosts of who?" Wondered Peacock.

Bells willed herself not to smile, although the corners of her lips still traveled upward. "Ghosts of *bugs*."

"Bugs?" Repeated Peacock, stunned.

"Bugs?" Asked Grand and Rusty from behind.

"Bugs?" Scattered a confounded potpourri of words though the hazy crowding.

"You know, bugs die too." Continued Bells in a very serious tone. "I will have to digress from the scientific approach of examining these..." she groped for the right word, "things. I mean, scientifically speaking they can't exist. You can't pass your hand through a living being without somehow damaging it. But, as a scientist, I always trust my senses. And I can pass a hand through every one of them," she demonstrated on the nearest body of fog, unceremoniously plunging her hand into its forehead. She had to stifle a cry and yank her hand out.

"It's wet and cold!" She pronounced.

"I will see what you will be...when you are dead...badling." Dawdled the shape unpleasantly. "I like...that badling...better." It floated up to Rusty.

"So I think they're ghosts of bugs," concluded Bells. "To answer your question, Peacock."

The specters pushed in closer in an angry wave. "We are no bugs...we are ghosts...of characters...of badlings..."

Bells's throat constricted. "Are you?" She asked.

"Good work, Bells." Said Grand.

"What...what do you mean by that?" Stammered Peacock.

"I get it!" Exclaimed Rusty. "So Grand told me how Bluebeard axed his page, right? Maybe when the page is gone, the characters are gone too? Like, if they don't go to some other page, they become ghosts?"

"Smart badling..." clamored the ghosts.

"Is that why they need us to replace them?" Asked Bells, playing the stupid card. "Do they foresee their death and, I don't know, plan ahead?" She wanted to ask more questions, other questions, but with an effort stopped herself, biting her lip.

"Why not just ask them?" Cried Peacock suddenly. "Hey, ghosts. What is a badling anyway? Can you tell us?"

"Peacock!" Agonized Bells.

"What?"

"You're hurting their feelings!" She snapped.

"I thought you were the expert of that." Said Peacock acidly.

Bells pretended not to hear. "I'm sorry, ghosts," she placated, "he didn't mean to offend you. He didn't..." She lost her train of thought. There was no one to talk to.

The spell was broken. The ghosts whirled around them once more in a tide of vapor and dispersed along the length of the tunnel, swooping and ducking and leapfrogging into the openings of the maze, the maze between the pages that appeared to have openings into hundreds of stories.

"Why are you all looking at me like that?" Demanded Peacock, pressing into the wall under the glares of his friends.

"Did something happen?" Asked Grand quietly, speaking directly into Bells's ear.

Bells shrugged. "Nothing I can think of." She whispered. "He's been like that since we've gone to that Red Death palace. It doesn't matter what I say, he's gets all upset and irritated."

"Peacock, what's wrong?" She asked louder.

He crossed his arms. "What do you care? Leave me alone."

"What is it?" Pressed Bells.

Peacock looked away and mumbled something.

Bells crawled up to him. "Listen." She said. "If you tell us, you'll feel better. I promise."

"Nice try, Bells." He scoffed, but without acidity.

"Come on, Peacock." Called Rusty. "What's up, man?"

"Shut up." Said Peacock miserably.

"All right, you know what? Stop being a chicken and man up!" Commanded Bells. "Either tell us what's going on, or sit here all pissed off and alone, because we're moving forward." She expected a furious rebuke, but Peacock only looked at her, small and frightened, his blue hair hanging limply over his eyes.

"It looked like..." He whispered, trembling.

"What?" Bells leaned closer.

"It looked like a vampire."

Bells eyes grew round. "What did?"

"That ghost, the one that got in my face."

"So what? They all looked like freaks. What difference does it make?"

"Aren't you scared of vampires?"

Bells sat back, brushing the dirt off her knees. "Not anymore than I'm scared of ghosts." She mused, shrugging. "Why?"

Peacock raked his hair. They all waited patiently for him to crack. "It's the book," he said finally. "The book that I didn't finish reading." He looked up.

Rusty opened his mouth, but Grand placed his hand on it just in time, more by instinct than by sight—it was too dark to see much around them.

Peacock took a deep breath and whispered, "it's Dracula."

Faint voices around them picked up the name.

"Dracula...he said Dracula...did you hear...he didn't finish reading Dracula...he will be mighty mad..."

Peacock jerked his head, mortified.

"It's about vampires, right?" Exclaimed Rusty. "Man, vampires are cool! I mean, they're scary, but—"

"Can you let him finish?" Said Bells.

Rusty sniggered embarrassingly.

"It is a bad idea...to mention books...you have never finished reading...badlings." Said a viscid voice from the darkness. The fog haze around them trembled faintly.

The ghosts were back.

"I don't think...they will listen to you..Bluebeard." Said another voice.

"Bluebeard?" Said Bells, squinting to make out shapes.

"Um. Grand looked in horror at a misty arm that playfully touched his sneaker and, seeing no reaction, migrated to Rusty, who happily engaged. It was Eleonore, one of Bluebeard's dead wives, looking uglier than ever as a bodiless apparition. She tickled Rusty, giggling, her fingers traveling to his neck and encircling it.

"Bells?" Called Peacock meekly.

She turned to look. Eleonore squeezed her fingers together, and Rusty rapidly turned blue. "Nice ghost. That's enough playing," he said. And then, in a sudden panic, "You're choking me! Get off me!"

They rushed to his help, but when they tried ripping the fingers off poor Rusty, their hands sunk though clammy slime and came away with strands of gluey goo.

"Let go of him, you dead pudding!" Screamed Bells. Her eyes threw daggers, and Eleonore flinched, uncertain.

"Do you want us to destroy Mad Tome or not?" Demanded Bells, wiping the substance off her palms. "Or do you want everyone to end up like you?"

"Oh." Said Eleonore and slackened her hold.

Rusty took a shuddering breath, color returning to his cheeks.

"Run!" Screamed Bells.

Unfortunately, running in a flow tunnel wasn't possible, and instead, shrieking their heads off in a panic, the children scurried forward without any sense of direction, only wanting to get away from the slimy ghosts and the murk and the chill. Shapes parted to let them through, rising and sticking to the walls in glitzy bulbous swells, whispering and urging them on.

Bells turned into a hollow and nearly fell out of it, poking up her head from the side of a hill, her ears assaulted by a cacophony of noises and explosions.

"Get back!" She cried, trying to push past Rusty.

Rusty was enthralled and wouldn't move. "Whoa!"

Below them lay a field. A garrison of horsemen in navy coats and beaver hats, sabres aloft, hooting and shouting, galloped through bursts of fire and smoke toward an army of swarthy men in kaftans. Some of them walked, others rode steeds, yet others sat on top of elephants decked out in brocades with golden tassels.

"I know this book! It's Baron Munchausen! Right there!" Rusty shouted, pointing.

"Are you out of your mind?" Cried Bells, tugging on his legs to pull him in. "Help me!"

Grand wrapped his heavy hand around Rusty's ankle and yanked him back into earthy darkness. "Come on, we can't go out there. We'll be shot dead." He said.

"But it's Baron Munchausen!"

He wiggled out of Grand's hold and crawled back, leaning over the edge, his mouth open.

A man in a red topcoat and a black triangular hat, his face one big curly mustache, charged at the sultan, whacked him off the elephant, dismounted and rained lashes left and right. The air crackled and boomed.

Grinning like a lunatic, Rusty screamed. "Right there, see? That's him. Watch what he's going to do!"

For a moment Rusty's enthusiasm infected them and they gathered up, watching the baron catch cannonballs with his bare hands and fling them back at the enemy's fortress. The sultan fired at the Baron from a pistol, to which the Baron responded by swiftly slicing off the sultan's head.

Bells gasped.

Peacock and Grand gaped.

And Rusty said in awe, "Did you see that? He just lopped it off, just like that!"

The Baron cleaned his sable, stashed it away, caught a shooting cannonball, mounted it, and flew off.

"What the heck?" Said Peacock, staring.

Rusty rattled to him excitedly. "I know, right? But listen to this. He also pulled himself out of a bog by his own hair, right? And he shot a deer with cherry pits! And a cherry tree grew from the deer's head the next morning! And—" Rusty gasped for air, "—he shot ducks in the air so when they fell down they were already roasted! And he turned a wolf inside out!"

"I don't know about the wolf," said Grand, shuddering at the memory, "but roasted ducks sound good." He swallowed sadly. "Come to think of it, I wouldn't mind a roasted wolf either." He patted his stomach sadly.

"Come on, guys." Said Bells.

They crept through the burrow for another hour, halting and pausing to rest, when at one of the stops they glimpsed a rift in the haze at the end of the tunnel, a patch of starless and moonless sky visible through a window. Energized by this discovery, they scrambled toward it, oblivious to Dracula peering at them from the shadows.

Chapter 14. The Underground Throne Room

Book characters must lead extraordinarily easy lives. According to most stories, rarely do they waste time on such trifles as sleeping, eating, or making trips to the bathroom. This presents a curious problem for those unprepared (in the future, make sure to do these things before you start reading).

The children climbed out of the opening in the wall, dusted themselves off and looked around.

They were standing in a dark room. A tall wardrobe flanked a simple wooden bed on which a child slept peacefully under the covers, blonde locks spilled on the pillow. By the bed stood a chair and a wooden desk with carefully arranged papers, an inkbottle, and several quills. A large clock tick-tocked in the corner. Apart from that no other noise disturbed the night.

Bells shifted weight and the wooden floor creaked under her feet. She froze.

"Where are we now?" Whispered Peacock.

"No idea." She answered.

"I wish it was Hansel and Gretel." Said Grand under his breath.

Rusty's eyes rounded, and he said as quietly as he possibly could. "It's where that old hag eats two kids, right?"

"Um." Grand's stomach rumbled, and he quickly clasped it with his hands. "Not exactly. It's about a cannibalistic woman who forced Gretel into slavery and locked Hansel in an animal cage, fattening him up so she could fry him in an old-fashioned stove. It operates similarly to a funeral incinerator, except that it burns at lower temperatures and more unevenly, so his dying throes would be longer and more painful, and nobody would hear his screams." He supplied helpfully. "I think once she decided that he was sufficiently dead and crisp, she would take him out and start carving him and—" He stopped under his friends' stares. "I'm just stating the facts of what could happen. She doesn't eat him in the end. They escape."

"Thank you for the clarification." Said Peacock nervously. "Why would you want to go into a story like that?"

"The house is made of cakes and candy," said Grand dreamily. "Which is almost as good as doughnuts."

That last word rung a bit too loud, and the child's breathing pattern suddenly changed. It paused. The bed springs groaned, the blanket billowed, then sagged, and all was still again.

"Shhhh!" Hissed Bells. "You'll wake her up."

"How do you know it's a her?" Asked Peacock.

Bells shrugged. "I hope this is The Secret Garden. I would like for it to be The Secret Garden, because there's food there."

"Is that about an orphan girl who lives with her uncle?" Whispered Rusty.

"Yes," said Bells, impressed. "Her parents die of some disease and she comes to live in this mansion with her sick bother, and all they do is plant a garden and eat currant buns."

"For the whole book?" Asked Peacock.

"For the whole book." Confirmed Bells.

"Cool. I'm in!" Said Rusty.

Peacock smirked. "Sounds like a nice life."

"Are you still scared of Dracula, is that why you're upset?" Inquired Bells and was met with a cold wall. Peacock looked through her, pretending he didn't hear the question.

"Suit yourself." Said Bells and stole to the window, drawing the curtain open. Outside, on the cobblestone street, a horse pulled a carriage across a bridge dusted with snow and illuminated by lanterns.

"It's a city," whispered Bells.

"Do you recognize it?" Asked Grand.

"Nope." Mumbled Bells. "The Snow Queen again? Maybe this is the prince sleeping, but then where is the princess?"

"Maybe it's Dwarf's Nose." Said Rusty. "Grandma read it to me when I was little. It's about this boy who lives in a witch's castle with guinea pigs and squirrels. They wear nut shells on their feet and skate on this glass floor, and he learns how to cook all these dishes." He poked Grand. "Hey, if we asked him to make doughnuts, he'd probably make us some."

"Warm doughnuts." Grand's eyelids fluttered and closed.
"With sugar glaze..."

"...and with chocolate syrup..." Breathed Peacock.

"And when you bite into it..." Added Bells, dazed.

"...it melts in your mouth!" Finished Rusty excitedly.

That did it.

The child yawned and sat up. It was a boy of about ten, with long blonde hair and dressed in a long nightgown. He saw the children, frowned, and then beckoned to them without a word.

The covers bulged at his feet and out snuck a little black hen. It clucked once, its eyes shining like two candles, fluttered to the floor and scurried out of the room. The boy padded after it. When he reached the door, he turned back, put a finger to his lips, and beckoned once more.

Bewildered, the children tiptoed out of the room and inched along the corridor after the boy. He led them into a large bedroom illuminated with silver moonlight. In it slept two old ladies in two white beds. On one of the nightstands sat a cage

with a parrot, and next to it reclined a big grey cat. The boy leaned to the cat, reaching for its paw. The cat sprung up, its fur standing on end. The parrot spread its wings and squawked, "Fool! Fool!"

Startled, the boy and the hen rushed to the door at the opposite end of the room and vanished through it. The old ladies opened their eyes. The cat hissed and screeched. The parrot cried, "Fools!" Fools!"

Unnerved by this spectacle, the children darted to the door and down many flights of steps in one breath, finally emerging in a long dim hall. Ahead of them two figures receded into shadows, their words bouncing off the walls in a muffled echo.

"You woke them up, Alyosha!" Berated the hen the boy.

"I'm very sorry, Blackey, I will be more careful next time." Said Alyosha anxiously.

"Guys! Did you hear that? It can *talk*!" Said Rusty in a loud whisper that carried rather well. "The chicken can talk! Man, I tell you, everything talks here. I wonder if the walls talk too. Hey, wall, how you doing?" He patted the stones.

"Rusty, can you be quiet for once?" Snapped Bells.

Blackey stopped and peered back.

The children halted.

"Er. Hello. I'm sorry," said Bells, her face glowing like a furnace, "we won't talk anymore."

Blackey nodded, and they continued walking.

The further they went, the more it smelled like molten wax, old smoke, and dust. They came upon a dead end and halted, taking in the sight.

A single candle chandelier hung off a low ceiling, its golden light flickering and throwing dancing shadows on the walls. Two armored knights, one on each side, guarded a pair of polished bronze doors. Without a warning they sprung off their pedestals and charged at Blackey. He inflated himself until he was Alyosha's size and flapped his wings and clacked and pecked at them until they fell apart with a clang, their armor scattering along the stone floor.

Alyosha threw up his hands and fainted.

Blackey turned to the children and said commandingly, "You must go through these doors and wait for me there. Promise me you won't go anywhere until I come back." Then he picked up Alyosha and vanished.

"Okay," said Bells, "this explains things a whole lot."

She marched to the doors and tugged on the knockers.

The doors slowly swung open.

Beyond them lay a throne room with a low ceiling. Bells's head almost brushed it. She gaped at the size of the things inside. Everything was miniature, made for people no higher than a couple feet. Multiple candles in candelabras threw a warm glow

on the marble floor. Chairs draped in velvet lined the walls that were hung with tapestries. And on a raised platform stood a gilded throne.

"Whoa." Said Rusty, sidling over and touching it.

"That's very exciting, Rusty." Said Bells and plopped to the floor, sighing. "Finally it's nice and quiet. I hope nothing happens for a long time."

"Guys, it's a doll throne!" Rusty ran his hand over the canopy. "I wonder if little people live here, like with a little queen and a little king and everything."

"There is nothing to eat." Observed Grand disappointedly.

Peacock raised a brow at him. "Can we talk about other things besides food? Like, what is a *badling*, for example?"

"You're starting to get as annoying as Maria," said Bells with feeling.

"Oh, am I?" Peacock smirked. "Care to elaborate?"

Bells missed the sarcasm, busy fixing her ponytail. "She's always nagging me, 'Belladonna, can you draw me a princess?'

'Belladonna, what do you think about this dress?' 'Belladonna, how do I look?' 'Belladonna, do you think mom will like it?' She can't shut up and won't stop calling me Belladonna, when I told her a thousand times that my name is Bells. All she cares about is her pink dresses and books of fairy tales. Bleh." Bells made a gagging noise.

"Like The Snow Queen?" Asked Grand.

"That's only one of them. Now I wish I read it to her until the end, maybe then we wouldn't have ended up here. I thought it was silly girl stuff, I didn't know that it was a pretty scary story."

A frightened pause stretched among them.

"We need to rip it." Said Bells quietly.

Peacock looked up. "Rip what?"

"Mad Tome." Bells passed her eyes over the boys one by one.

"We need to rip it to pieces as soon as possible."

"No!" Cried Peacock, startling everyone.

Bells lifted her eyebrows. "Why not?"

"What if..." Peacock fidgeted with his hair, "what if something bad will happen?"

"Of course something bad will happen." Said Bells. "It will die. But then something good will happen too—we'll be back by our duck pond."

Peacock narrowed his eyes. "How do you know?"

"I don't." Said Bells honestly. "But that's what usually happens in books when you kill the villain, doesn't it?"

"Totally!" Cried Rusty. "That's brilliant, Bells!"

But Peacock was not convinced. He shook his head. "And what if it will go after us?"

Grand sighed. "It will be dead, Peacock."

"And what if its ghost will go after us?"

"Is something wrong?" Asked Grand worryingly. "Why do you keep—"

"Wrong?" Peacock straightened his back. "Wrong? We got sucked into some crazy book and now we're supposed to rip it pieces, or we'll end up ghosts like Bluebeard. That's what's wrong!"

"We don't know that for sure." Said Grand.

"We know nothing for sure!" Peacock's voice took on a higher pitch. "How can you all just tag along when who the heck knows what these characters are planning for us?" He gazed at them with hard eyes. "We need to figure out how to get out of here and not go from page to page or whatever."

"Who says we haven't been figuring it out this whole time?" Said Bells defiantly.

"It's your fault we're here," stated Peacock bitterly. "You're the one who found Mad Tome, you're the one who picked it up and threw it at the ducks. We can all die because of this, and you don't even care."

"Oh, I don't care? I see." Bells nostrils flared at this accusation. "And you're apparently being a great help to us all, peeing your pants and whimpering like a little boy. Of course you would. It's the easiest thing to do, to sit around and to feel sorry for yourself and to blame everyone else."

Peacock gaped at her, splotches of red creeping up his neck. "Who's peeing pants? *I* am peeing pants?"

Grand glanced at Rusty. Rusty winked and put a hand over his mouth to suppress a snigger.

Bells's and Peacock's voices bounced off the ceiling, spurring them on to throw more insults at each other. Bells flipped her ponytail, Peacock mussed his fauxhawk. They looked like two fighting roosters, their elbows stuck out at right angles, their faces so close, any moment one of them would poke the eye of another.

Rusty continued examining the throne room.

Grand leaned on the wall and closed his eyes.

There was a drawing of two breaths and a pause. When no more shouts shook the air, Grand opened one eye. "You guys done?"

Bells and Peacock stared at him, fuming.

"Man, you were loud." Commented Rusty. "I thought my eardrums would break. Why do you always have to fight? If you were my grandma's dogs, I'd smack you to make you stop."

"Hair pulling works too." Added Grand with a faint smile.

"Or tail pulling. Works like a charm." Rusty sniggered, pleased with his delivery. It had a sobering effect.

"Shut up, Rusty," said Peacock flatly.

"No, you shut up!" Cried Rusty, his little hands balled in fists. Astounded at his own dare, he gaped at Peacock, but Peacock only sagged and said nothing. He was looking at Bells. After an awkward pause he brought himself to call her.

"Hey, Bells?"

She didn't answer, hugging her knees.

"Look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it..."

Bells's shoulders began to shake.

The boys exchanged a horrified look that meant something like, "but...Bells never cries. She didn't even cry when she fell off her bike and scraped her hands bloody. What do we do? If we say something wrong, she'll bite our heads off." They sighed, thinking one single word that contained an enormous magnitude of meanings, "Girls."

Grand licked his lips, then rubbed his face, then licked his lips again, and said timidly, "Bells?"

She shook her head.

He took a deep breath and scooted up to her, speaking into her ear. "It's okay. We'll be fine. We'll figure out something. We'll rip Mad Tome, like you suggested, and—"

"It's not that." Mumbled Bells into her knees.

"Oh," Grand hesitated, "what is it?"

Bells didn't answer.

"My mom says it's no good holding things in," began Grand thoughtfully. "She says—"

And the flood broke through.

Bells lifted her tear-stained face and sputtered. "She doesn't want me to become a scientist, she thinks it's not a proper job for girls, she wants me to become a stupid opera singer, she always tells me, 'Why aren't you like your sister?' I hate her, I..." She paused to catch her breath.

Without a word Grand pulled a crumpled napkin from his pocket. Bells gratefully accepted it and blew her nose.

"You don't know what it's like," she hiccupped and a couple tears fell on her cheeks, "none of you have any idea, so don't tell me that you get it!"

Grand spread his arms, "We're not saying we do."

She sniffled. "Then don't say anything at all." She dropped her face into her hands and proceeded to cry.

Grand passed a look of utter bewilderment to Rusty. Rusty shrugged. Carefully, as if afraid to touch a white-hot griddle, Grand hovered his hand over Bells's back, touched it, waited, and when she didn't make a move to strangle him, patted it and stroked it, like he would stroke the heads of his two little brothers after a good session of roughhousing.

"I don't ever want to go back." Whispered Bells.

"What?" Asked Grand.

"I don't want to go back."

Grand's mouth fell open. "You don't want to go back home?"

Bells raised her head, looking crushed. "No. I'd rather stay here and hop from page to page than see my mom. She...she called me a 'poor scientist' and kicked me out."

More sobbing followed.

The boys shifted uncomfortably.

"At least she doesn't call you *names*," soothed her Grand.

"My mom calls me fat, to motivate me to lose weight, only it works backwards. It makes me feel awful." He glanced down at his girdle and sighed.

"At least you have a mom." Said Rusty absently.

Bells immediately stopped crying.

"Bells?" Began Peacock. "I didn't mean that, really, about you throwing the book at the ducks and everything."

Before she could answer, Grand stood up so suddenly, he nearly fell over. "Ducks." He said, rubbing his brow with shaking hands.

"What is it?" Croaked Bells, sniffing.

"I think," Grand started, sweat beading on his forehead, "I think I know how to rip Mad Tome."

"You do?" Cried Rusty, leapt up, hit his head on the ceiling and dropped back down, which didn't faze him in the slightest. "How?"

"Ducks," said Grand, kneading his hands. "I think if we somehow found a way to..." He licked his lips.

"A way to?" Prodded him Bells.

"Well, here Mad Tome is too large for us to rip, unless we find a way to change in size or someone helps us. We should've grabbed a piece of that mushroom from Wonderland, it's too bad we didn't think about that when we were there." His cheeks were glowing. "But if we could find a way to make the ducks rip the book, back at the duck pond..." He frowned. "Never mind, it's a stupid idea."

"It's not stupid, it's genius!" Exclaimed Rusty.

"Why would ducks bother about some book?" Blurted Peacock.
"Ducks are dumb."

"No, they're not." Said Rusty in an offended tone. "We just need to find a way to get them interested in it."

"And how would you do that?"

"We could go back to The Snow Queen's page," pondered Grand, "and...I don't know..."

"Climb up the dirt wall maybe?" Offered Bells.

They contemplated this in silence.

Suddenly, Bells yawned. Rusty picked it up, then Peacock.

"I'm tired." Said Grand with a heavy sigh.

"You guys want to give it a try? You know, try climbing the wall?" Asked Rusty, stifling another yawn.

"Not now," said Bells with finality that didn't invite any objections. "We're all tired and hungry. I hope Blackey will feed us breakfast tomorrow. I suppose we'd have to sleep right here, since he told us to wait, so I suggest you all make yourselves comfortable." She pulled off the band and shook out her hair. "Grand?"

He turned to look at her.

"Nice work."

He beamed.

They yawned at the same time and grinned, the tension of the day whooshing out of them. Peacock lied down on his back, crossing arms under his head. Rusty curled up by the throne, using one of the tapestries as a blanket. Grand slumped next to him. Bells snuggled up to the wall, and before they knew it, they were sleeping.

Chapter 15. The Hen Uncovers The Culprit

Where there are *big* bad things, there are *little* bad things helping *big* bad things do mischief. Every character in every book has an agenda. Sometimes authors themselves don't know what characters want and run and hide under their beds from unforeseen trouble.

It was trouble that brewed over the children while they happily snoozed away. Only Grand didn't sleep well. He kept dozing off and snapping awake until finally he sat up, watching his friends. Rusty snored with amazing regularity. Peacock lay still, an arm over his face. Bells's eyelids twitched. Grand straightened his legs and accidentally woke her.

"Whuh?" She said, blinking.

"Sorry." He whispered, coloring pink.

"Grand? Is something wrong?"

He sighed. "Nothing. Just can't sleep."

"Why not?" She rubbed her face, carefully stretching so as not to disturb Peacock or Rusty.

Grand wouldn't meet her eyes.

"What is it?" She insisted.

He shrugged.

"That was brilliant, by the way, your idea about the ducks."

"Um. If you think so..." He said appreciatively, and then added, "at least some use out of a fat kid."

Bells passed air through her lips. "That is a bunch of nonsense, Grand. Stop berating yourself."

"Why not?" He spread his arms with passion. "I *am* fat. Everybody thinks that."

Bells began to object.

"Yes, you do." Said Grand in a dispirited tone. "Don't deny it. I was fat my whole life. My dad died from being fat and I will die from being fat, so I might as well get used to it." His arms hung limp and he sagged.

"No, you won't." Said Bells sternly.

"Of course I will," he said, his face burning, "everyone dies sooner or later. See this?"

He inspected his bulging stomach, his plump fists, his thick calves, and his big feet. "I hate my body." He concluded. "I wish I could stop it somehow, but I can't. When I feel bad, I have to eat a doughnut, or something sweet, it's the only thing that helps me feel better." He looked up, and blurted. "Do you think I'm fat?"

Bells sucked in air.

She considered lying, avoiding the question, blaming it on doughnuts, then discarded it all in favor of being honest.

"You are a bit overweight." She said tenderly. "That doesn't mean you're fat *fat*, you know? There are fatter people out there. It just means that you have a bit more weight on you than a healthy eleven-year-old should have, according to some stupid standards devised by some stupid doctors. What do they know? In my personal opinion, it's a load of nonsense. It's how you feel that's important. If you feel healthy, then you are healthy. And I can't imagine you in any other way, I like you the way you are. You're..." she searched for the right words, "you're...cuddly like a bear cub and...and..." She suddenly threw her arms around him, surprising herself.

Grand's already red face turned deep magenta, and he thought it would melt off any second. "My mom says I'm fat." He mumbled in her ear. "She says if I won't stop eating sweets, I'll die like my dad."

"Baloney. How can she know?" Said Bells fervently, and let go, immediately attending to her hair as if it needed attention. "Moms sometimes say things they regret later. And sometimes they force us to do things they think would be good for us instead of just letting us be." She smoothed her ponytail with shaking hands, then pulled the band off, and started gathering it again. "It always snags," she complained. "And there is no mirror."

"You don't need a mirror, you look great." Muttered Grand.
"It's me who is ugly."

"Stop it." Said Bells sharply. "Who says you need to be thin? You look cute like this. I like your cheeks. They're so...round." She forced a smile on her face, hoping it was big enough.

"Are they?" Grand stared at Bells and in the flickering candlelight noticed for the first time that her eyes were the color of thunderous sky right before it erupted. Which, essentially, what Bells was, a constant threat of eruption.

He felt his cheeks. "You really think so?"

"I really think so." Bells nodded. "I want to grab them and squeeze them, like Rusty's grandma does."

"Um. Okay." Said Grand, encouraged. "You can, if you want to." He closed his eyes and offered his face.

Bells didn't expect this. After a moment of awkward hesitation, she quickly brushed his cheek and tore her hand away. Grand's skin was smooth and smoldering like a pancake griddle.

Someone coughed politely.

They started, turning to look.

In the doorway stood a little man about two feet high. He wore a black velvet suit with a large lace collar. A red wedge cap sat at an angle on his small swarthy head. He coughed again,

which sounded like a hen's clacking. In fact, he looked like a hen if not for his lack of wings.

"Hello." Said Bells, and poked Grand.

"Hello."

Blackey walked up to them in measured dainty steps, doffed his hat, and bowed. "Blackey, the King's Ambassador, at your service."

Bells's eyes widened, and it took her a couple seconds to compose herself. "Belladonna Monterey. Very nice to meet you, Blackey. Thank you for letting us stay on your page. May I ask what book this is?" She spoke in a reverent manner that Blackey instilled with his poise.

"You may. You reside in The Little Black Hen by Antony Pogorelsky." Blackey took the very tip of Bells's forefinger and lightly kissed it. "Pleased to meet you, Belladonna." He straightened and looked up at Grand, questioningly, only it seemed he was regally looking down, and Grand attempted to shrink to Blackey's size.

"George Palmeater." He offered shyly. "My friends call me Grand."

Blackey bowed. "My pleasure, Grand." He turned. "May I call you Bells?"

"If that is what you prefer," said Bells. "I prefer to be called Bells as well, actually. May I ask how you know my nickname?"

"Everyone knows about you, badlings. Everyone sends to you their greetings and their welcome."

"Everyone?" Asked Bells, puzzled.

"Every badling in Mad Tome."

"There are others here besides us?" Bells stared at Grand. He pushed out his lower lip, shrugging.

"Undoubtedly you have surmised by now that none of us are what we appear to be." He tilted his head, as if challenging her.

"Oh, absolutely." Bells swallowed, sensing the tips of her ears beginning to glow. "It is very unfortunate, what has befallen you."

"I humbly ask you to grant me your understanding of the matter." Said Blackey with a new steely tone to his words.

Bells quickly glanced at Grand.

"Um." Grand began. "Well, we think that...since badlings are bad children who don't finish reading books, then you must be badlings who got into Mad Tome and never found your way out, stayed here and...and eventually replaced the real characters," he caught his breath, amazed by his own idea, "so they went back to their books, leaving you here to enact the same pages

for them because it's a lonely and boring job. Mad Tome must know about this but there is nothing it can do, so it brings in new badlings for entertainment." Grand wiped the sweat out of his face, breathing hard. "Then...then you decided to do the same, I think. I think you found a way to leave other badlings in your place and go to...to other books. You were children too, at some point, but now you've forgotten what it's like and you'd like to get back home but you don't know how." He could see out of the corner of his eye both Rusty and Peacock awake and imbibing his words, their mouths agape in awe. "You must have tried things and they must've not worked and..." He paused, aware of four pairs of eyes on him, including Blackey's.

"Quite astute of you to deduce this much in such a short period of time." Said Blackey smoothly. "It will be a pity if you end up disappointing us."

"Wow, Grand." Whispered Bells.

"Holy cow," came from the corner, and on its heels, "No way, man! Is that why we're here? Like sheep to be slaughtered or something?"

Blackey regarded them and was about to speak when Rusty interrupted. "It's the talking chicken! Hey, chicken guy!"

Blackey gave him the stare of death.

"Oh, wait. You have a name, right? What was it? Man, I can't remember." Rusty screwed up his face.

"It's Blackey," said Blackey levelly. "I'm not a chicken, I'm a hen and the Ambassador to our King."

Rusty covered his mouth. "Sorry! Hen. I mean, Blackey. I mean—" he sniggered and fell quiet.

"Hi." Said Peacock, sitting up. "I'm Peacock."

"Blackey," said Blackey through pressed lips, and curtly nodded his head. His eyes flashed dangerously. "The King's Ambassador, at your service. You may now tidy up the throne room, as the King himself will be arriving here this very morning."

Rusty guiltily lifted the tapestry and threw it back over the throne, attempting to smooth it and making it drape worse than before. He gave up and stretched his hand to Blackey.

Blackey took a frightened step back.

"Sorry!" Exclaimed Rusty. "Didn't mean to scare you. I wanted to pet you. I mean, not that I've never petted a chicken, I mean." He sniggered again, hiding his eyes. "Crap."

Bells smacked her forehead. "I apologize, dear Blackey. Let me introduce you to my friend Russell Jagoda, or Rusty for short. He's very excited to meet you, as you can see."

"Right! I'm supposed to introduce myself." Rusty grinned. "Russell Jagoda."

Peacock cleared his throat. "My full name is Peter Sutton, but you can call me Peacock."

Blackey pursed his lips. "Pleased to meet you all." He paused. "I do hope that you are well rested, for as much as I regret this, I must send you on a journey right away. This page is no longer safe for you to stay on."

"There won't be any breakfast?" Asked Grand.

"Not safe?" Bells frowned. "Why is it not safe?"

"I cannot tell you, I'm afraid." Said Blackey courteously. "I truly wish we could spend more time together to get to know each other better. I would've loved to show you our underground zoo—"

"There is a zoo?" Rusty's eyes shone with delight. "Can I see it?"

"Another time, perhaps."

"What kinds of animals are there?"

"Rusty." Hissed Bells.

Blackey smiled. "It's perfectly all right. It's not every day that a new badling is interested in our old musty story."

Rusty beamed, but Grand frowned. He could sense resentment lurking under Blackey's polished conduct.

"We have rats, moles, and other rodents." Explained Blackey. "We go on rat hunts in the underground tunnels. If you," Blackey faltered for half a second, and Grand tensed, his armpits filling with moisture, "ever care to come back, I will

show you our English garden where paths are strewn with diamonds, emeralds, and rubies."

"Real diamonds?" Breathed Rusty.

"Real diamonds." Confirmed Blackey.

Bells inconspicuously felt her pockets.

"Right on!" Promised Rusty. "But how do I get here?"

Blackey appeared to have mulled over a distant memory. "All you have to do is read the book."

"I totally will." Said Rusty hurriedly.

"Thank you." Blackey bowed. "You give me hope, badling."

"Will we," began Bells, "turn into ghosts if the page we're on gets ripped?"

"Most certainly." Answered Blackey, stealing a glance behind him. "I hate to bring our conversation to an end, but we don't have much time. We must hurry."

A faint noise of struggle reached them through the doorway, as if someone was clouting someone. Blackey jumped and skittered into shadows. "Follow me!"

They scrambled after him, stooping so as not to bang their heads on the ceiling.

"Blackey, wait!" Called Bells.

He fluttered up the steps and balanced on the edge of the page that peeled up by the omnipresent dirt wall.

"Quick!" He waved and his face contorted in a painful grimace of one awaiting a torturous punishment. From the fissure below cold vapor swirled up, flapping the ends of his jacket like wings. The wind picked up, and a freezing gale assaulted them with such force, they got nearly swept off their feet.

"Where are you sending us?" Screamed Bells over the squall. The expression on Blackey's face sent goose bumps down her spine.

"Somewhere where you deserve to go." Said Blackey darkly.

Through the rift in the mist below they saw a cobblestone court by an ancient castle shrouded in a pitch-black night.

Rusty peered down. "That looks creepy."

"Um." Said Grand and swallowed.

"I would prefer it if you got in of your own volition," clacked Blackey severely, "unless you want me to push you in."

"Why would you do that?" Asked Peacock.

Blackey pinned him with a piercing stare. "Why? You *dare* to ask me why?"

Bells, Grand and Rusty wrenched their eyes away from the chasm and turned to look at Peacock.

"Stop staring at me, stupid chicken. What did I do?"

Blackey began to quiver violently, his velvet suit puffing up and sprouting feathers. "Would you like me to enlighten your

friends as to what has transpired between you and a certain book?"

Peacock paled. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a badling boy who has gotten terribly upset at a story he was reading not too long ago," said Blackey in sharp measured words, "but instead of simply closing it and putting it back on the shelf, he flung it out the window. When that didn't deem enough punishment, he went outside, found it, picked it up," Blackey paused dramatically, "and *ripped* it. He ripped it almost in half and threw it into trash."

Peacock gripped his hair. "So what? What does this have to do with me?"

Bells gaped. "Who did it, Blackey?"

Blackey pouted bitterly, rapidly changing shape from that of a little man to a hen. "The most feared, the most popular story of all time ended up in Mad Tome as a result of this abomination." He clucked. "Not only has this badling brought misfortune to the book he maimed so cruelly, he unleashed Mad Tome's wrath upon all of us, and for that he deserves to suffer."

"Who did it, Blackey?" Asked Bells softly.

Blackey said nothing. He only gazed at Peacock with glistening eyes, opening and closing his beak, fully transformed into a bird puffing itself up in preparation for an attack.

Peacock got very quiet. He passed his eyes over the ambassador and then over his friends one by one.

"Is that true?" Breathed Bells. "Did you really rip a book?"

Peacock backed into the earth barrier, gripping onto roots. "What book? What are you talking about?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Said Bells icily. "Did you rip a book almost in half, like Blackey is saying?"

Peacock opened and closed his mouth without a sound.

Bells put a hand on her hip. "Did you?"

Wind whistled angrily from under the page. The air grew colder, and the noises of struggle rose higher up the staircase, now with added grunts and ululating. But neither the badlings, nor Blackey registered it. They waited for Peacock to say something. He's gone grey, and suddenly shrieked, "I didn't mean to, okay? It scared me! It...they talked to me! I thought I'd gone off my marbles, I thought they'd get out of the book and—"

"What book was it, Peacock?" interrupted him Bells.

Peacock took a deep breath and bellowed. "You know what! Why are you asking?"

"No, I don't."

"Dracula, that's what!"

The ground rocked and they swayed, windmilling their arms for balance.

"It's about vampires, right?" Asked Rusty.

"Why did you have to rip it?" Shouted Bells.

Peacock has gone from grey to splotchy bluish. "They whispered to me."

"Who?"

"Dracula's sisters." His lips quivered, and he reeled, as if about to collapse.

"We get lonely when nobody has read our books for a while." Clacked Blackey fiercely. "Of course they whispered to you. They needed company. That in no way justifies your destroying their home—"

He didn't get a chance to finish his account of the tragic events that have befallen Dracula, as right then several awful things happened at once—awful things tend to happen one after another in a row.

Loud grunting and victorious cries issued from the stairs, and out rode Dapple the donkey and a rotund balding man on its back. "There they are!" Cried the man. "Stop them!" From behind him piled out a throng of disheveled characters, wheezing and panting, masked guests from Prince Prospero's ball, headed by Prince Prospero himself and Red Death at his one side and the Snow Queen at his other. She blew a gust of frosted air that crusted over the soil with loops and swirls of frost glittering silver in the dimness of the stairway.

"You were going to hand them over without consulting us first," said the Snow Queen to Blackey. "You will answer for this."

But how Blackey was going to answer for his blunder, none of them found out. A rustling voice boomed over their heads through a mouth that materialized on the candlelit ceiling.

"Ahem," said Mad Tome. "What is going on here?"

Peacock shook like a leaf, as did the rest of the company.

"Answer me!" Demanded Mad Tome.

Paralyzed, they watched in horror its face solidify and shoot out a pair of long arms with crooked fingers that snapped and clicked more like ossified claws of a crab than sharp corners of a book cover.

"Badlings." Mad Tome said, astounded. "How did you manage to escape my notice? Clever, clever." It squinted at the shivering hen. "Blackey, you treacherous buffoon. Why, of all you rubes and layabouts it was you who had to deceive me. I should've torn your page a long time ago. Well, no use talking about it, is it?" Its crabby eyes swiveled around at the characters hung in suspense.

"I shall do it now, lest I forget after my nap." As if it was as casual as crumpling a napkin, Mad Tome extended its claws, dug them under the edge of the page, gripped and tugged.

A crack shot along the floor. Blackey thrashed his wings spasmodically. His bid at escape was short-lived and made Mad Tome even madder.

"You think you can fly away, you traitor?" It thundered.

The badlings screamed, Dapple brayed, the Snow Queen shrieked, causing Prince Prospero and his ball guests to erupt in a skirl of chaotic terror. Only the Red Death remained silent, as it pertains for a proper death to behave.

Mad Tome jerked its hideous arms apart, and the page rent with an ear splitting rupture. In midst of ensuing confusion Blackey slammed into Peacock with a frantic screech. Peacock flung up his arms, tottered over the narrow abyss, and tumbled in, sailing through the night and landing hard on the stony plateau in front of Dracula's castle.

Blackey spread his wings and shoved Grand toward the void, causing both Bells and Rusty to topple under his weight and plunge in after Peacock.

Grand managed to grip the rim, holding on, his fingers sliding. What he saw next made him let go and plummet into the night, stunned.

With a hideous demented cackle, Mad Tome yanked the rest of the page apart. At once the color went out of it. Old stonewalls burst into clouds of dust. And Blackey, desperately flapping his wings to stay airborne, imploded. In his place appeared a

ghostly shape of the little man in the velvet suit and the wedge cap, forlornly gazing at the Snow Queen jumping into her sleigh and Prince Prospero's entire court riding off on the Red Death's expansive cape.

"You got what you deserved, you prissy snitch!" Raged Mad Tome, foaming at the mouth. "Your turn, badlings...where did they go? Where are my new badlings? Dracula, you bloodthirsty beast! Give up my loot at once!" It extended its claws down, rustling and sputtering.

The rest Grand didn't see, thumping to the ground and rolling to a stop. A painful groan escaped his lips. The earth beneath him rattled to life. The stale chilly air condensed and enveloped him, molding into shapes. Dim voices murmured unintelligible strings of words, until he could make out a chorus chanting, "Run, badling! Run!"

Jolted out of his stupor, Grand struggled up and bolted, half-conscious from fear. In front of him loomed a castle as tall as a mountain and as cold as a mortuary freezer, its formidable walls scarred with narrow windows, jet-black in the light of the moon.

Grand reached the porch and collapsed on the steps next to incoherent Peacock and Bells and Rusty who were in the process of furiously banging on the door with fists and feet and

everything in between. The reason for that was chillingly simple.

A pack of wolves howled nearby, and the sound of their hunger rapidly drifted closer.

Chapter 16. The Vampire Hospitality

Never damage a book in any way. In fact, never open a book you don't intend to read from cover to cover. Who knows what awaits you if you decide to forfeit it in favor of doing something else? Like chasing ducks or mining for diamonds? Don't. You may bitterly regret your nonchalance later.

That is precisely what Peacock did. He bitterly regretted mistreating Dracula, appearing no more than a disfigured page himself. His eyes were glued to the massive inviolable door that didn't bode anything good, his lips moved in an effort to say something, and his knees were knocking each other with a horribly regular rhythm. He took a step and swayed.

Grand caught him. "You okay?"

Peacock mumbled a string of words.

"What?" Grand cupped his ear, concentrating.

"I don't..." Came out of Peacock's mouth. "I don't want to..."

"You don't want to *what*?" Inquired Bells, hugging herself. She regarded the windows with suspicion. Someone was watching them, she was sure of it, someone's eyes glittered dully and retreated as soon as they met Bells's prying stare.

"If someone is in there, I hope that *someone* will open the door before we get eaten alive." She said loudly and kicked it.

No reaction, only a muffled echo and another volley of howls, much closer this time and moving.

Peacock suddenly broke into a hysterical gibber. "I don't want to be a ghost, okay? I want to live! I'm just a kid! I didn't do anything wrong. Since when is it a crime to rip a book? Why do I have to pay for this with my life? That's a bit harsh, don't you think? What is this Mad Tome anyway? What right does it have to do this to me? Dracula is just a book, it's just stupid a book—I don't want to die! I want to get out of here!" Spurred on by his speech, he pushed Grand aside and belted.

"I don't want to die either," said Grand absently, watching Peacock catch his foot on a rock and sprawl.

"Me too! I mean, me neither." Added Rusty.

"You're scaring me, Peacock." Said Bells through chattering teeth. "You're scaring all of us. We're already scared, and you're scaring us even more."

"I don't care!" Cried Peacock, examining his bloodied hands.

"Yes, you do." Said Bells sharply.

"No, I don't!" Refuted Peacock.

"Then what do you care about?"

"Go away!" He cried. "Leave me alone. Just...leave me alone..." He hid his face.

Grand and Rusty looked at Bells.

She took a deep breath. "I want to throttle you right now, Peacock. But I won't. Logically, it will make no sense. The more of us alive, the better chance we have to win over Mad Tome. And, well, to deal with—" she glanced up, a tingling sensation telling her that someone was not only watching them but ardently eavesdropping too, "—Dracula."

"Totally, man!" Confirmed Rusty with a forced grin.

"Shut up, Rusty." Muttered Peacock.

Rusty staggered back as if slapped in the face. "Don't you shush me!" He sputtered, his nostrils flaring like that of an angry monkey. "You blamed Bells for getting here when it was *your* fault all along!"

Peacock covered his ears. "Stop talking to me! I don't want to hear it!"

Bells gritted her teeth, suppressing an insuperable urge to punch him.

"It's okay, Peacock." Said Grand tiredly. "I guess you can apologize to Dracula for hurting his book and then we can figure out a way out of here, hopefully before he bites our necks and drains our blood and..." He stopped himself.

Crisp footsteps rebounded from the hall.

The badlings turned their faces to it, white as paper.

Rusty nudged Bells lightly. "Hey, we get to see a vampire, a *real* vampire. That is crazy! I mean, it's cool, right?"

Bells whirled around, ready to snap, looked into his eyes, wide with fear, and sagged. "Thanks, Rusty." She said. "You always try to cheer me up—thank you."

Rusty's grin stretched and stretched and threatened to slit his head in two. "Hey, no problem. That's what you have *me* for." He stuck out his chest and straightened a bit.

"Okay then." Bells scrutinized the boys. "You ready to face him?"

"Um." Grand pointed to a scattering of red shining dots surrounding the court. "I don't think I've ever been more ready in my life."

The wolves whined hungrily and drew closer.

"Wolves!" Said Rusty. "Can I...never mind." He let his arm fall under the unblinking stare of the nearest beast. "I see you don't want to be petted. Got it."

Peacock lunged to his friends with an agonized wail.

Bells lifted the knocker and tapped it several times. The resounding bangs it produced froze them to the spot. Muffled reverberations streaked into the depths of the castle and died.

They listened intently. No sound reached them, except the gritting scrape of claws on stones and the wolves' panting in the anticipation of a nice dinner.

"Let us in, please!" Bells grabbed the knocker with both hands and hammered it until the door suddenly unlocked. They tumbled inside and shut it behind them. Heavy bodies slammed into it from the other side, yowling in dismay.

"That was close." Whispered Bells. "Who opened the door?"

The entrance hall stretched dark and empty. Vague shapes of statues fringed a low staircase that led into the gloom of upper floors.

"I dunno." Said Rusty. "Dracula's butler?"

"He doesn't have a butler," muttered Peacock. "It's just him and his sisters."

"And wolves." Added Rusty, glaring at Peacock.

Peacock pressed his lips into a line.

"You feeling better, then?" Asked Bells derisively.

"Having the time of my life."

"Can you tell us what those Dracula sisters are?" She asked. "Do they live here? Are they also vampires?"

"Can we not talk about this right now?"

"What else would you like to talk about? You didn't have to tear this book, you know." Said Bells crossly.

"You didn't have to throw Mad Tome." Taunted Peacock.

Bells looked at him in surprise. "I thought you were fainting from freight."

"I am. You're so scary, I peed my pants." Said Peacock sarcastically.

Bells smirked. "You are feeling better."

"Say you're sorry." Butted in Rusty.

"Don't tell me what to say!" Cried Peacock.

His voice ricocheted off the ceiling lost in the shadows. Ahead of them, in the recesses of darkness, footsteps ambled to life. Pulled by the sound like by a lure, the badlings slogged up the polished staircase, along the balustrade, and through dimly lit passageways lined with tall doors and dusty portraits, a moldy scent of something long dead and disintegrating assaulting their noses.

"I wonder how old this book is." Whispered Bells. The atmosphere didn't invite loud talking.

"A couple hundred years, right?" Volunteered Rusty.

"Too bad vampires don't eat human food." Said Grand miserably. His face shone with a fine layer of sweat.

Peacock walked last, his head down.

The footsteps paused, as if waiting for them to catch up. The badlings passed a hallway and turned into another, lighter and airier. It ended in an archway flanked by stone gargoyles. Their ugly countenances grimaced in silent scorn.

Peacock looked into their faces, and thought that one of them winked. A rippling of goose bumps stood up the hairs on his neck.

Bells walked up to him. "Come on, Peacock, we need to get going."

He reluctantly made himself move.

"I wonder," said Bells, marching resolutely, "how Mad Tome ended up by our duck pond, you know? Why would it want us to find it in the first place?"

Peacock drew a ragged breath. "Why are you asking me?"

"Well, can you tell me more about what the vampire sisters told you?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Maybe Dracula sent it?" Piped up Rusty.

"Um." Said Grand.

They all looked at him expectantly.

"Um." He said again, red in the face. "I think..." He rubbed his nose. "I think this whole talk about Mad Tome being mad at you for throwing it at the ducks is a lie, Bells. I think it would've found a way to get us anyway." He darted his eyes at Peacock.

"What?" Blurled Peacock.

Grand looked down at his tromping feet. "If they're all badlings, then..." He wiped his forehead. "...they're in it together."

Bells knotted her brows. "So they *made* it, is that what you're saying?"

"Or tricked it," Grand heaved, "and now it's not going according to their plan, because we're too stubborn."

Rusty sniggered. "We totally are."

Bells twirled her ponytail. "So maybe those vampire sisters planned to scare Peacock all along?"

This idea made them study their friend with a new understanding. Peacock paled, raking fingers through his hair.

"What did they tell you?" Pressed Bells.

He didn't answer, staring at the floor.

They came upon a circular flight of stairs that wound up to yet another corridor. It abruptly ended in two ornate doors that flung open as if in mute greeting, inviting them into a richly decorated room with heavy draperies over the windows and squat oak chairs around a table set with dishes and candles.

There was perhaps a tiny moment of doubt, and then all thoughts and feelings and memories and ideas evaporated from their heads.

"Food." Said Grand in a voice not quite his own, and it acted like a signal.

They blundered in and began filling plates with cold roast chicken and bread and cheese, grabbing bits of everything and stuffing their mouths.

"No doughnuts," sputtered Grand and plopped into a chair, his jaws working hard.

"Chicken!" Rusty chewed so fast, his whole face moved in waves of struggling muscles, his eyes about to pop, raving over the table in search of something else to snatch.

Peacock didn't eat. "He's coming for us."

"Listen, you have to eat something." Instructed him Bells, biting into a hunk of bread.

"Bells is right. You need to eat." Said Grand in a way he talked to his brothers at the dinner table.

"He wants to be left alone, so leave him alone." Said Rusty fiercely. "If he wants to starve, it's his choice, right?"

There were no objections to that. Sounds of chewing and gulping and swallowing filled the room. Hands reached for food. Forks scraped plates. Tumblers filled and emptied. At last every crumb and morsel of everything edible was consumed.

Grand belched.

Rusty grinned and belched louder.

They proceeded to belch in turns.

"Stop it, you guys." Said Bells, but her tone lacked conviction. Her face grew warm, her stomach full, and her thoughts slurry.

Peacock looked slightly better. He was nibbling on a piece of cheese, sniffing it occasionally.

Bells turned to him. "That was good. I'm so full now."

Peacock didn't answer.

"I don't want to do any more analyzing." She continued. "I wonder how scientists do this every day, it's making my head hurt. I just want to go home."

Peacock looked up.

"Yes, I want to see my ridiculous mother with her ridiculous demands. And I miss Maria, can you imagine that? I thought I wanted to stay here, but I don't think I want to anymore." She shifted closer. "Don't you miss home?"

"Maybe." Said Peacock to the cheese. "Why would I? They don't miss me."

"I'm sure they do." Said Bells with feeling.

Peacock swallowed and brushed off his hands. "You're not mad at me?"

Bells raised her brows. "Is that what you're worried about? Me being mad at you? I thought you didn't care."

"I was upset." Said Peacock with a sigh. "I do care."

"Well, *that's* a relief to hear." Scoffed Bells.

"You can be pretty scary."

"Who, *me*?" She gaped.

"I'm not kidding." Said Peacock.

"Don't be scared of *me*, be scared of Dracula. I suppose you plan to apologize to him?"

"How can I apologize to him if he's not here?" Said Peacock defensively.

A chair fell with a clutter and startled them.

Rusty was chasing Grand around the table. Grand tripped. Rusty fell on him and pounded on his stomach, both of them laughing.

"Stop it, you two." Said Bells commandingly.

Grand pulled himself up, beaming. Rusty hung off his shoulder, grinning like a lunatic. Both their smiles faltered as they met Bells's smoldering stare.

She rolled her eyes. "Boys."

"Come on, Bells." Said Rusty. "Lighten up! Have a little fun."

"Fun?" She repeated. "We're in the castle of a vampire, you dolts." She rose from the table and stomped to the window, drawing back the drapes. The view arrested her breath. "Wow."

"Holy cow..." Gaspd Peacock, "how did we get this high?"

They pressed their noses to the glass.

The view was both magnificent and scary. A black carpet of treetops, glittering in the moonlight, stretched to the distant horizon. Silver ribbons of rivers cut through the ravine beyond which lay mountains that touched the sky. Rare stars gazed down on this splendor in silence.

A sudden chill cloaked the room. Wolves howled, and urgent steps answered them.

The badlings stiffened and whirled around.

A tall man appeared in the doorway. He was dressed in black, with impeccability and style of someone inordinately wealthy. His face had no wrinkles, yet he seemed ancient. His eyes glinted red one moment, dimmed to empty holes another.

He smiled, revealing sharp white teeth.

"Welcome, my friends." His voice was smooth and charming, with a hint of courteous indifference. "I welcome you to my castle. You came here freely, and you shall remain my guests for as long as you like. I take it dinner was to your satisfaction?"

His words put them at ease.

"Count Dracula?" Asked Bells.

"Yes, I am Dracula. And you lovely miss would be?..."

"Belladonna Monterey." Bells heard herself say, although she wasn't quite sure how her tongue moved. "It is very nice to meet you." She curtsied.

"Is it?" Dracula's bloodless lips curled. "Well, I am delighted you think so."

Peacock felt for the curtain and sidled halfway behind it.

"There is no need to be afraid." Said Dracula. "Peter Sutton, is it?"

"Yes." Croaked Peacock, nailed to the floor.

The howling of the wolves erupted to a high-pitched chorus. Dracula smiled wider. "Ah, the music of the night." He shifted his gaze to the badlings. "You must be tired from your journey. You need to rest. Let me show you to your rooms."

They nodded, spellbound.

Bells pinched herself. "Thank you for the offer, Count Dracula," she squeaked, "but we don't need to rest, we slept quite well on your *friend's* page." She waited for the effect.

Dracula's face was an unreadable mask.

"Your friend Blackey," she clarified. "If you care to know, Mad Tome ripped his page and made him a ghost. We saw it happen."

Count Dracula merely looked at her, cold as stone.

Bells shifted uneasily.

"I like your spirit, Belladonna Monterey," said Dracula slowly, striding by the chairs, his fingertips lightly brushing them.

Bells gulped. Grand and Rusty flanked her, Rusty's small hands balled into fists, Grand's round face set and somber.

"Aren't you scared of me?" Asked Dracula.

With a panicked agility Peacock lurched to the table, snatched two knives, crossed them and thrust this makeshift weapon at the vampire. "I'm sorry I ripped your book, okay? Ask your sisters why. They said, they'll find me and kiss me to death if I won't. There, I apologized, can we go now?"

The Count merely cocked a brow.

Bells stole a horrified glance at the boys.

Peacock began to shake. "I didn't do it on purpose, okay? What else do you want me to say?"

"Put that down, my friend." Said Dracula coldly. "You're only tiring yourself out. I don't intend any of you any harm. You are my guests. You have entered of your own free will and, as I said before, can stay here for as long as you like." And he smiled another menacing smile.

Peacock dropped the knives and bolted for the door in a mad attempt to escape. Dracula caught him, dragged him back as if he were a puppet. "I *insist* you stay." He said, his eyes riveted on Bells.

She held his gaze. "Please forgive Peacock, Count Dracula, he didn't mean to do it. You heard him, it was your sisters who

asked him to do it. He was scared and did as he was told. What does he have to do for you to let us go?"

"Do you always speak on behalf of your friends, Belladonna?" Asked Dracula interestedly, ignoring Peacock's pleading and thrashing.

"I-I'm—" Bells faltered. "Can you please let go of Peacock?"

"You think you know better than them?" Continued Dracula, ignoring her request.

"No, I just...I like to analyze things."

"Please, analyze me. I would love to hear your thoughts." His voice sounded like a request impossible not to obey.

"Well, scientifically speaking, you don't exist." Began Bells, clenching and unclenching her fingers. "Vampires don't exist. Dracula is just a story written by an author, and you're acting it out. You're not even a real Dracula character, you're a replacement, a badling like us. So, in this sense, you're not a real vampire, and we're not afraid of you." She finished, her heart pounding. "And if Mad Tome tears up your page, you'll become a ghost, so if you won't let us out, you risk meeting the same fate that Blackey—"

"Do you wish to outwit me, Belladonna Monterey?" Interjected Dracula harshly.

"No," squeaked Bells.

"Your spirit is admirable, I must say. You're the most stubborn badling I have met in centuries." His eyes glinted.

"Come, let me show you to your rooms."

Enchanted, the badlings obliged.

Without letting Peacock out of his hold, Dracula seized Bells by the wrist. She flinched but didn't say a word.

He led them into the frigid air of the floor below and here, in a long corridor, he pushed open the doors into a spacious guest room.

"Is Belladonna your friend?" He asked Peacock.

"Yes." Peacock shrunk under his stare.

"And you'd do *anything* to save your friend, would you?"

"Yes." Peacock tried shrinking even more.

"Peter Sutton." Announced Dracula grandly. "I declare the price for your assault on my book," he curled his lips, showing a pair of sharp cutters. "The price is Belladonna's life."

Bells uttered a mortified gasp.

The boys stared at Dracula, unable to speak.

"Why does it surprise you so?" He inquired. "The prospect of death is the best motivator for lazy insolent badlings like yourselves." He passed a sorrowful sigh. "I must confess, I grew rather bored in my years here. It's only fair to exchange a favor for a favor. If you amuse me and figure out a way to save your friend," he nodded at Bells, "I'll let her go. If not, I'll

make you stay in my place." He leaned to them, a putrefying reek of death wafting from his sneering mouth. "Four badlings, the prefect number for myself and my three charming sisters, wouldn't you agree?"

He snapped his fingers.

The boys stumbled into the room.

The doors swung shut, the bolts slid into place, and all was silent.

They were trapped.

Chapter 17. The Healthy Boy Fight

A well-paced book is like a time bomb. It has a clock. If you won't watch it, it might explode right in your hands. Or else, it might make your heart burst to bits from frantic pounding. In either case, it will make you bite your nails and wish the minutes wouldn't tick off so quickly.

The boys stared at the door, their hearts—you guessed it—pounding. Victoriously and quite rudely, the door stared back. It had nothing to stare with, and yet it seemed to dare them pry it open.

"He got Bells!" Shouted Rusty, shaking the knob that wouldn't budge. He spun around and blurted out the phrase he'd been nurturing since Blackey told them about Dracula's misfortune, "Thanks to you, *moron*." His fists clenched tight, he pulled back his arm and with a relish of one having waited for this opportunity since the beginning of time, punched Peacock square in the nose.

Peacock staggered back. "You hit me!"

"And I'll hit you again!" Ascertained Rusty, advancing. For all his height and knobbly build, he towered over his gangly

friend who appeared to have instantly dried out and crumbled to half his size.

Peacock raked his hair, squinting. "You want to fight, is that what you want, *monkey?*"

Rusty opened his mouth, searching for a word to retort. When no word came, he hunched, tucked his shoulders, and ran, ramming his head straight into Peacock's stomach.

Peacock doubled over, winded.

Rusty, elated by this unexpected advantage, clobbered him left and right.

Grand watched this spectacle with mixed feelings. On one hand, instinct told him to grab them by the hair and pull them apart, like he did with his two little brothers. On the other hand, he wanted to shout encouragements and directions to Rusty for a better aim or better hook or a better kick.

He decided to give them another minute.

Rusty pounded on Peacock's crouched back until his arms got shaky. "Man," he wheezed, "this is...hard. It's making me...tired."

Peacock peeked up. "Are you done?"

"I...dunno." Gaspd Rusty and clonked him on the head one more time, for closure.

When no more hits came, Peacock said, "Care to take a break?"

"Don't talk to me like nothing happened!" Cried Rusty.

"Liar!" And he smacked him in the face, which finally broke the shackles of Peacock's cowardice. He sprung up and pushed Rusty away. "Get off me, gibbon."

Grand concluded that he has satisfied his yearning for justice and stepped between them. "Guys, I think that's enough."

"But Grand," pleaded Rusty, "he lied! He lied and he got Bells in trouble!"

"Um." Grand rubbed his nose. "He was scared."

"That's no excuse!"

"Like you never lied before?" Snarled Peacock.

Grand sighed. It was high time to employ the maneuver that has never failed him. He grasped Peacock and Rusty by the hair and held out his arms, which, considering Grand's intimidating girth, was hard to ignore and terribly impractical to attack.

It took them another fuming minute.

"Um, guys?" Said Grand patiently, looking both of them over. "I'm going to let you go, but no more fighting, please. And Peacock? My mom says, if you own to your mistake, it will make you feel better and you'll forget it faster. I think you should try it." He released his hold.

Rusty scratched his head, glaring.

Peacock stood high, tossing the hair out of his face. "I'm sorry, okay? I already said I'm sorry, didn't I?"

"You said it to Dracula," conceded Rusty, "but not to us."

Peacock's skin lost color.

Grand and Rusty waited.

"Look, I *am* sorry. Seriously." He raised both arms. "Sorry I was a jerk." And then he added indistinctly, "I mean it."

"No use for it now." Said Rusty.

"Should I say it again?"

"What for?" Rusty scrunched his energetic face into a scowl. "Your sorry is not going to bring Bells back, is it? What a retarded thing to do, to rip a book. Don't you have a brain? And you call me *monkey*."

Peacock gritted his teeth and said nothing.

They stood in silence, contemplating.

"We're doomed." Said Grand dejectedly. "Dracula will bite Bells's neck and drink her blood and infect her with his vampire blood, and by the time we will figure out how to save her, she will turn into a vampire and bite us one by one, and we will turn into vampires too and stay on this page and sleep in coffins during the day and at night we will go out and hunt—" Grand felt Rusty's hand on his shoulder. "Sorry."

"No, it's cool, man." Said Rusty. "Just not now." He gave Grand a reassuring grin.

"What do you think we should do?" Asked Grand.

"I have *the* perfect idea." Said Rusty exuberantly and sized up Peacock, staring at him with simian permeation. "It's your fault we're here, so you figure out how to fix it."

Grand shook his head. "I don't think this is a good idea. Pointing fingers won't help us rescue Bells."

"Hold on." Objected Rusty. "So *he* can be pissed off at me and call me *monkey*, and I can't? That's not fair. He did it, he needs to solve it!"

Peacock avoided Rusty's eyes. "How do you propose I do it?"

"I don't know!" Exploded Rusty. "Figure it out. What are you, *dumb*?"

The word struck Peacock like a slap. He cringed.

"We could ask someone for help?" Theorized Grand. "Only there isn't anyone to ask."

Rusty noisily breathed, not only his fists but his whole body tensed into a knotted ball of strife. "We can kill him, right? We totally can. We just need to drive a stake through his heart or shoot him with a silver bullet."

"The only problem is," noted Grand, "we're locked in, and I don't see any stakes or guns with silver bullets. Suppose we got them. How would we get out?"

"Right. I didn't think about that." Rusty wilted.

"We need to wait." Muttered Peacock.

The boys looked at him mistrustfully.

"Wait for what?" Demanded Rusty.

Peacock's eyes glistened with some kind of a revelation.

"It's like Grand said," he explained. "If you stay on a page long enough, it will repeat itself."

Grand nodded. "That's what happened in The Headless Horseman."

"Listen to this." Continued Peacock a bit bolder. "I know it might sound insane and against logic, as Bells would've said, but if we sit in this room and wait, at some point the door will be open again. I didn't see Dracula unlock it when we got here. Did you?"

Grand shook his head no.

"Wow, Peacock." Said Rusty with admiration. "I forgot about that."

"Do you want to try it?" Asked Peacock.

Agreed, they crouched by the door, listening.

For a while nothing stirred, but just as they were beginning to doubt this brilliant idea, the door shuddered. The latch bolt shifted and slid, the spring released, and the hinges gritted, eager to stretch their bones. The boys looked at each other. Peacock twisted the knob and the door swung out.

"It worked!" Proclaimed Rusty in a thrilled whisper.

"Good job, Peacock." Said Grand.

"Thanks," said Peacock, studying his hands, as if unable to believe that they have performed such an extraordinary feat. "It was your idea, though."

Grand shrugged. "It doesn't matter whose idea it was."

"Who cares? We're out, right?" Rusty sniggered into his hand. "Man, I want see Dracula's face when he sees that the room is empty."

He grinned at Peacock and thus their peace was sealed. At least until the next squabble erupted.

"He'll be here soon." Said Peacock uneasily. "I saw him stare at us from the window above the door."

As if on cue, distant footfalls paced the hall behind them.

The boys scurried to the staircase and skipped down it full pelt, leaping over two steps at a time. The steps behind them accelerated as well.

"He's after us!" Shrieked Rusty.

They took off blindly, racing along unfamiliar corridors and dashing into a narrow passageway, until they blasted through a postern left ajar and emerged into the shadowed courtyard behind the castle, stark and foreboding in the cold light of the moon. It was a large stone square hemmed by ramparts with turrets that stood out against the sky like primordial fangs.

Frigid air chilled their faces. The wolves howled on the other side of the wall, as if sensing their presence. Whoever was pursuing them, broke into a trot.

"Over there!" Pointed Rusty.

They tripped after him through a crude dilapidated arch and found themselves in another yard, smaller, full of mossy stones wedged crookedly among patches of grass like sharp jagged bones.

"A cemetery." Croaked Peacock. "This is where the sisters sleep. I'm out of here." He made as if to run.

Grand seized his arm. "No, you're not. You're staying."

"What is that?" Said Rusty.

They squinted.

Where darkness became so black it turned liquid, hazy light shone through in glittering shafts. It seeped from underground, rippling and glinting, as if whatever was below enjoyed the middle of a sunny day as opposed to the middle of the nippy night.

The boys inched toward it.

"It's coming from another page." Said Rusty.

Where Dracula's page abutted into the ever-present barrier of dirt, the ground curled in a lip, offering a foot-wide glimpse onto the page below.

The boys ground to an abrupt stop.

"It's a desert." Breathed Peacock. "Looks like a desert."

A gust of freezing wind blew at them from the cemetery.
They spun around, staring into darkness with horror.

"Something is moving there." Breathed Rusty.

"Where?" Peacock asked in a shaky voice.

From between the tombstones three smoky figures rose and rapidly solidified into women dressed in hoary white lace, their skin mottled and streaked with grime, their lips bright scarlet, their eyes shining with hunger. Moonlight gave their features a keen aggressive look, and there was no shadow on the ground where they stood.

Peacock screamed, stumbled back over the lip of the page, and sunk into the light.

"Peacock!"

Grand and Rusty dove after him.

In a moment they left the chilly veil of the night and pierced through the swathes of hot whirlwind that billowed and roiled over an empty sun-bleached road.

Chapter 18. The Lunatic Knight

Characters in stories travel in arcs. I don't mean being blasted from cannons, flying—Wheee!—through the sky and dropping on piles of dung. No. Arcs that represent curves of growth and bows of change, trajectories of awareness that help them arrive at some kind of an enlightening wisdom, which in turn is supposed to change them for the better (or worse, depending on the book).

Peacock sat up, blinking.

Painfully vivid sky arched overhead. Not a cloud in it, not a bird, only gusts of hot wind. Patches of brown grass ran up the hillock and over a flat plateau where a dozen windmills stood like forlorn giants. Their blades rotated lazily, creaking and swishing, as if passing gossip from windmill to windmill about unfortunate badlings that landed on their page.

"What is this place?" Said Peacock, getting up. His nose tingled and he sneezed, bending over.

"Windmills..." Said Grand absently.

"Come on, guys!" Called Rusty, dusting himself off. "We need to find a way back and get Bells out of the castle, before those vampire freaks suck the blood out of her."

Grand stared around.

"What are you looking at?" Demanded Rusty.

"We've been here before..." He faltered. "I think."

"Where, on this page?"

"Um. Maybe it's a different page, or maybe it's a different part of it, but I have this feeling..." He paused. "It's the same terrain—Bells would know. See the grass patches and the yellow soil, and the hill. We're on the other side of it. The donkey, the windmills..." His face cleared, and he grinned. "I think we're in Don Quixote. I think. I'm sure we are. It looks just like in pictures in the book."

"You read it?" Inquired Rusty.

Grand's cheeks blazed crimson. "Sort of."

"Don—what did you call him?" Repeated Peacock.

"Don Quixote. He's this knight who lived in Spain, in La Mancha. In," Grand scrunched his face, "seventeenth century, I think." Beads of sweat gathered between his brows and rolled down. "We need to leave this book." He blurted. "We need to leave as soon as possible."

"Why?" Asked Peacock nervously.

"He is crazy." Explained Grand, huffing along the road to the distant wall of dirt. "He goes on these quests to revive chivalry—his idea of chivalry, anyway—and he attacks everyone and everything he meets. I think if he's a badling like us, he might be even worse, crazy from having to act crazy."

Peacock and Rusty shared a look of utter horror and took off after him, breaking into a run.

"I'll tell you what happens in the book. In the book he thinks he's being romantic...and noble," Grand caught his breath, his sizeable legs pumping, "because...he wants to win the heart...of this lady Dulcinea, so he fights things...for her." He brushed the sticky hair out of his face. "If he sees us...he will kill us, or he should kill us...if he enacts it properly."

"Can he help us kill Dracula?" Asked Rusty hopefully.

"He has...a spear," mused Grand, speaking in bursts, "but he's nuts. He should be nuts...according to the story. I don't know how we could...convince him. And how will we...find a way back to...Dracula's castle?"

"We'll ask him!"

"I don't think it's...a good idea."

"But they must have their ways for getting around," said Rusty, "the characters. They made it to Blackey, right? And to that Red Death guy mansion. They know how to get where they want to."

Several paces away from the wall the page rumbled under their feet. They halted and pivoted, staring into the clouds of dust curling up the road. An uneven canter of hooves preceded

two riding figures, one tall and one short, mounted on steeds that matched their appearance.

"Is that him?" Asked Rusty.

"Yes." Stated Grand and gulped. "We better find a hiding place. Behind a windmill would be good." He lurched off the road, mumbling, "I'd like to meet him...but I'm not ready to meet my...untimely death."

"Who's the other guy?" Rusty pointed.

"Sancho Panza, his squire." Answered Grand without looking.

"Man, is he riding a *donkey*?" Rusty sniggered.

The figures morphed into weary riders, a lanky knight in dented armor upon a mangy horse and a pot-bellied peasant on a dappled donkey.

"Wait, that's Dapple!" Rusty didn't get a chance to confirm his discovery or to skip to the donkey to pet him. Grand seized his arm and pulled him up a rocky scree and into cool shadow behind a windmill.

Peacock didn't move, facing the riders.

"Peacock!" Called Grand in a loud whisper.

"Leave him." Grumbled Rusty. "If he wants to be skewered on that spear, great. It's his decision, right?"

"But he's our friend," objected Grand. "We can't just let him do something stupid because he feels bad."

"Why not?" Rusty squinted, his fists curled tight. "Tell me you didn't want to punch him in the face when Blackey said he ripped Dracula's book. He blamed Bells for everything and then tried to run away. That's not cool, man."

Grand considered it.

"Come on, tell me."

"Well," Grand sighed, "maybe a little."

"See? I knew it!" Rusty beamed.

"That doesn't mean he's a bad person. He was scared. We all get scared." Grand stepped out of the shadow. "Peacock!"

Peacock didn't answer, standing taller.

The riders were upon him. The knight shook his spear and shouted through a grey mustache. "Behold the giants, Sancho! Look at their thousand arms! They are mocking me, despicable monsters!"

"What giants, sire?" Asked Sancho dumbly, sizing up the windmills. His jolly face puckered in concentration. "Those aren't giants, sire, those are—"

"I will battle them, Sancho! Prepare my steed!" Don Quixote dismounted and marched ahead until he glimpsed Peacock and stopped short, staring at him.

"That little fat guy," whispered Rusty to Grand, "he was chasing us in Blackey's story, right? He was riding Dapple."

Grand nodded.

"What are they doing here?"

"They're part of the story."

Rusty scratched his head. "I don't trust them, Grand. They all want us to replace them. I don't want to spend the rest of my life as a donkey in a book, do you?"

Grand put a finger across his lips, and Rusty shushed.

Don Quixote hefted the spear and thrust it at Peacock's chest. Its sharp end quivered inches away. "Who are you?" He cried in a dry crackling voice.

Peacock flinched. He started answering but the knight was speaking again, evidently not used to waiting.

"I am the renowned knight Don Quixote of La Mancha. What is your name? Answer at once!" He said it in the tones of one who didn't tolerate ignorance and required instant servility.

Peacock cleared his throat and, reluctantly taking his eyes off the spear, looked up and spoke in what he hoped sounded like genuine awe. "Oh, esteemed knight Don Quixote! I have heard so much about you. You are well known for your famous deeds of chivalry and courage!"

Grand and Rusty looked at each other.

"What is he doing?" Asked Rusty.

Grand shrugged. "I don't know. Talking to Don Quixote?"

"I can see that!"

"I think," Grand paused, "I think he's trying to appeal to his vanity and talk him into helping us."

Rusty scrunched his nose. "Appeal to what?"

Peacock glanced in their direction and winked.

"Well known, am I?" Don Quixote patted his chest.

"Oh yes, you are." Said Peacock and gently pushed the spear aside with one quivering finger.

The knight appeared not to notice this sly maneuver. "You say, you have heard of my deeds?" He asked.

"Oh yes, beloved knight." Said Peacock, working hard not to smile. "I have heard of your adventures. Allow me to tell you something of which your excellency might not be aware, yet I believe will rush at once to *her* aid, as *she* is in grave danger."

Rusty gaped. "Where did he learn to talk like that?"

Grand shook his head. "No idea."

"She?" Don Quixote frowned. "Who is this *she* you mention, stranger?"

"He didn't call him *badling*." Whispered Rusty hotly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That he has been here far too long and thinks he is really Don Quixote," pondered Grand. "Maybe, maybe not. Maybe he is the real, the original character."

"Tell me your name, before I impale you on my spear!"
Threatened the knight.

Peacock winced, raising both hands. "No, no, please don't impale me. That sounds painful. My name is Peter Sutton."

"Hmmm." Grumbled Don Quixote into his mustache. "You are not who I'm looking for. There is only three of you." He glanced at Grand and Rusty who froze. "Get out of my way."

"Who is it you're looking for?" Asked Peacock. He regarded Sancho and Dapple, but neither of them made any indication of recognizing him, purposefully looking away.

"Why, four new badlings, of course!" Said Don Quixote. He cast a wide look around and grunted. "Sancho! Do you see them?"

"See who, sire?" Asked Sancho in a sleek little voice, jerking his head up as if waking from a doze.

"Did you say, four new *badlings*?" Said Peacock.

"But of course! Did you happen to see them? Answer at once!" He swung the spear so close, Peacock had to duck. "This is an urgent matter! I must find them and present them to my queen."

"What queen?"

"The Snow Queen, what other queen is there?"

"It's us!" Cried Rusty, sprinting out of the shadow and down the road. "It's us you're looking for! We're the new badlings! Tell him, Dapple. Tell him you met us before." This

last remark was addressed to Dapple who blinked stupidly and flicked his ears like a properly dumb nonspeaking donkey.

"Why won't you talk?" Said Rusty, taken aback. "Can you talk?" He turned to Don Quixote's horse who whinnied at him angrily.

"Rusty." Hissed Peacock. "You're spoiling my plan."

"I have my own plan." Rusty boldly marched up to the knight. "Hey, Don Qui-something, we're the badlings you're looking for. So, will you help us—"

Don Quixote thrust the spear at him, cutting him off. "Do not lie to me! Where is the fourth badling? I see only three."

"We were four," Rusty's eyes focused on the sharp tip not too far from his nose, "but then Dracula took Bells away—"

"Why, that bloodless hooligan is at it again." Don Quixote whacked the blunt end of the spear on the road. "It is as The Snow Queen lamented. Dreadful tidings, dreadful! Tell me your name."

"Mine?" Rusty blinked, relieved that the spear wasn't aimed at him any longer. "Russell Jagoda. But my friends call me Rusty."

"Rusty." Said Don Quixote dreamily, moving his lips as if tasting the name. "Like the blood rust on the brave knight's sword."

Rusty grinned. "Yeah, something like that."

"And you?"

Grand timidly stepped closer, his eyes on the spear.

"Oh, that's Grand!" Supplied Rusty.

"Grand," repeated Don Quixote, "like a grand duke."

Grand's round face slowly stretched into a timid smile.

"You really think I look like a grand duke?"

"Why, you are magnificent! Peter Sutton, state your other name. Do you have another name like your companions do?"

"He does!" Interjected Rusty. "He's Peacock."

Peacock gave him a cold stare.

"Peacock," Don Quixote rolled the name in his mouth. "Like an exotic bird dazzling the eyes with a feast of colors. Azure! Turquoise! Cerulean!" He waved an arm with his eyes closed at the recollection of the marvelous creature.

Peacock gingerly touched his hair. "I never thought of it this way. I just thought it's blue."

"The name of the missing badling!" Demanded Don Quixote.

"Bells." Said the boys as one.

"Her name is Belladonna Monterey," clarified Grand, "but she doesn't like it because she thinks it's too pompous for a scientist, so we call her Bells."

"Bells, like the ringing bells of a beautiful cathedral." Said Don Quixote and opened his eyes. "We mustn't tarry. Lead

on, Duke Grand, Dazzling Peacock, and Brave Rusty! Let us rescue Beautiful Bells from the greedy clutches of Dracula!"

"But," began Grand, "how will we get there?"

"Fear not!" Cried the knight. "Follow me." And he tromped to the dirt barrier and mounted his horse. The horse probed it with a leg, searching for a solid spot, and then it was trotting up the wall, breaking all rules of gravity that have ever existed.

"What the heck," said Peacock, his eyes round.

"You can walk on it?" Asked Rusty.

"All this time we could've just..." Grand trailed off, rubbing his face vigorously and testing the wall with his foot.

"Hurry!" Demanded Don Quixote. He seemed to be fond of demanding things. "Hasten, hasten after me! Sancho, my squire!"

Sancho nodded, Dapple brayed, and at once they hopped and sallied after him, Dapple trying to bite Rusty inconspicuously when they passed him.

And then they heard a noise every one of them dreaded but didn't dare mention in case it decided to come true.

"Who goes there," a sleepy voice rustled out of the sky.

"Who dares disturb my napping?" The lips appeared, then the tongue. It flicked from side to side, as if hungry.

"Aww, crap." Said Rusty, "we woke it up." He stood on the moist soil, staring at the page that now became he wall, turned

his head and saw another page not too far—another wall—hanging down from Mad Tome's binding like a curtain, brushing the ground. He shook his head, dizzy.

"Don't be afraid!" Proclaimed the knight. "It can't touch us here. It's not part of the book." And he urged his horse ahead, the badlings barely catching up to him, sprinting, Grand the last of them.

"Where do you think you're going, you dimwitted blimps?" Shouted Mad Tome, fierce wind swirling out of its mouth.

"It will blow us off!" Cried Peacock over the wind, gripping the roots with a fierce determination.

Dan Quixote halted and turned his horse around. "It will not, Dazzling Peacock!" He curled his mustache on a finger, oblivious to swirling dust and grit flying in his face. "Sancho? My sword."

Sancho handed it to him, and Don Quixote carelessly waved it about. "Try me, you abominable beast! Come out and face me in an honest battle!"

"I will get you later, you piece of tin junk." Hissed Mad Tome, blowing gusts of stale air at them, its swirling cloudy lips writhing over their heads, its claws snatching at the air in frustration. It didn't seem to be able to reach the dirt, as if it couldn't extend its arms past the length of the page.

Don Quixote brandished his sword at it with such vigor, he leaned too far and almost toppled out of the saddle.

"Careful, sire!" Cried Sancho.

"Do not vex me with your cowardice, Sancho!" Commanded Don Quixote. "Didn't you hear the words of these noble badlings? One of them is in danger! We must rescue her!"

"Yes, sire. Of course, sire." Sancho kicked Dapple who let out an upset bellow.

"I know where you're headed, badlings!" Screeched Mad Tome after them. "I will wait for you to arrive, and then we will have us a pleasant talk about your punishment." It cackled hysterically, although with a hint of bitter disappointment, and for a moment Grand, Peacock and Rusty shared a bewildered gaze, that perhaps meant something like, "we better find Bells fast and get out of here, because nothing makes sense anymore."

And it didn't.

The world itself tilted and played with their state of equilibrium. They jogged after Don Quixote who led them across the peat brown waste and under the bottoms of pages, their worlds brushing like squares of cloth hung out to dry in a stack, with perhaps the length of a field between each. It was all an illusion, like a theater set with a painted background that fools you into thinking there are miles and miles of blue sky when in fact it's a huge slab of cardboard painted blue.

"Is he real, or is he a badling?" Gaspd Rusty.

"You're asking me?" Threw Peacock over his shoulder. "I know as much as you do. Ask him."

Rusty slowed down. "Grand, what do you think?"

But Grand couldn't talk, concentrated on moving, sweat running down his purplish face in rivers.

"Faster, my friends!" Shouted Don Quixote. "We are nearly there!" And with a scream of war he reined the horse up the nearest page, dark and lightless under the blanket of a night. Sancho and Dapple followed suit, the badlings behind them.

The ground keeled over and they stumbled onto the cobble pavement in front of Castle Dracula.

Chill cut through their clothes. Wolves howled hungrily not too far away. And from one of the castle windows, so high up, it almost touched the sky, a figure in a black flapping cape was crawling down the wall. It stopped, grew wings and took off to the moon as a giant bat.

Chapter 19. The Inside-Out Rescue

What reader wouldn't enjoy a story about valiant knights rescuing wretched maidens from castles of evil fiends? Even badlings read stories like that. Not this book, though. In this book, irritated at not being saved fast enough, the maiden scolds the tarry knights and brings them back on task.

The boys watched Dracula shrink to a dot.

"He left!" Said Rusty in exalted tones of unexpected victory. "We can get Bells now!"

"Holy cow." Croaked Peacock. "Did you see the size of those wings?"

"I think he went on a hunt," said Grand gloomily. "It's what he does every night. He hunts innocent people, catches them unaware, drinks their blood, and returns in the morning to sleep in his casket in the dungeon, in the dark and the mold and the death around him."

Peacock stared. "You read Dracula?"

Grand shrugged. "A while ago."

"And you didn't get scared?" Asked Peacock, impressed.

"Well, maybe a little." Confessed Grand with a sigh. "There is nothing to be scared about, though. Dracula is very lonely

because nobody wants to be friends with him. They all think he's scary and dead. And he's just sad and thirsty and wants company, so he goes out there to get it the only way he knows how."

When Peacock didn't respond to this, Grand added, "My mom says living people are scarier than dead ones."

Peacock's eyes grew huge. "You really believe that?"

"Well, she works with dead people every day, she must know better. She says when she touches a face of a dead—"

"Guys, come on!" Cried Rusty anxiously. "What if he left because he bit Bells already? What if we're late? That's it. We're late and it's your fault!" He glared at Peacock.

Peacock lifted his arms, which could be an attempt to protect himself from being beaten up again, or it could be an attempt to beat up Rusty, when Sancho called on his master in anguish. "Sire!" He slid off Dapple and scurried to the knight.

The boys spun around.

Don Quixote did something bizarre. He took off his helmet, bent his head and genuflected, stretching out both arms to three figures that stepped out of the gloom.

Peacock felt his legs give out. "The vampire sisters."

The sisters smiled, advancing.

"Oh, beautiful maidens!" Intoned the knight. "How fair is your skin! How precious your faces! Your lips are rubies that put sunset to shame! Oh, let me feast on your beauty with my

ancient eyes. I am your humble servant, the revered knight Don Quixote of La Mancha. Command me."

"Whoa. They're pretty." Said Rusty, spellbound.

"Um. I don't think he's a badling," said Grand, nodding at the knight. "I think he's real, and I think he thinks they're real too. They're all fooling him." His comment was lost in the reverie of the moment.

Peacock and Rusty fell victim to the vampires' charm already, ogling them open-mouthed, as did Don Quixote and Sancho and even Dapple and the horse. Regardless of whether or not the sisters were replacements, they did an evocatively convincing job.

Moonlight silvered their faces, smooth and glossy like that of porcelain dolls. One of them was blonde, the other two dark-haired, all three elegantly poised. If not for the unnaturally scarlet color of their lips, they could pass for a trio of very pale, very lost young women seeking shelter.

"That beauty is deceiving," said Grand meekly, every hair on his skin standing up, "they're worse than regular vampires because they feed on children and infants."

"Uh-huh," uttered Rusty, his eyes glazed.

"I never knew they were so..." Peacock trailed off.

"Take that one." Said the blonde to the taller of the dark-haired sisters, pointing a bony finger at Grand. "Look how plump and juicy he is, just the way you like them."

"I shall." Agreed the tall one with a sneer. "Come, badling." She beckoned to Grand, flicking a bloody tongue. He obediently waddled up.

"I'll take the little one, he seems to be so full of life." Said the shorter dark-haired vampire, gesturing at Rusty. He slogged to her, slowly, as if dragging his feet through mud.

Peacock whimpered and with that his throat sealed. The blonde regarded him hypnotically. He took a step, and another, and another, wanting nothing more but to come close.

"At last." She murmured, lifting his chin. "How splendid it is to meet you face to face. Peacock, is it? I knew you'd come to our bidding. You poor badling, did you think ripping our book would kill us?" She gave a burst of raucous laughter. "You were *wrong*. We live in too many minds. It will take more than that to banish us from existence." She curled her lips revealing a pair of sharp cutters, tipped Peacock's head, and fell on him, gurgling in the ecstasy of feeding.

Her sisters hissed, salivating, about to make the other two boys breakfast according to the normal vampire schedule.

The knight and his squire watched this, paralyzed.

"Grand!" Came a scream from above. "Rusty! Peacock! What took you so long?"

They slowly raised their heads.

Bells hung out from the third story window. "Wake up, you idiots!" She shouted.

Peacock blinked. "Bells?"

"Sssss!" Hissed the blonde. "Don't listen to her."

"Shut up, you abomination of a woman!" Cried Bells. "Guys, push them away! Do it, before they bite you!"

Peacock made a motion to raise his arms and dropped them.

Grand slumped into the vampire's arms, nearly knocking her off her feet.

Rusty tugged at the folds of the skirt in front of him without looking, simply because it was the first thing he felt under his fingers. His eyes were riveted to the sister's face.

Don Quixote played deaf, stiff and lifeless as a statue.

Sancho flinched, jolted out of his stupor by Bells's urgent cries, and massaged his head. "Where is Dapple?" He asked dumbly. Neither the donkey nor the horse was to be seen. The wolves weren't seen either, only strange slurping and crackling noises emanated from behind the castle walls.

"Do I always have to do everything myself?" Bells's furious glare had a sobering effect on everyone, even on the vampires. They screeched their displeasure at being interrupted.

"Where did you go?" Harped Bells. "Who is this?"

"Don Quixote." Said Peacock automatically, sensing the blood drain out of him, quite literally. "He is a knight, he came to help us rescue you."

"Whose brilliant idea was it?"

"Mine."

"You blockhead!" She shouted as loud as she could. "You'll get all of us killed! You should've stayed where you were and waited for me, why did you have to come back here, are you out of your mind? Hey, dead girl, get away from him!" Bells reached behind her. "You! I'm talking to you! Look at me, you dumb rattle-brained bloodsucker!"

She aimed and hurled down a candle candelabra. It hit the tall sister square in the face. She yelped and jumped away from Grand, her teeth bared in a snarl.

"Huh?" Grand spoke from his slumber.

The vampire lunged back at him.

With a roar of unimaginable strength, Peacock shoved the blonde away and threw himself in front of Grand. His eyes blazed with terrible wrath. Startled, the sister drew back.

"Don't touch him, you undead cow!" He shook so hard, his last word burst through a choke. "Don't you *dare* bite him, or...or..." He struggled to come up with a horrific enough consequence, when the vampire spoke.

"You're right, badling. Who wants to feed on a fat kid? His blood must be stale from sitting around too much. You, on the other hand, promise to taste delicious." She sniffed and lunged for Peacock, her sweet cloying breath muddling his mind.

"I'll show you *fat*," muttered Grand and brought his whole weight on the creature, knocking her off balance.

She windmilled her arms for a short moment and sat back hard, staring at Grand's mighty figure.

"If you weren't a girl," he said dangerously, "I'd mash you into pulp. But you're a girl, so I can't hit you. My mom says boys can't hit girls. I think it's not fair because Bells beats us up all the time. I guess she can do it because she's a friend." He shrugged. "We understand. Do you need help getting up?" He offered her a hand.

The vampire stared, and then said in a breaking voice, "This is the nicest thing anyone has said to me in all my years of being here. It's a long and boring life we have to endure, if you must know." She sniffled, touched.

"I think you're badlings like us, you only pretend to be vampires." Said Grand knowingly.

"Are we doing a good job?" She asked hopefully.

"I think all three of you are doing a great job." Confirmed Grand with a nod at Peacock struggling in the blonde's hold.

"This prop blood you're using looks very real."

"You think so?" The blonde grimaced, her eyes crazed. A thin line of blood cursed down her chin. "You think this is fake?" She licked it off and glued her lips back to Peacock's jugular vein. He stopped moving, slouching in her hold like a ragdoll.

"Peacock, no!" Screamed Bells. "Guys, help him!"

"It's okay, Bells!" Shouted Grand, hands around his mouth. "It's not real. She's only pretending."

"No, she's not! She's killing him!" Bells groped for something to throw. "Hey, knight, whatever your name! You're the most laughable pathetic knight I've ever seen! What good is your sword if you can't use it?"

Don Quixote suddenly stirred and sprung up. "Oh, how mistaken I was!" He cried miserably. "Dracula, you old crook! You fooled me again!"

He swooped on the blonde and shoved her with both hands. She staggered and landed on the stones with a resounding smack. The knight wasn't done, however. He dragged her to her feet and egged her to the wall, holding out a cross from the chain on his neck. The vampire writhed and snarled, no longer a charming maiden but a revolting undead varmint.

"You disobeyed the Snow Queen's orders!" he spat. "She will hear of it, mark my words, or I am not the reverent knight Don Quixote of La Mancha!"

"Put it away, put it away!" she hissed, shielding her face.

Her dark-haired sisters flanked her.

"Please." Pleaded the tall one.

"She didn't bite him," implored the short one, "we promise. She was only pretending, enacting the story, like this lovely badling has explained." She looked at Grand with most innocence she could muster.

From above they heard a horrified intake of air and Bells's furious shout. "There is blood on your mouth, you filthy liar! You bit him! You bit Peacock!" Next a rain of various objects pelted the sisters' heads, everything from silk pillows and balled up blankets to heavier items like ceramic vases, bronze statuettes, a paperweight in the shape of a bat, and, finally, a heavy book that struck the blonde on the head.

"Why do you hate me so!" She cried. "I'm only doing my job. Do you think I enjoy frightening new badlings? Oh, how wrong you are! It breaks my dead heart to see horror on your mute terrified faces before I sink my teeth into your soft pulsing necks." And she dove under the knight's quivering hands, using his distraction to her advantage.

"Liar!" Cried Bells, stepping away from the window and looking around the room. She had successfully defenestrated every item that she could lift and carry, unless she managed to dismantle the four-postern bed. She contemplated it for a few

seconds and decided it was not worth the effort. "Someone go fetch a ladder or something to get me out of here! The door is locked and I can't get out!"

Below yet another drama was unfolding.

Grand and Rusty slowly gained their senses, neither of them injured, while Peacock was losing his, being dragged into shadow by the blonde. Instead of pursuing her, Don Quixote berated himself for letting her slip, and Sancho searched for the horse and the donkey.

"I'd done it." Said the blonde guiltily to her sisters, wiping her mouth and dropping Peacock to the ground like a bag of wet clothes.

They stood in a dark nook behind a pillar.

"You fed on him in earnest?" Asked the tall one.

The blonde one kneaded her hands. "Oh, I simply couldn't resist. What was I to do?"

"But..." The short one faltered. "Dracula said to wait till he's back!"

"He always says to wait, and nothing ever happens."

Retorted the blonde. "Haven't you noticed? Listen to me." She lowered her voice to a feverish whisper. "We have them in our hands, right now. Take the other two. Take them, before it's too late!"

Alas, it was.

A gush of freezing air ruffled their hair. In the waning darkness of the night a glittery sleigh pulled by three snowy horses flew over the castle and arced into the court. With a gentle thud and a clop of the hooves it landed. A regal man in a velvet cloak stood up, peering at them.

"There they are!" he cried.

"I see them, prince." Answered the woman in white fur and tugged on the reigns. The horses reared, snorting plumes of warm air, and trotted to the porch, stopping in front of the astounded company.

"The Snow Queen!" Cried Rusty, scratching his head, an expression of bewildered vacuity on his face. "What's she doing here?" This was addressed to Grand, who shrugged, not quite fully present himself.

The Snow Queen stepped on the ground.

"What are you doing on our page?" Snapped the blonde, emerging from the shadows. "Leave at once! Count Dracula—"

"Count Dracula is not coming back." Said the Snow Queen gravely. "We have captured him. He is chained to a wall in the dungeon of Prince Prospero's mansion and he's not getting out."

"I vow for this to be true," said the prince with a hint of pride, "I have seen to it myself."

"What for?" Beseeched the blonde. "Why did you capture him? What has he done to you if not long years of faithful service?"

"Do not pretend you do not know." Said the Snow Queen icily. "You're well aware of Dracula's affairs. He schemed against us. He lured new badlings—not one, but four!—onto his page for the purpose we're all too familiar with. If only that was the end to his crimes. I'm afraid he went against our unbreakable agreement and aided in spilling the blood of one of the new badlings to claim as *his*. He selfishly and foolishly betrayed us when it was us who—"

"He bit Bells?" Interrupted Rusty, his hands in fists. "Bells, did that freak bite you?"

"No, he didn't, Rusty. Relax." Grumbled Bells from above. "And he's not Dracula, he's only a boy. He told me how tired he is being stuck here for decades, and I listened, that's all. He said I was the first new badling who didn't think him a creep and wasn't afraid of him. He hates it that everyone is too scared to talk to him, and because I wasn't, he said he'd spare me. At least for a bit. He even went out to bring me doughnuts. So, you see, you didn't need to go anywhere, you only made things worse."

"Doughnuts?" Gaspd Grand. "Oh." His stomach rumbled appreciatively at the idea. "Doughnuts." He repeated, visions of sugar-dusted marvels swimming in his eyes.

"It's not her whom you have lost." Said The Snow Queen.

"Lost?" Rusty frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"One of Dracula's sisters has bitten your friend."

"Who?" Rusty passed his eyes over the court. "Hey, where is Peacock?"

"I told you!" Bells shouted angrily. "I told you and you wouldn't listen!"

"Oh, what have I done. What have I done!" Don Quixote fell to his knees before the Snow Queen. "I have failed you, my queen. My life is in your hands, do what you will with it." He hung his head.

"Rise, knight." She said regally. "Do not despair. There is work for you to do still. I want you to watch the vampire sisters, to make sure they don't follow me. Can you do this for your queen?" She dazzled him with a blinding smile. "For your *Dulcinea*?"

Grand gasped.

Don Quixote reeled. "Anything, my queen." He intoned in complete servitude. "Anything for you."

"Where is Peacock?" Demanded Bells. "And can someone get me down, please? My throat hurts from shouting."

"I'm here." Said Peacock quietly, stepping out the shadow. "I'm fine." His face lost color, and when he smiled, his teeth shone white in the waning moonlight. There were two razor-sharp cutters protruding on either side. He strolled to his friends with a new gait, assured and stately.

Grand stared at the ground. "Peacock? You have no shadow. I think you have turned into a vampire."

"What are you talking about?" Objected Peacock languidly. "I feel fine." He took another step and sniffed the air, which made Grand shudder.

"You smell nice," concluded Peacock, "I never noticed before for some reason. Very sweet, like...doughnuts."

"Listen to me, badlings. Mad Tome is napping." Interjected the Snow Queen urgently. "We must journey before it wakes up and starts looking for us. Hurry." She motioned for them to get into her sleigh.

Peacock tossed his hair naughtily. "I'm not going anywhere, I'm staying here."

"Get in the sleigh." Snapped the Snow Queen.

"Why can't he stay?" Pleaded the blonde. "You have three more. Do with them what you please."

"What is she talking about?" Whispered Rusty.

Grand rubbed his forehead. "I don't know. I'm thinking."

"Hey! Hello? Everyone? What about me?" Bells waved, hanging over the sill. "It's great that you guys have stuff to talk about, but can one of you please get me out of here? Like, now?"

"We'll get you on our way up," said the queen, stepping into the sleigh and pulling Peacock behind her.

"Hey, Snow Queen. Care to explain why I have to—" Peacock's whine was cut short.

The queen breathed in his face and it frosted over. Subdued, he slumped next to Prince Prospero. The queen motioned to Grand and Rusty. They warily climbed in, seating themselves behind Peacock on the ice-glazed bench. The prince twisted in his seat and threw a white fluffy blanket over their laps. It appeared to have been made from snow, and curiously both chilled and burned them.

"My queen!" cried Don Quixote and made to rush to her, but Sancho nimbly jerked him back. "Stay, sire. You're supposed to stay here and watch the sisters."

"Ah yes, yes." The knight patted his helmet. "My head."

The sisters huddled on the porch, hissing.

Grand reclined back, away from Peacock who took on smelling the air around him and grinning in a dreadfully disturbing manner. "Listen, Grand, I'm fine. Seriously."

"What is..." Grand began shyly. "What's happening to your hair?"

Peacock mussed his fauxhawk in alarm. "Is something wrong with my hair?"

"Your hair is absolutely gorgeous, Peter Sutton. You have no reason to worry." Said Prince Prospero and gave Grand the look of death.

Grand gulped, squeezing Rusty's knee in time to prevent him from saying aloud what they both saw happening in front of their very eyes.

Peacock's hair bleached from blue to blond and his features began acquiring a rather refined feminine look.

The Snow Queen climbed on the box seat, struck the horses, and they swept up to the window, hovering close enough for Bells to hop in. The moment she did, the sleigh shot to the dirt wall with incredible speed.

The world careened.

The ground became the wall, the wall the ground.

Bells stared at her friends, too stunned to speak.

The Snow Queen sprayed snow from her sleeves, covering bare soil with a blanket of white. The horses touched upon it and galloped forth, pulling the sleigh under dozens of pages, leaving Dracula's story behind.

Chapter 20. The Sleigh Chase

The problem with villains is, to conquest them you have to face them. That is one scary prospect. Most stories have a hero who shoulders this noble chore and slays the dragon or whoever the villain is: a crazy queen, a soulless tyrant, or a pissed off duck (it didn't get to eat a doughnut). But what do you do if the villain is the book itself?

The badlings sat huddled on the hard seats, peering up at the passing pages of Mad Tome. On the front bench Peacock shifted closer to Prince Prospero, whispering in his ear something amusing judging by the glitter in his eyes. On the back bench Bells huddled up to Grand, as did Rusty. They sandwiched him for a good reason: his body radiated enough heat for both of them to keep warm.

"We're idiots, absolute and total idiots. All this time we could've just *walked back*," said Bells to Grand under her breath, her cheeks flushing.

"We didn't know," objected Grand. "How could we know?"

"We could've figured it out," said Bells resolutely. "We could've tried and tested every possibility, including the one of gravity reversal, and figured it out. Some scientist I am,"

she snorted and crossed her arms. "Well, now we're stuck here and this is my punishment. I will know better in the future."

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

"It's Peacock who should be punished," rasped Rusty, because any attempt at whispering resulted in him sounding like an old man who has lost his voice but is shouting anyway.

"What was that?" Peacock spun around.

Bells forced herself to not make any noise or let her face betray even a hint of surprise, at the same time pressing on Grand's foot who in turn pinched Rusty who choked on whatever it was he wanted to say. The source for their distress was simple and disturbing. Peacock rapidly changed in appearance, looking more and more like the blonde vampire sister. He was turning into her, replacing her. That was obvious to them but not to Peacock, who seemed to enjoy himself (or herself?) immensely.

"We were just talking about how much I was worried about you," said Bells.

"Worry again," Peacock tolled his eyes. "Girls and their worries." He angled away, whispering something to Prince Prospero, who nodded intermittently.

Bells sensed a curious elation spreading through her chest. "I'll see what you have to say once you're a *girl*," she said inaudibly.

Grand curled a hand over his ear. "Did you say something?"

"He's changing," whispered Bells.

"I see that."

"Hey, not fair," blurted Rusty, "I can't hear what you guys are talking about."

Bells pushed her head behind Grand's back. "Peacock is changing."

"Ah, yeah! He's turning into that blonde freak, right?"

"Do you understand what that means?" Bells pulled out from Grand's back and leaned over his knees in front, fervidly talking to both boys. "They have to spill our blood, that's how it works."

"Crap." Breathed Rusty, trying very hard to keep his voice down. Then he wrinkled his nose. "Wait, how do you know?"

"I don't, I'm just guessing. I was sitting in that room in the castle, thinking about it. That's why Dracula is after Peacock." She grabbed onto Grand's and Rusty's shirts, pulling them to within inches of her face and speaking in rushed muffled bursts. "He ripped Dracula's book, so his punishment is to replace one of its characters and stay in it. Forever. Get it? Why else would the vampire sister bite him? I guess that is what she told him when he was reading it, she told him to tear it apart. She must've known that will lead him to her somehow. I bet she's a badling herself and is tired of Mad Tome and wants to get out. They all want to, that's why they asked us to

destroy it. They're afraid of it, because it can turn them into ghosts. They don't care about *us*, though. We're the perfect heroes. Sort of. More like perfect sheep to be slaughtered after they have accomplished their purpose." Bells's eyes shone when she finished.

"Whoa," gasped Rusty, blinking.

"I think there's more to this." Whispered Grand. "I think—"

Without letting go of the reins, the queen spun in her seat and scrutinized the passengers with an icy stare. "Are you cold, badlings?" She asked, her eyes falling on Bells. "Would you like Prince Prospero to give you another blanket?"

"I would be only happy to oblige," said the prince humbly, yet there was nothing humble in his stony gaze as he regarded the badlings one by one, as if assessing their usefulness. His face spoke without words. He has heard everything Bells has said, and was sure to pass it on to the queen at the first opportunity.

"Another blanket?" He prompted.

Bells shuddered. "No, we're good. Thanks!" She said politely, willing her teeth not to chatter. The first blanket was long thrown to the floor, lying there in the heap of snowy wrinkles.

The queen turned back to her horses.

"I have a feeling she wants me for herself." Said Bells as quietly as possible, speaking directly into Grand's ear, the proximity of which made her face tingle with warmth.

"I think you're right." Agreed Grand and stilled, catching Peacock's stare. It was bloodthirsty and feminine.

Peacock batted his newly grown lashes and patted the space next to him. "Do you want to sit next to me? We have more space here than you guys over there."

"That's a great idea." Said the prince and snatched Bells's arm. She didn't have time to resist. He dragged her up and over the bench back to sit between them. The cold emanating from them enveloped her at once. She glanced back at Grand, numb and helpless.

"No, I meant Grand." Said Peacock petulantly, sticking out his lower lip. "He smells better."

"What?" Asked Bells in an offended tone. "I don't smell." She sniffed her sleeve and her ponytail.

"You can't choose a badling for yourself yet," said the prince with a sly grin, "you're not fully formed yourself."

"Hush!" Shouted the Snow Queen at him, the whip high in her hand, her eyes wide with fury.

"Sorry." Said Prince Prospero, shrinking into the seat. "You let things slip too, by the way, it's not just me. You shouldn't have mentioned spilling blood, now they know." He

jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I heard them talking about it."

"It matters no longer," professed the queen. "Our time is near. They might as well know what awaits them." She passed her cold eyes over Bells. "What do you say, you sit next to me and not with these silly boys?" Her breath pinked Bells's forehead with an ice pick, sliding all the way in. A tremor passed her, and she stilled, chilled to the core.

"Boys always fight and get on your nerves," continued the queen. "How tiresome it must be for you."

Bells's circle of vision shrunk to the Snow Queen's eyes. She saw two silvery mirrors, polished to perfection like two frozen lakes. She wanted to hop on them and skate and splinter ice into shards to inlay mosaics on crusted snow. The vision became so real, she stretched out her hand to touch the intricate designs glinting in the winter sun.

Bells felt her hand cramp.

The Snow Queen yanked her up, smiling.

"Sit with me," she said, and Bells stiffened with cold, as if she sat next to a fridge.

"I'll tell you a secret," said the Snow Queen conspiratorially, and lowered her voice, "I don't like boys. They are filthy and obstinate and have no appreciation for beauty. Many of them have come, and many of them I could have

changed, but I didn't. I've been waiting for a girl. *Her* whom I could offer gems of a wintry splendor, *her* whose heart would still from the play of Aurora Borealis, *her* who'd dwell in my icy palace after I'd gone. *Her* whom I could talk to about girly things." An arrogant child flashed through the Snow Queen's silky expression, the one she once was and had almost forgotten.

Despite her numbness, Bells shuddered at these words. "Girly things?" She asked, moving her tongue with difficulty. "I don't like talking about girly things. I'm a scientist."

"Okay, we can talk about scientific things," backtracked the queen. "If we do, will you stay with me and stave off my loneliness?" She reached up to her crown and broke off one of the crystal teeth.

Bells watched it near her cheek, knowing in the dimness of her mind that she should dodge before it cut her and finding no strength.

Suddenly the horses reared, snorting.

The Snow Queen's spell broke, her arm jerked and the ice shard flew out of her fingers. She screamed then, hitting the reins hard. The animals neighed and jolted forward, galloping like the wind.

Bells gripped the seat for dear life. "I'm okay," she whispered, "I'm okay. I'm still me and I'm not dead yet."

Above them the rustle of stretching Mad Tome filled the air, chasing them from page to page in a blurry madness.

"It's waking up!" Cried Prince Prospero.

"I have noticed!" Replied the Snow Queen.

The characters from the pages they passed swarmed them like restless bees, buzzing and knocking into each other for a better look at new badlings, shouting and waving and grimacing and roaring. Ghosts swam in their midst, migrating noiselessly next to the sleigh, murmuring warnings.

"Out of my way!" Screamed the Snow Queen, slashing the steeds mercilessly, standing tall, her snow-white tresses flapping in the wind. She looked a fearsome and powerful deity not to be trifled with. The sleigh careened, snow spuming from under its runners. There were upset bellows all around them, a few pages flapped in an attempt to block the sleigh, but the Snow Queen paid them no heed, speeding on.

The air trembled with rustling snores.

"Hold on!" Cried the queen.

The sleigh veered to the right and ploughed over the bend in space, through furrows of white haze, tilting up perpendicularly. At once the page became the ground and the dirt wall behind was the wall once more.

Clutching the seat, Bells peered at the unfolding landscape spreading around them: the bare hills, the dark distant woods,

and a mansion girded by a stone wall, two naked tress standing sentinel by its gate. The sleigh ground to a halt, the horses snorting, foam dripping from their chewing lips, their rumps shaking from exhaustion.

"The Red Death story," said Bells to herself. Hope danced in her eyes. "They're all in order, one page after another. That means that...we don't have to rip Mad Tome, we can just walk out."

"What is it you said?" Asked the Snow Queen interestedly.

"Nothing." Bells forced a smile, hugging herself. She could no longer feel her fingers or hear the beating of her heart.

"We have arrived." The queen offered her hand to Prince Prospero who helped her to the ground. "What are you waiting for? Get out."

Grand and Rusty awkwardly hopped off. Peacock elegantly stepped down, his long blond hair spilling on his shoulders, his feminine frame barely fitting in his clothes.

The Snow Queen regarded him with dislike. "We shall hold a council on how to appropriate you. In you go." She gestured to the open doors already crowded by expectant faces, hungry and eager to slash or cut or bite, to escape their predicament and have new badlings suffer in their place.

Chapter 21. The Wrong Council

How do you divide four things among eight things? You cut each thing in half. How about four things among a hundred things? It depends on the thing, of course. If it's four doughnuts, you break them into a hundred tiny pieces (good luck with that). But what if the things to be divided are four people? No, you didn't just think that and I didn't write it.

The badlings reluctantly entered the palace, shuffling after the queen, moiling deeper into the unnervingly silent crowd. The Snow Queen strutted smoothly with her head high, until they reached the doorway to the black suite. Here she halted, spun on her heels, and addressed them in a formal tone.

"We, the characters of Mad Tome, intend to hold a council the sole purpose of which is to determine your future placement."

The badlings stole an uneasy glance at each other.

Even Peacock frowned at this, forgetting his blood thirst and still unaware of the peculiar changes happening to him. "No need to decide anything about me," he said smugly, "I'm going back to Dracula's sisters. They invited me to go hunting with them." He wet his lips or, rather, *she* wet *her* lips, as he

appeared quite androgynous at the moment, with a definite lean on the female side.

The Snow Queen narrowed her eyes. "You don't get to go anywhere until we're through with you. We will vote. And it is out vote that will determine your fortune, or *misfortune*, depending on what angle you view it from." She curled her upper lip.

"Vote?" Asked Bells, alarmed. "We don't get to choose?"

"Enough idle talk!" Shouted the queen.

They were unceremoniously shoved inside and pushed into four soot-black chairs in the middle of the equally soot-black suite with glaring red windows. Whatever friendly demeanor any of the characters displayed toward them evaporated leaving in place only greed and irritated impatience.

Bells caught her breath, fuming. "What are we, prisoners?"

"Looks like it." Sighed Grand, mopping his face that matched the reddish glow emanating through the panes.

Rusty stared at Peacock, speechless, which prompted Peacock to snap his jaws right in his face and make him jump.

"Whoa, dude, cut it out!" Rusty edged away.

Peacock sneered, revealing his (her?) canine fangs. "What happened, Rusty? What's wrong? Don't you want to beat me up? Go ahead, I'm not stopping you." And he hissed so hideously, Rusty gulped and turned his head to Bells and Grand, seeking some kind

of a solace. They bent, eager to relieve their friend of his distress, only to be stopped by a burbling jostling onslaught of bodies that filed in, a disorganized throng of people and various creatures. They bedecked every vacant surface of the dozens sofas and settees positioned in semi-circles facing the four chairs. Not a seat was left unoccupied. Some of the characters the badlings had met before, like the caterpillar and Alice and the Headless Horseman, others they'd never seen.

"They must be characters from other Mad Tome pages." Whispered Bells to Grand.

"I think so too." He agreed.

"What? I can't hear you, guys." Rusty spoke in what he thought was a properly hushed voice.

"If you won't shut up, I will bite you." Snapped Peacock. He projected an undisputable flair of superiority and arrogance.

Rusty stared, lips pressed into a line, hands in fists.

"Go ahead. Try me," taunted him Peacock.

"I would've," spat Rusty through clenched teeth, "but I don't raise my hands at *girls*."

Peacock balked, slapping both hands against his cheeks. He gingerly touched his face, then passed a hand through lock of long hair and uttered a suppressed groan.

Rusty sniggered until Bells stomped on his foot.

The murmur around them rose to an impatient clamor and abruptly fell dead. Everyone present drew back as the Snow Queen lowered herself into a large armchair positioned directly across the badlings. On her right stood Prince Prospero, and on her left, to their collective shock, hovered the ghost of Bluebeard stroking his faint beard. The shimmering vapor shape of the black hen perched on his shoulder like a parrot would on a shoulder of a pirate. His dead wives shimmied behind, their heads as cleaved as they were before, only now you could positively see all the way through them.

Bells shuddered, opened her mouth to comment and was interrupted by the Snow Queen.

"I ask everyone to be quiet."

There was no need as the silence was absolute, if not for the smacking of the caterpillar's lips around his hookah and one accidental tap on the glass—the Roc chicks couldn't fit in the room and were watching the assembly through the window.

"We have gathered here—" began the queen.

"I have suffered the most damage!" Twanged a voice from the second row. It came from below, and heads turned and necks craned and bodies twisted to see who was bold enough to interrupt. Prodded and elbowed by his neighbors, the Headless Horseman rose, holding his head in outstretched arms. It grimaced, moving its lips and tongue in an exaggerated fashion

that only added to the gruesomeness of its act. "I have been traumatized for the rest of my existence. The consequences are dire. I cannot perform my story without being terrified of a badling stalking me. Therefore it is my right to demand compensation. I claim the fat one." He pointed with the head at Grand.

Grand's eyes rounded.

"That is entirely unfair." Said the caterpillar languidly, taking the hookah out of his mouth and breathing out a ring of smoke. "If anyone could claim him, that would be me. I have been first in line for years, according to our last assembly. Bluebeard, you decreed it. Have you no memory, no record to prove my right?"

"Bluebeard is a ghost," refuted the Snow Queen. "Whatever he decreed is no longer valid."

"Besides," continued the caterpillar in an unhurried manner, "he managed to escape my carefully spawn pupa. I have been perfecting the art of morphing into a genuine caterpillar, and that is not easy. Most of you get to wander across your pages, but not me. These pitiful stumps and pathetic prolegs provide me little locomotion aside from crawling and creeping and on a rare occasion—"

"Silence!" Boomed the queen, her nostrils flaring. "Anyone else who speaks out of order will be dismissed, therefore

forfeiting their chance to be doled out a badling. Need I repeat myself?" She roved her icy eyes from row to row.

This brought forth an uneasy susurrations and angry glances at the queen and at the badlings and back at the queen.

"The Headless Horseman is afraid of *me*?" Muttered Grand to himself, massaging his ears as if unable to believe them.

"Apparently." Confirmed Bells and stiffened under the queen's glare, fear pulsing in her like an unfettered bird.

"We have very little time." Proclaimed the queen importantly. "The badling by the name of Grand, stand up and tell us what you had in mind. What method did you come up with to destroy Mad Tome?"

Everyone's attention was on Grand. He opened his mouth, his jowls trembling. "Method?"

"Yes, you have proposed a certain foolproof method." Said the queen. "We want to hear it."

Grand looked at the ghost of the black hen who curiously angled away, as if afraid to meet his eyes.

"This is like the trial in Wonderland." Muttered Bells, looking over the crowd until she spotted Alice who urgently relayed something into the caterpillar's ear, or a hole, as caterpillars don't really have ears.

Bells nudged Grand. "You better tell her."

He stood, kneading his big hands. "Um. What is it I'm supposed to say?"

"Your method." Repeated the Snow Queen, measuring him with disdain. "We have heard you have devised an ingenious way to do it."

"Heard from who?" Asked Grand, staring at the ghost of black hen that by now has crawled under Bluebeard's beard, pretending like it wasn't there to begin with.

"It matters not and it does not concern you." Answered the queen roughly. "Speak!"

Grand shifted his weight from one foot to another and, unable to come up with any more delaying remarks, sighed. "Well, I thought if we could, um, somehow get the ducks back at the pond to pull Mad Tome out of the dirt and...and clamp it in their beaks and tug at it and rip it, that would be easier than us trying to rip it here because it's too big for us. And, well, now that I'm talking about it, I have a better idea." His expression brightened with something Bells hadn't seen on his face in a long time: mischief. "If you'd let us, we could just walk along the dirt wall and get out by the pond and then we'd be able to destroy Mad Tome for sure for you."

He met Bells's astounded eyes, an awed appreciation shining in them, and smiled.

For a few beats the positive outcome of his proposition muddled the minds of the characters, and they raised their hands and paws and hooves to applaud, when someone shouted from the last row.

"Wait a minute! What do you mean, let you go back to the pond? You want us to let you go? Just like that?"

That was picked up by another cry. "Look at the blond one! Look at him! The vampire sister has already claimed him. Why does she get to do it without our vote?"

The meaning of these two new revelations pushed out the first one and the mob erupted into befuddled chaos. "He said back to the pond!—They're planning an escape!—She bit him, I heard it from Sancho—Seize them! Seize them at once!—Have we waited for nothing? Who says we need to vote?—Grab them, while you can! Get the fat one!—No, that one, the blond one, before he's gone—" They leapt and stomped and surged at the badlings.

"Sit down!" Screamed the queen over the hullabaloo, attempting to bring order to the writhing mass of characters who gibbered and bellowed and roared, hemming in the unfortunate badlings. Faces snarled at them. Wings spread. Tails twitched. Teeth bared.

"Quiet!" Thundered the Snow Queen and unleashed a freezing wind of such force, it blew out the windows and froze everyone solid. Shards and splinters of red glass tinkled to the ground

in a sparkling shower, and in poked the beaks of Haroun, Hussein, and Hinbad.

"You forgot about us, huh?" Said Hinbad.

"And, like, congratulations. Mad Tome is waking." Said Haroun.

"Dude. You people are too loud, you know that?" Added Hussain. "Awesome trick, Snow Queen, that's a cool way to make them shut up."

The Snow Queen heaved, momentarily worn out by her effort.

Hinbad pushed Hussain out of the way. "Anyway. Did you divide the badlings yet?" He passed his orange eyes over the frosted bodies and halted on Bells. "We claim that one. She is clever."

"We?" Haroun screeched in shock. "What's this 'we'? There is no 'we'. *I'm* getting her."

Hussain pecked his bothers' heads, forcing his way to the window and sticking in his whole beak. "Like, okay. Here is what *I* have to say. You better get out of here, because Mad Tome is really mad right now. So, like, we can give you a lift, but not to everyone at once. First come, first served. That cool?"

There was a pause, a collective intake of air, and then a crackle and a rattle and a crash of limbs stretching and bone joint flexing and in the next minute the mayhem erupted anew. Sofas were overturned with a clutter, vases broke on the floor

with a bang. Cries and shouts mixed with the stomping of feet and the trampling of hooves. Some characters dashed for the doors, others for the windows, yet others went for the badlings, reaching at them with anything that was sharp: talons, teeth, daggers, spurs, spike heels, and even a hairpin thrust out in the shaking hand of Alice.

Thankfully—authors say this word to give you a breather and to elicit gratitude for lessening your anguish over something dreadful that was *about* to occur but didn't—again, as I was saying, thankfully, before any of them managed to inflict any damage, a low rumble rolled through the sky, as if a thunderstorm began brewing, and then at once lightning cracked and shook the entire palace.

The light dimmed. Darkness oozed into the room, and with it, on the heels of an angry gale, broken out from his dungeon prison, Dracula flew in and alighted next to the badlings, sweeping competitors off their feet.

"You are mine," he told them, "*mine*. I claim you all." He spread his manicured fingers, and the sharpened nails elongated into crooked claws designed to rend and maim and pierce.

"But then we won't be able to destroy Mad Tome!" Screamed Bells over the noise. "You said you're tired of being here! Don't you want to get home?"

"Let that not concern you, Belladonna Monterey." Said Dracula with relish, his red eyes shining. "You will love your new life, trust me."

Bells knew that trusting vampires was a bad idea. She ducked, dragging down the boys with her. Dracula pulled back his arms, prepping for the final blow, and that was when the Snow Queen smote him in a powerful strike. She grabbed Bells by the arm, searing her skin with frost. "You are *mine!* I claimed you first! You chose my page!"

Dracula recovered and hugged the Snow Queen from behind, lifting her clear off the floor and hurtling her into the corner of the room.

The badlings took big gulps of air, looked at one another, and bolted under Dracula's arms and through the doorway, running full pelt until they were out of the palace.

Fierce currents of air slapped their faces. Dirt rained on their heads. The hills swarmed with running figures. The sky twirled and flashed yellow.

"Who dares to wake me?" Thundered Mad Tome. Dark clouds formed its crabby face. It roiled and rumbled, screeching.

"Badlings? Where do you think you're going?"

"What do we do now?" Squealed Bells.

"Where is Dracula?" Wailed Peacock, hardly resembling himself anymore, his pale hands plastered over his face. "I want to go with him!"

Grand hyperventilated. "This is it, we will die. We will die. This crazy book will break us to pieces and squeeze us into a mush of bones and meat and cream us into a glop of--"

"Guys, over there!" Rusty pointed. "See the birds? They're taking people on!"

At the end of the page hovered Haroun, Hussein, and Hinbad, their mother protectively circling around them. The characters streamed on their backs in rivers, and one by one the birds took off, flying up and parallel to the dirt wall.

Mad Tome's face loomed over them. Two claws stretched out with an unmistakable intent to crush everything into nothing. "You think you can escape me? Think again!" It rustled and snapped, barely brushing the heads of the characters on one of the birds. It screeched and swooped down and flattened itself on the ground, waiting for the danger to pass.

"Come on, guys, we can still make it!" Shouted Rusty.

Bewildered, Bells gripped Peacock's and Grand's hands and, headed by Rusty, they sprinted forth.

The claws hung over them. Another moment, and it would snatch them and grind them into pulp. They reached Hinbad and jumped on his back just in time, slamming into a mass of people

and animals already crowded there and watching with horror the claws snap shut inches away. Squawking and flapping wings, Hinbad soared up.

Then several very unpleasant things happened.

Naturally, the badlings' attempted escape has upset Mad Tome greatly. It began fluttering pages, generating a storm of enormous proportions and sending those who didn't gripped Hinbad's feathers hard enough tossing and tumbling and scattering over the hills, uprooting trees and bushes in the process.

As if that wasn't enough, Dracula came out of nowhere, swept down, snatched Peacock, and dove out of sight.

Next, from the tangle of limbs and bodies the Headless Horseman emerged and clasped Grand by the arm, twanging, "Mine! He is mine! Drop us off on my page, Hinbad!"

Hinbad veered to the right, passing under several pages at incredible speed, while the horseman, his head tucked under his arm, waded his way to one of his wings and from there slipped off with Grand firmly in hold and somersaulted into his prairie.

It wasn't all.

While Bells and Rusty stared at this, unable to help, the remaining characters around them started giggling hysterically.

"We got you! We got you! We tricked the Snow Queen! We got two badlings, the boy and the girl!"

"Monkeys." Gaped Bells.

"Crap!" Exclaimed Rusty. "Where did *they* come from?"

All around them the monkeys peeled up their lips, showing sharp yellow teeth.

"Stop! I command you to stop! You are carrying my badling!" Came a shout from above, and out emerged the Snow Queen in her sleigh, livid, her horses snorting angrily.

Startled, Hinbad rocked off balance and heeled over, corkscrewing right into the next page instead of passing under it. Bells and Rusty glimpsed lots of green, and then they didn't glimpse anything anymore, smashing into a canopy of leaves, flowers, and lianas.

Chapter 22. One Monkey's Mischief

Beware of paper cuts. Once you shed blood at the hands of a character, you become it. How long it takes for you to change no one knows, but that only adds to suspense. It could be a day, it could be a week; it could be a whole year. Or it could be exactly thirteen minutes—such an unlucky number—provided you had an inclination to look like that particular character anyway.

Peacock has suffered this fate already, successfully turning into a vampire, and not just any vampire but one of the sisters. Grand was yet to face his decapitation. As to Bells and Rusty...well.

Pursued by the speediest steeds in Mad Tome, namely, the three horses of the Snow Queen, Hinbad was not to be outdone.

"You try and catch me, you crazy icicle!" He squawked haughtily, clearing the roof of bright leaves and recovering. His pace slowed considerably, but he was one stubborn bird. "I didn't learn to fly for nothing!" He screeched. "I can totally outfly you, watch me!"

As is the case with most young people, young giant overconfident Roc chicks in particular, Hinbad focused on the chase behind more than on where he was going. The monkeys

screamed directions at him, trying to prevent the final crash, and failed spectacularly.

Scudding full speed through shapeless drifts of vapor, Hinbad saw the rising slope in front of him a tad too late. He careered up, desperately flapping his wings, and then realized that this maneuver happened only in his head. In reality he rushed forward headlong, tore through the breathing tent of the jungle, and staved into the rich soil the way a knife slides into butter. His whole body quivered from the impact, and for a moment both the bird and its passengers resembled a picture that defied gravity, then it broke apart.

Hinbad swayed, tilted, and paraboled into the thicket of bramble with a rending crash. The monkeys rained off his back, scattering into trees. And Bells and Rusty propelled to a copse of young saplings like two bouncing pellets.

There was a silence that happens after big explosions.

Then it erupted with noises.

Bells and Rusty sat up, reeling. They brushed off leaves and grit and gawked around at the pulsing dripping forest. It seethed with life. Insects buzzed. Birds shrieked. Everything quickened and made annoyingly loud sounds. There were no visible paths leading anywhere. Tree branches hung low like green outstretched fingers aiming to snag their hair. Flowers emitted a nauseating odor. The ground was covered with soft moss that

squelched when stepped on, an ankle-deep sludge obviously hungry for someone to get trapped inside it.

"Are you okay?" Asked Bells Rusty, her nimble fingers redoing the ponytail.

"I'm fine!" He said with forced enthusiasm. "You?"

"I'm okay. I'm alive. We're alive." Said Bells dazedly. "Although I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. Where did Hinbad and the monkeys go?" She reached for his cheek. "What's that on your face?"

"Where?" Rusty touched it. A shallow gush ran from his eye to his chin in a jagged red line.

"Did you get scratched?" Asked Bells. "It looks bad, Rusty. You're bleeding."

"I dunno how it happened." Rusty examined his stained finger with interest, then licked it.

"Eww!" Cried Bells. "Why did you have to do that?"

"What? It's just blood. It's nothing, it will go away." He spun around. "Where are we, Bells, do you know? This looks cool. This looks like a jungle!" He parted the stems of a leafy plant, peering into the thicket.

"I can see that." Bells sucked in air. "I'm more worried about Mad Tome finding us, or the Snow Queen, or some other deranged maniac who wants to..." she trailed off, her whole face sagging. "Rusty." She gulped. "What if..." She bit her tongue.

"Huh?" Rusty was occupied with sniffing things.

Their eyes met.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I just...I worry about Grand and Peacock." Her voice broke.

Rusty nodded. "I know, man. We need to find them."

"How? How are we going to do that?" Implored Bells.

"Dracula's got Peacock, and he probably won't even want to leave, now that he's one of the sisters. And that headless guy snatched Grand, you saw it. I don't want to think about what he plans to do with him. I guess..." she bit her lip, "I guess we could find the edge of the page, get on the wall and split up. I could go look for Dracula, and you could—" Her eyes widened.

"What?" Rusty flinched, unnerved by her stare.

"Listen," she said, "just...stay calm, okay? Stay calm."

"Why?" Rusty cried. "What's happening? What's the matter?" He touched his face and stiffened.

Bells took a deep breath and said in a terrified little voice, "I think you're turning into a monkey."

"No." Rusty patted his nose, his forehead, his ears. Soft grizzly fur sprouted under his fingers. "Ah!" he shrieked and tossed both hands to his back. "Ah!" His feet mashing the moss, he proceeded to dance around himself, screaming.

"Don't freak out, please. We'll find a way to fix this."
Said Bells levelly, unable to take her eyes away from Rusty's back. There a monkey's tail unfolded in a curly loop. It was brand new and soft and kept growing by the second.

Rusty ogled his black leathery hands. "Crap, Bells. It's that monkey. The monkey that sat next to me, it scratched me!"

Bells put a hand on his arm. "You're replacing it, to stay here, so it can—" She fell silent, crushed, quickly looking herself over for any snicks or bites. Cold stole into her stomach. She spread her fingers, watching them, then reached and felt her back for a tail.

"This is awful!" Screamed Rusty hysterically. "Pinch me, Bells, I'm dreaming! I want to wake up! Grandma! *Grandma*, get me out of here!" And he took off, stumbling through the thicket of hanging lianas.

"Rusty, wait!" Bells dashed after him.

He expertly scampered and hopped over clusters of flowers on his spindly monkey legs that look like, well, like the legs a proper monkey.

Bells could barely catch up. "Rusty!" She wheezed, out of breath. "Rusty, stop!"

A slew of new sounds made her halt and look back. She couldn't see anything through the tangle of trees, but she heard a distinct thump, a volley of snorts, and a crunch.

A crunch of *snow*.

It appeared that the Snow Queen has landed on the page. Arrows of ice streaked the forest and bit every leaf and petal and twig with glittering frost. The ground crackled and groaned, squeezed by an advancing tide of ice.

"The Snow Queen!" Bells choked on panic and struck out across the squelching mud, pulling out one foot and plunging the other with determined ferocity.

"Bells, look!" Came a call from above. "I can climb trees like a monkey!" Rusty didn't resemble himself anymore. If not for his clothes, he could be easily mistaken for a young langur with a bushy tail sticking out at the right angle like a fifth limb. He curled it around a liana and whirred down, a wide grin on his monkey face.

"Careful!" Cried Bells. "You'll fall like that."

"Don't worry, Bells. This is fun!" He appeared to have lost memory of why they were here, enjoying himself.

"Listen to me." Said Bells desperately, glancing back. "You're Rusty, Russell Jagoda, okay? You're not a monkey, you're a *boy*. We're on a page from a book about monkeys, or something. One of them has scratched you so you could replace it, do you understand? And the Snow Queen just got here. She's after me, Rusty. She already tried poking me with a piece of her crown.

She'll do it again and this time it'll be the end of me. We need to find Grand and Peacock and get back to our duck pond!"

"Huh?" Rusty blinked. "Duck pond?"

"Do you want to stay a monkey forever?" Asked Bells.

"Totally! This is cool! Look!"

She clasped her forehead. "You don't change, Rusty, monkey or not."

The splintering noises intensified, and the nearby trees groaned, stooping under the weight of the snow that materialized out of thin air.

"Rusty, where did you go? Help me get up this stupid tree!" Bells took hold of the bark and watched her hands slide down, dismayed. It was slippery from condensation.

"Rusty!"

He didn't hear her, scaling the trunk and swinging down from a liana, only to climb back up for another go, an amused expression on his black leathery face.

The jungle grew strangely still.

Bells's skin crawled. "Rusty?"

He poked his head between branches and suddenly shrieked. "Ahhh!"

Dozens of furry arms reached for him. Dozens of dark wrinkly faces exactly like his peeked out of the emerald carpet, giggling at Bells. A band of wild langurs assembled in a circle

around Rusty, sitting on every bough and branch and protrusion of the dense tree crown.

One of them picked off a marmoreal globule that looked like a large nut or a hard fruit and threw it at Bells. She ducked. More nuts pelted her, painfully knocking on her head and shoulders. She cowered, arms crossed overhead for protection.

"Get her! Get her!" They screamed, hooting and ululating.

"Rusty!" Called Bells. "Don't give in! Fight them! You have to—Ow!" A large nut struck her elbow, hitting a nerve.

"There you are, badling." The Snow Queen stepped out of the underbrush tangle, crystallizing it with her breath. Her mouth twisted in the smugness of a predator that has at last cornered its prey. Steam rose from her, the kind you see when you open a freezer on a hot summer day.

The monkeys ceased their assault at once, issued an ear-splitting skirl of terror and fled, Rusty clamped firmly in their nimble hands, leaping from bough and bough and smashing through the jungle. Their grey fur flashed and was gone.

"Poor badling." Said the queen sweetly. "You look so tired and dirty and bruised." She took a dainty little step, and another, and another. The fresh crust of ice splintered under her feet.

Bells jerked to run and couldn't, paralyzed.

"What is your hurry? Let that *boy* have his fun." Cajoled the queen. "Come. I will clean your face and give you a cloak to wrap yourself in. It will cool you. It will shield you from this insufferable heat." Her exhale frosted a cluster of flowers into an icicle bouquet. The good outcome of this was, they didn't stink anymore. The bad outcome was, they crumbled under her shoe, the last barrier between her and Bells.

Mesmerized by the enchanting melody of the queen's voice, Bells imagined herself as the Snow Queen, sitting on an ice throne, arranging and rearranging ice shards into sparkling mosaics and intricate designs.

The queen advanced. "You will live in my shiny clean palace, wearing shiny new gowns. Who needs to be stuck in this dirt and filth, this is a jungle, it's no place for *girls*." Saying this word was a big mistake.

"I'll be as dirty as I want, thank you very much." Snapped Bells, her daze gone. "And I'm not coming with you."

The Snow Queen hissed, steam clouding her face. "Oh, you won't, you say? We'll see about that." With a greedy glint in her eyes, she doffed her icy crown and thrust it forward.

Bells staggered back, missing the pinpoints by the inches. Her foot snagged on a root and she plopped down.

The Snow Queen smiled, stooping, the razor-edged circlet poised in her hand like a knife. "Say goodbye to life as you know it, badling," and she slashed her.

For a split second Bells lost her peripheral vision, focusing on the sharp tip, waiting for the pain. But when it didn't come, and when the tip swiftly moved away without touching her, she had to blink to believe it true.

The Snow Queen hiccupped. A puzzled and rather blank expression spread over her features. And then she rose from the ground and hung in the air, swinging left and right.

"Humph uh uphm uhm mumph?" Squawked a familiar voice.

Bells squinted. "Hinbad?"

The Roc chick spit out the Snow Queen, watching her tumble with one amused orange eye, and clacked. "I said, is she giving you trouble? We were supposed to vote and stuff, like who gets what badling and—hey, icicle lady, you're not going anywhere."

The Snow Queen was stealthily crawling behind a cluster of orchids. Hinbad snapped her by the cloak, vigorously shook her from side to side in a manner birds shake worms, and flung her off into the hazy emerald distance. They listened. There was a shrill cry, a snap, a crack, and blissful silence.

"That's better." Concluded Hinbad, prancing to Bells on his scaly legs the size of tree trunks, crushing vegetation and

sending myriads of startled insects and birds scattering into the sky.

He stopped by Bells, tilting his head. "That felt so good. I wanted to do it for a long time."

"Thank you, Hinbad." Squeaked Bells.

He fastened his orange eyes on her. "You're clever. You'd make a great Roc bird."

"I would?" Asked Bells carefully, horror stealing over her.

"Don't you want to fly like a bird?" Hinbad jerked up his head in a twitchy avian fashion. "There she goes."

Bells followed his gaze.

The Snow Queen's sleigh shot up and out of sight.

"I have a feeling she'll be back," said Bells uneasily.

"Do you want to be a bird, then?" Hinbad's lowered his head level with Bells.

She gulped. "Do I...have to decide right now?"

"What's there to decide?" asked Hinbad. "Haroun and Hussain will be so jealous that I got you." He made a series of grating noises, which was as close as a giant bird can get to laughter.

"Can I find my friends first?" Implored Bells. "I'd like to say goodbye to them, you know," she measured her words carefully, "like you would want to say goodbye to your brothers, if you were to leave them forever."

Haroun blinked. "Why would I want to say goodbye to those brutes? They'd never say goodbye to me." He screeched in agitation.

"Okay, okay, that's not what I meant." Stammered Bells. "I mean, could I see them one more time to...to tell them that I'm going to be a bird so they could be jealous because *they* don't get to be one?" She parted her lips in a wide grin, hoping it looked natural enough.

"Oh. Sure!" Hinbad nodded happily. "I could even change you before you go so you could fly up to them and show off. Wouldn't that make them choke on their elephant meat?" He lowered his voice a notch. "So, like, I'm not supposed to do this, Mother told me to wait for her, but she's not here to see me, is she? That'd be a great surprise for them all, wouldn't it?"

"Well..." Bells took a deep breath and let out the air, energetically twisting her ponytail, "if I change into a Roc bird now, my friends won't recognize me. They'll think I'm you and run away from me screaming."

"Huh," said Hinbad, jabbing his beak at something squirming in the grass, tossing it up and gulping it so fast, Bells failed to see what it was, but she thought it looked like a fat anaconda perfectly capable of swallowing an eleven-year-old girl whole, and her stomach rolled over itself.

"You're clever." Continued Hinbad, nonplussed. "I didn't think about that."

"You can always change me later." Said Bells weakly, twirling her ponytail with both hands now. "Could you...maybe...take me to them? You're so powerful, so big, your flight is so...smooth and speedy. I bet you fly faster than your brothers." She watched the effect of her words take hold.

"Huh. I totally am." Hinbad unfolded his wings, uprooting a couple palms in the process. "I am *the fastest*. Mother told me I'd never fly as well as Hussain, but I'm better than him. I'm better than both of them."

"You are." Bells lauded. "You are graceful and swift. May I once more experience the pleasure of traveling with such a capable flyer?"

"You shall!" Screeched Hinbad. "Get on! I will take you to the Monkey City."

"The Monkey City?" Repeated Bells. "What book is that from?"

"The Jungle Book," answered Hinbad in proud tones of someone who managed to recall useful information for once. "It's where the monkeys live."

"Is that where they took Rusty?"

Hinbad blinked. "You are clever."

"Er. Thanks." She stole a glance up. "Is it safe to go? I mean, isn't Mad Tome looking for us?"

"Nah, it's napping." Said Hinbad. "It tired itself out with that tantrum. Always does."

"How do you know?"

"Can't you hear it?"

Bells listened.

Sure enough, underneath the din of the jungle ran a thinner fainter sound, a rustling snore that could be mistaken for the murmur of leaves. A muted tremor hummed somewhere underneath the soil, as if the forest floor was alive.

Bells involuntary opened her mouth. "So that's how you can tell—"

"We have to go, though. Before Mother finds me." Hinbad gulped, evidently more terrified of his mother's wrath than that of Mad Tome. He flattened a wing. Bells climbed up it and straddled his back. He spread his wings and kicked off, soaring above the sea of trees that shifted and rippled like verdant water, with splashes of color erupting here and there in the shape of startled butterflies and squawking tropical birds.

Chapter 23. The Queen's Betrayal

For some unfathomable reason it is generally easier to undo things than to do them. Say, it took you *forever* to write a story by hand, in meticulously looped ornamental cursive. By that same hand it will take you no time to shred it and toss the scraps out the window. Of course, then it will take you another forever to regret your undoing, but that is not what concerns us. What concerns us is the undoing of Mad Tome.

"Hinbad!" Called Bells over the rushing air. "If we rip Mad Tome, will my friends change back to themselves?"

"Huh?" Answered Hinbad, skirting the shiny roof of leaves spread below. "I can't hear you!"

"It's okay!" Cried Bells. "It's nothing. Just talking to myself." She banged her head on Hinbad's back. "Ugh, I hate this. Scientifically speaking, nothing makes any sense. Non-scientifically speaking, nothing makes any sense either. My brain will explode." She took a shuddering breath and let out the air.

"Okay, let's think. If we rip Mad Tome, how will it make Rusty less of a monkey and Peacock less of a vampire? It won't. They'll turn into ghosts, that's what will happen. So we can't

damage it in any way. Not that we can, I mean. Okay, I don't know what I mean. Oh, I wish Grand was here! I hope that headless idiot hasn't done anything horrible to him." She shuddered at the thought. "At least I know where he is, and I know where Peacock is, and I'm about to see Rusty."

She gazed around with unseeing eyes and got back to muttering.

"I need to stop freaking out and examine the facts. The facts are—well, there is only one, really—all of the badlings—assuming all of them are badlings—want us to destroy Mad Tome. Right? Right. Theoretically, that should destroy them too. However, because they seem to want it so bad, it must send them back to their books, together with their pages, because that's what happens in stories when the villain is slayed. Everything returns back to how it was before."

Bells closed her eyes and smiled, letting the wind batter her face. After a considerable and rather satisfied pause at having figured things out, a new thought struck her. "Wait, they don't belong in books, they're not real characters, they're replacements!" She groaned.

Hinbad sunk, his wings brushing tree crowns, and tipped forward. Bells tightened her grip.

The woods have come to an abrupt end. In front of them lay the ruins of an ancient Indian city. 'Lay' is perhaps the wrong

word here. The city (or whatever remained of it) *jutted out* like broken teeth in a dusty mouth. Every surface, every outcrop and shelf and post teemed with monkeys. They saw the circling bird and hooted, baring their teeth.

Hinbad touched the ground. The shock of landing jolted Bells, and a new idea exploded in her mind like blinding fireworks, making her wince. She slid off Hinbad's back and stared at him, a trickle of sweat tracing a line on her back.

"I know what will happen." She said hoarsely to no one in particular. "You don't want to return, at least not all of you." She passed her eyes over an abundance of furry bodies that crept to her in a jostling crowd. "You want to stay in books, and the only way to do it is to replace yourselves with new badlings so you can escape before it happens, leaving us doomed to become ghosts or get buried underground." She swayed and looked up at Hinbad, at his orange unblinking eyes, her chest tight with anguish.

"Do you remember who you were before you got here?" She asked, her voice catching. "What's your real name, Hinbad?" An embryo of guilt hatched in her stomach. It rose to her lungs and clogged her throat. She dropped her gaze, suddenly understanding.

"It must've been bad for you at home, so bad that you didn't want to come back." She blinked away welling tears.

Hinbad's feet stepped from one leg to another, talons clawing at the ground. "The Roc chicks have no names in the story. Hinbad is my real name," he screeched, scaring the monkeys off. They scattered into gaps and pits, poking out their heads.

A globe of water rolled out of Hinbad's orange eye and splashed into a puddle at Bells's feet.

Startled, she looked up.

"All I ever wanted was to fly." Squawked Hinbad. "That and my name are the only two things I remember." He spread his wings, scattering the monkeys again.

"I'm...I'm sorry." Said Bells, patting the scaly skin of one of his legs. She sniffled and wiped her nose, watching the monkeys elbow each other and chatter in hushed voices.

"Please, don't tell Mother I told you." Implored Hinbad in a screeching whisper. "She'd kill me if she found out."

"She's not your real mother, is she?"

Hinbad opened his beak to answer.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Screamed the monkeys suddenly and swarmed them in a moving groping blanket.

"Get off me, fuzzy bugs!" Hinbad shook one leg, then another, then tried to flutter his wings.

It was no use.

The weight of the animals overpowered him.

"You have no idea what you're doing, do you? Not one of you." Bells spoke in a sort of a trance, surveying the mess of advancing grimacing faces. Perspiration dampened her forehead. "You're just so desperate, you're willing to try anything, even if it means your dea—"

A young langur leapt at her. "We're great! We're awesome! We're smart!"

Bells dodged it and bumped into another one.

"We got you! We got you!" Two more monkeys sprung on her, felling her into sun-scorched grass. One of them raised his hand to deliver a fatal scratch, when Hinbad smote both of them with his beak, sending them flying.

"You're not getting her, she's *mine*." He screeched. "She said I could turn her. You said I could." He regarded Bells hopefully.

"After we find my friend, yes." Panted Bells. She gingerly touched her face. There wasn't a single cut.

The monkeys retreated, rumbling angrily.

"Help me, Hinbad." She said. "The faster we find Rusty, the faster I can replace you." She encircled his leg, clinging to it like to a tree. Hinbad obediently stomped onto the ruins, poking his head in every fissure and gap.

Bells held tight, bouncing up and down.

They passed a crumbling stonewall and stepped onto a plaza overgrown with creepers. At the end of it sat the remnants of a once magnificent palace. The few pillars that didn't collapse protruded up like lonely fingers with no roof to support. The floor plates were cracked, torn apart by grass and roots. In the heat haze beyond stretched a maze of abandoned houses with empty windows.

"A king used to live here," screeched Hinbad helpfully. "He kept his elephants here. Mother liked to come hunt them."

"Don't you ever feel sorry for them?" Bells let go of Hinbad's leg and walked around, touching stones and examining the dust on her fingers. "Poor elephants."

"You wait," Hinbad cheered. "When you become a Roc bird, you'll like them. They taste like worms, only a bit more chewy and with five ends."

Bells glared at him. "That is not happening until we find Rusty."

"Oh. Sure!" Agreed Hinbad readily. "Rusty!" He squawked. "Hey, fur balls, go find him for us, will you?"

The langurs stole up to them in a tightening circle, shouting strings of the same words on repeat. "We are strong and tricky and smart!" Their dark faces radiated mischief and threat. More and more of them spilled out of every crack and

hole. Alarmed, Bells quickly scaled Hinbad's lowered wing and crouched down.

"I'll squash you like bugs!" He warned.

The monkeys eased off with a grumble, but as soon as Hinbad tromped, they bounded and hung on his leg. He shook them off. A handful of them stuck to another other leg, the rest gathered around in a menacing wall.

"Hinbad?" Said Bells. "I think they intend to fight us."

"They can try."

"We are wicked and free and bright!" The monkeys whooped.

Bells put hands around her mouth. "Rusty!" She called.

"Where are you?"

"Here!" Came a feeble cry from the broken dome. "I'm here, Bells! I'm okay! I'd get out but they won't let me!" His head bobbed over the lip of the roof. Two langurs smacked him, pushing him down.

"You dumb knuckle-draggers!" Shouted Bells. "Let go of him!"

"She called us dumb! She called us dumb!" Scores of them spilled over the bird. They climbed to Bells, blustering, reaching with their sharp nails and teeth.

"Hold on!" Hinbad shook like a wet dog, dropping animals in clumps, and blundered to the dome where Rusty received clonks on his head from two langurs.

A breeze rushed at them from above.

Hinbad raised his head. "Mother?"

"Hinbad!" Cried the Roc Mother, soaring on massive wings and staring down with her scolding eyes. "How dare you defy me! What did I tell you?"

"But Mother—"

"I don't want to hear any excuses. No badlings for you." The Roc Mother paused, contemplating. "And no elephants, understand? Only old chewy serpents."

"Mother!" Cried Hinbad, horrified.

"You heard me." She screeched. "Your brothers didn't break the rules. You did."

"Dude, you cheated." Said Haroun smugly, alighting next to his brother. The force of his descent sent monkeys rolling and Bells sprawling on the ground.

"Yeah." Echoed Hussain. "You broke the rules. That's bad." He winked to Haroun.

"Mother, I didn't—"

"Do not argue with me!" She screeched. "My apologies, Snow Queen."

A fierce biting wind rose and swept the plaza. The Snow Queen steered her sleigh down and expertly landed in the middle of it, bringing with her a blizzard.

Summer died, strangled by sudden winter.

Cold flakes stung Bells's face. The jungle around the Monkey City, so green a moment ago, got encased in ice. Every branch and bough held up a sheet of snow, fresh and fluffy like white cotton balls.

Bells huddled, her teeth chattering.

"No harm done." Said the Snow Queen to the Roc Mother, stepping down and drawing herself to her full height. The ivory steeds neighed and tossed their manes. Three figures shrouded in cloaks, faces hidden, remained seated in the sleigh, as if waiting for a signal to make an entrance.

"I call to your attention!" Proclaimed the Snow Queen.

The monkeys quieted.

"We came here to deliver the badlings to their task. It is time." She gave Bells an icy stare.

Bells braced herself and spoke, focusing on keeping her voice even. "Before we do that, I think everyone here deserves to know that you tried cutting me with your crown to get me all for yourself."

A murmur passed through the assembly.

The queen narrowed her eyes. "Don't listen to the badling. You can't trust a badling. Bad child who doesn't finish reading books." Her lips twisted.

"Who is it?" Asked Bells boldly, her stomach twisting from such a dare. "Your mom or your dad?" She saw a flicker of doubt pass the queen's gaze. "Your dad? Was he mean to you?"

A chalky lifeless expression spread over the queen's already pallid features. "What is this nonsense you're saying?" Her voice came out broken.

"Who is it that you don't want to see?" Pressed Bells. "Who is the reason you don't want to go *home*?"

The queen sagged, leaning on the sleigh, a hand over her eyes as if shading them from some apparition. She appeared to have started melting. Her snowy mantle glistened wet, round holes peppering it, widening and leaking. The winter retreated, leaving dark spots and puddles where heaps of snow lay a moment ago.

A tense pause hung over the plaza.

Bells's throat constricted. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Why, you continue to surprise me, Belladonna Monterey." Broke the silence a languid voice from one of the cloaked figures. Dracula unwrapped himself and stood, deathly elegant and charming as always.

"Dracula?" Bells uttered a small gasp. "I thought you were...I thought..."

"What a mistake to let you slip through my fingers."

Drawled Dracula, his eyes flashing red. "Your friend Peter Sutton proved to be a much lesser entertainment."

Bells's heart shrunk. "Where is he?"

The Snow Queen shook her head, as if tossing away a memory, and stood tall, fully recovered. There was such hatred in her eyes that Bells involuntarily took a step back. "He's about to join you." She hissed. "With two other badlings. You four have a job to do." She raked her eyes over Bells as if wanting to throttle her. "You're a cruel cruel child," she said coldly, "you don't deserve my beautiful palace. I have changed my mind. I don't want you."

Bells let out the air, without realizing she was holding it.

"Make her a monkey! Make her a monkey!" The langurs started laughing. It sounded strange, like giggling and shrieking mixed together. Some of them fell over on their backs and rocked back and forth, holding onto their stomachs.

"No, thanks." Said Bells levelly. "I'd rather stay myself."

"You'd make a good one." Said one of the langurs, old and bent. "You look like a monkey. Doesn't she?"

"Join us! Join us!"

Bells put her hands on her hips. "Okay, you know what? If this is amusement to you, it's not to us. We want to get back,

and we *will*. We'll figure something out. I'm sure Rusty doesn't want stay a stupid monkey for the rest of his life." As soon as she said it, she regretted it.

The langur's face, already black, darkened. "What's wrong with being a monkey?"

Others chittered angrily, pushing forward.

"Enough!" Shouted the queen. "We're running out of time."

"But, Snow Queen, she has insulted us." Whined the langur. "I think we deserve to get her as punishment. You know how annoying it is to repeat every day, 'We're smart and awesome and free!'" It makes me want to bite off my tail and tie it around my neck and hang myself. How about you try it?"

"Wow." Said Rusty. He stealthily made his way out of the dome and stood in the first row, listening. "I would've never thought of that. Hang yourself with your tail?"

"Rusty!" Cried Bells, running up to him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm great!" He scratched his face. "You're Bells, right?" And he began picking at his fur, evidently snipping fleas.

"Rusty." She shook his arm. "Russell Jagoda!"

"Hey, let go!" He scowled, tearing it out of her hold.

"We shall be merciful and give you a choice." Said the Snow Queen, peering at Bells. "Would you like to sprout fur all over your body? Or would you like to die and suck blood for the rest

of your meager existence? Or, perhaps, you wish to have your head chopped off and deposited in your hands?"

At these words one of the figures rose in the sleigh and unwrapped its cloak.

Bells whimpered.

It was Grand, only he looked an almost exact copy of the Headless Horseman, his head neatly sliced off and tied with a twine to his plump hands. His face was ashen, yet still round, as if not fully transformed.

"Um, Bells?" Said Grand's head. "It's okay. Don't worry. I'm fine. It actually doesn't feel all that awful. Bells?"

Bells has gone white as sheet. She opened and closed her mouth, trying to say something, but no noise came out. She couldn't take her eyes away from Grand, or, rather, his head.

The last figure stood and tossed back its hood. It was Peacock, or, shall I say, Peacock completely changed into the blond vampire sister. "Very funny, Grand. You scared her."

"I didn't mean to." Sighed Grand's head. "Honestly."

"Well?" Prompted the Snow Queen. "Your choice, badling."

Bells croaked, trying to find her voice.

"Come on, Bells," said Peacock flatly, "choose a vampire. Hunting was fun." He (she) smiled, showing off his (her) gleaming cutters. "All that squealing, and the warm blood on your tongue..."

"You're making me want a doughnut." Sighed Grand's head without much conviction. "Only I can't eat anymore, there is nowhere for food to go."

"Man, that's sad. So you can't eat at all now?" Asked Rusty, catching a bug and popping it in his mouth.

Bells looked at her friends in horror. They appeared to have no care for their predicament, no sign of worry, no relief at being together again.

"If you can't decide, I will decide for you," said the Snow Queen severely. "You deserve to be a monkey, like these lowly creatures." And before anyone could register her intent, she took off her crown, swooped on a langur that happened to sit too close and cut its black cheek, drawing blood.

There was a second of a vacuous silence.

Then the monkey cried a terrible scream of pain, a scream of a child, a child who has been betrayed, and all around the characters collectively inhaled, stunned.

Dracula recovered first. His eyes blazed red, his face contorted into that of a giant bat. "How dare you? How dare you cut one of our own?"

"I'm not going back, I'm not!" Shrieked the queen, hopping into her sleigh. Dracula was upon her, tearing at her cloak. White flakes fluttered up and met those falling from the sky. Only it wasn't snow.

One of them landed on Bells's upturned face. "Paper."

Now they all could hear it. The crackling noises. Noises of ripping paper mingled with raspy wails of doom.

Dracula let go of the queen, gaping upward.

"Mad Tome." Said Bells under her breath. "It's Mad Tome. Something is ripping it to pieces."

Chapter 24. The Unrivaed Curiosity Of Ducks

When your friends are in peril, and you yourself are in peril, and even the villain you have to eliminate is in peril, what do you do? You show peril that you mean business.

Bells set her teeth.

An earsplitting crack slashed through the air. Pieces of pages rained on the badlings' heads, some as big as birds. It was no longer possible to see where they were. The air swarmed with characters and character ghosts from every story imaginable, their pleading faces yawning wide. They were falling from above, no, they were *pouring* down, blotting out the light and shaking the sky with their cries.

Unperturbed, her lips pressed tight, Bells marched up to Hinbad and knocked on his leg. "We need you to fly us out to the duck pond! Can you do that?"

"Huh?" Hinbad blinked his orange eyes. "Why me? What did I do? I didn't do nothing!" He shrunk away, tossing his head from side to side, dodging and ducking.

She pounded him with her fists. "We need to go *now*, Hinbad, or we'll *all* die! Don't you get it?"

"Help! Help!" Screamed the monkeys, climbing on him, jumping off him, running around in circles and tumbling over one another. "We don't want to die!"

"Hinbad, Hussain, Haroun! To me!" Screeched the Roc Mother, to no avail. Her chicks flattened themselves to the ground, jittering as if they were about to be eaten by a cat.

"It's killing us...stop it..." Whined the ghost of Bluebeard, his vaporized wives kneading hands and lamenting in chorus, their gossamer hair and nightgowns fluttering on the breeze.

More ghosts appeared and floated aimlessly like clumps of malformed clouds and sad drifty mists, making the air dank and slimy.

Dracula whooshed off on his black bat wings.

Two of the Snow Queen's horses panicked and broke off from the sleigh, galloping away. She saddled the last one and shot into the papery mess after them.

Grand, Peacock, and Rusty stood gaping around.

One moment Bells saw them, another she lost them from sight, blocked out by the rising Roc birds.

Above it all broke a full-throated roar, creating a momentary pocket of silence. Mad Tome raved and raged and writhed in agony, and its cries of woe acted like a signal for

panic. What was a hullabaloo became mayhem that quickly escalated to an uncontrollable pandemonium.

Desperate screams mixed with bellows and yelps. People and creatures alike boiled on the page like an infestation of lice. The ground shifted and groaned, threatening to split open any moment.

Bells no longer sought a way to get everyone out. She abandoned all notion of acting a hero and stumbled through confusion, calling the names of her friends, her throat sore, her voice breaking.

"Ohhh, they hurt me so." Wailed Mad Tome. "Stop them. Stop them. Make them stop..." Its corner claws sliced through the swirling cumulus of rabble and grazed and scourged and rent and smashed, grabbing at anything and everything that moved.

The moans of characters, the tumult of their dying outcries shook Bells from head to toe. She wavered about, one arm stretched out for balance, another shielding her face from flying debris.

"Grand! Rusty!" She cried. "Peacock!"

The page tilted sharply to the right, throwing off everyone who remained standing into a parting void. If not for Bells's quick reaction, she would've faced the dreadful fate of those around her, falling to their imminent deaths. With a grunt and

agility Bells didn't know she possessed, she leapt for one of Mad Tome's claws and grabbed onto it, dangling like a worm.

Mad Tome seized its thrashing.

"Alice, is that you?" It rustled, peering at her with torn purblind eyes. "Why is your hair black?"

Bells gulped, pulling herself up and over the cover, hesitating to say anything. She dug her nails into leather binding, her heart hammering in her ears, and inched forward, away from the edge.

"Alice, it's as you said. They have betrayed me! After everything I've done for them, after I've risked my existence to hunt for a fresh crop of badlings—as *they* asked me to, mind you—they turned their backs on me. They have brought a terrible menace on me, Alice. You and Don Quixote is all I have left. Find him! Have him skewer them on his spear!" It stared blindly. "They torment me, Alice. Alice?"

Chill clasped Bells's heart.

There was a temporary calm in the turmoil. Disoriented, she didn't dare to look around, focusing on her hold. Her fingers cramped, her knees quivered. She gritted her teeth and blew hair out of her face, unable to wipe it.

"I'm here, Mad Tome." She croaked. "I'm here. I came to...to see how you're doing. Are you doing okay?" Bells blushed, knowing it was the dumbest question to ask, considering

the circumstances, but her scrambled brain wouldn't come up with anything better.

"You must help me chase them off, Alice!" Cried Mad Tome.

"Chase who off?" Asked Bells.

"The ducks!"

Stunned, Bells released her hold for a second. "The *ducks*?"

"They are ripping me, Alice." Mad Tome wrinkled its nebulous face. "They are ripping me apart!" There was a hint of desperation in its voice, an ancient tiredness, as if a burden of cancerous malice relinquished its hold and the book was simply that, a big tome of unread pages, sad and bloated and dying.

Bells buzzed with too many feelings at once: surprise, relief, astonishment, dread, and, strangely, giddiness, giddiness at the absurdity of it all.

"The ducks are ripping you apart?" She repeated. She had to say it aloud, to believe it. "The ducks at the duck pond?"

"Well, where else?"

"Are you kidding?" Bells cracked up, releasing her smorgasbord of emotions into peals of laughter.

"You're not Alice." Said Mad Tome, its dim nostrils flaring. "You're not Alice I know! Who are you? Answer me, before I slash you to bits and chuck you into oblivion!"

Bells twitched, choking on her laughter.

For a petrifying second she saw Mad Tome's face an arm away. It hung over her head like a bank of moiling dust, the one you see on very old books in the farthest corners of a library. Its curves and bends and wrinkles shaped two slanted eyes, one flat sniffing nose, and a huge toothless mouth, a grey papery tongue lolling out of it as if it wanted to lick her off. Everything about its appearance was crumpled, scratched and chewed on. It seemed to hold itself together by paper threads, refusing to disintegrate.

"Badling." It said, sneering. "You came to me yourself, how convenient. Let me show you what happens to stubborn imprudent children like you, you brazen ostentatious *girl*."

The insult slapped Bells in the face. She sucked in air and let it out. A vein throbbed on her temple. "Come on, ducks. Come on. Show this pile of stupid pages—"

"What is that you're saying?"

Forgetting danger, Bells slowly pulled herself to standing, first one leg, then another. The ground held her. Assured, she propped both hands on her hips, raised her chin up, and threw daggers with her eyes at Mad Tome, hoping it felt the heat of her wrath. "I'm saying, you're just a pile of stupid pages."

"Stupid pages, am I?" Rustled Mad Tome.

"No, I'm sorry. I got it wrong." She flipped her ponytail for confidence.

Mad Tome gaped, curious, torn corners of its mouth curling.

"You are a dumb wart on the face of literature." Bells cleared her throat and raised her tone a notch. "You're not even a book, you're a helter-skelter mindlessly put together heap of misplaced story fragments that is shamelessly boasting and bragging about its grandiose importance of making children read more books by dragging those of us who for some reason abandoned one book or the other inside and making us suffer through bits of stories, when in fact it does nothing of the sort. It has, I'm sorry to inform you, a diametrically opposite effect."

Mad Tome stared.

"You have terrified us out of our minds, and we will now avoid these books like a plague." She paused. "Well, maybe not. I kind of liked Bluebeard, actually, as gory as it was."

"I will punish you for this." Wheezed Mad Tome, the surface of its face a net of taut cords. "I will pick the worst, the scariest, the most horrific page of all, and I will put you there for an eternity, to make you suffer until you'd wish you were dead. Only there will be no death for you, I'll see to that. I will make you suffer *forever*."

"I thought most of your pages are gone, torn by the ducks. Aren't they?" Asked Bells. "Unless there are some left?"

"There are a couple." Screeched Mad Tome. "From a horror book."

"Oh, a classic then." Nodded Bells. "My favorite."

Mad Tome bellowed. "It will be filled with torture! With blood! With pain you daren't imagine!" Confusion clouded its eyes. "Aren't you scared?"

"Scared of who? You?" Bells crossed her arms to make them stop from jittering. "You're a book. You're not real. I mean, you made us feel like you're real, but you aren't. You're just a random tome of pages torn out of other books. You don't even have your own story, only bits and pieces of others. That's why you're so lonely and upset. You think that by hurting us you will make yourself feel better, but the only thing you will achieve is make yourself even more miserable."

Mad Tome squinted. "Are you trying to trick me, badling?"

"I'm not." Said Bells. "Look, you're dying. Why don't you let us all out, before the ducks finish you for good? What will that accomplish? That won't make us finish reading books we have started, because we'll be dead." She forced down a lump in her throat, sensing movement.

Mad Tome or, rather, the scraps that remained of it, trembled. Vapor swirled in its eyes, and it looked suspiciously like an onslaught of tears.

Hope flooded Bells. "Listen, Mad Tome. I'm sorry we never read those pages, none of us, badlings. I know in your eyes we deserve punishment for it. It won't make you feel any better.

Why can't you be our friend and send us back to the duck pond? I'm sure we've learned our lesson." She became acutely aware of the silence and the hush of falling paper scraps, as if there was a presence of characters all around and they held their breath.

Mad Tome sagged. "I used to be a book."

"What book?" Asked Bells quietly.

"The book of fables, Aesop's Fables." Said Mad Tome without a trace of malice. "Children read me so often, my pages started falling out, and then one day I found myself an empty cover. Every single one of my pages was gone. So I started searching for them, darting to and fro, but I couldn't find them. The children wouldn't let them go. They'd hide them under their pillows or blankets, and at night they'd read them again, in the dancing flame of a candle."

"Flame of a candle," mumbled Bells. "Sounds like a long time ago."

The fall of the paper stopped, as if listening to the story. Dim shapes hung around the edge of the book, a quiet audience of misty ghosts, hovering tensely around, ready to scatter at the first sign of danger. But there was none.

"Many years have passed since then," sighed Mad Tome. "Times have changed. Children found other things to do, and the pages they left unread, those pages died. I started collecting

them, first a handful, then more and more." For an intense moment it seemed to be recalling better days. "It was hard to stop after that. Hard to...feel empty again. I swore I'd find every badling and punish it." Mad Tome smiled cruelly.

Bells dared to explore some more. "Those other badlings before us, what happened to them? Did they all become characters?" She couldn't stop herself, thinking aloud. "But then, if they did, where did the real characters go?"

Mad Tome swiveled its eyes at her and said suspiciously, "why do you need to know?"

"I...I just..." She faltered.

"You want to trick me to get you out!"

"But you're already dying! The ducks will—"

"The ducks!" Scoffed Mad Tome. "The ducks have found worms and waddled off. I'll make them come back, so they can finish me." A mad light flashed in its eyes. "To finish *you*, you ungrateful selfish brats. You're all the same. You grab a book, flip through it and toss it, like it's an ugly toy. You hurt its characters' feelings. When another child picks it up, they can't perform. They make mistakes and stumble, and guess what happens. The child sets the book aside and becomes a badling!"

Mad Tome jerked, and Bells tumbled.

A long serrated rip deafened her. The Mad Tome's face cracked in two. With a tug and a yank two enormous ducks pulled it apart.

They tilted their heads, blinking, baffled by the strange behavior of a thick leathery thing that smelled like doughnuts but didn't have any doughnuts in it.

They have pulled it out of dirt not too long ago and wrenched it apart, lured by the sweet smell of the crumbs Grand left behind. They pecked the mush of moist paper to smithereens, and now decided to give the cover a try. Ducks are not particularly intelligent, but they are stubborn, and this wiggling brown thing kept their interest, promising edible delight. What if it was a huge flattened worm?

The two ducks clamped its beaks on the opposite ends of the cover and gave it a hearty tug. When the book attempted to crawl back into dirt, they snatched it firmly, heaved it out of the soil, dragged it to the pond, and dunked it into water. If ducks ever feel proud of themselves, this was the moment. They puffed out their chests.

The book squirmed, inadvertently making itself appear more appetizing. All it took was another tug. Mad Tome's ancient binding, already soggy from sitting in the earth for so long and now completely soaked, couldn't withstand the abuse. It gave and fell apart.

Startled, the ducks fluttered off, quacking in distress.

In that same instant the most peculiar sight occurred, something that made the ducks temporarily quackless. Where the scraps of Mad Tome floated in the sludgy water, children emerged. First a couple, then a dozen, and then the entire surface of the pond bubbled like boiling stew, birthing forth dozens of coughing and sputtering and dazed badlings.

"I told you it was a bad idea," quacked the duck that discovered Mad Tome to the duck that pulled it out.

"It looked edible," protested the other duck.

They spoke in a tart ducky language.

"Flee, you dummies!" quacked the others.

And flee they did, beating their wings, rushing to the shore and huddling into a frightened flock on the carpet of yellow maple leaves, next to a pile of four bikes carelessly tossed one on top of another.

Chapter 25. On The Importance Of Doughnuts

The smallest kindnesses (or follies) can bring about the biggest fortunes (or disasters). If Grand didn't feed his doughnut to the ducks, they wouldn't have followed the trail of crumbs, plucked out Mad Tome and minced it, accidentally releasing the badlings. And if Bells didn't chuck the tome, or if Peacock didn't rip Dracula, none of this would've ever happened.

Only it did.

And it wasn't over yet.

Bells sat stock-still in the shallow end of the pond, transfixed and dripping water. She was submerged up to her waist, although her mind hardly registered this fact and the fact that the water was cold and the air was crisp—a perfectly normal air of a sunny September afternoon. It smelled like autumn and musty cattails. The pond was its usual viscous self, if not for a couple dozen stupefied children sitting in it. At the foot of the maple mooched the ducks, casting wary glances at the blank unmoving faces.

The duck that pulled out Mad Tome saw Grand, recognized him and toddled over to the shore, craning its neck and quacking.

Grand blinked. "Um. Is this...our duck pond?"

He pulled out his hand and spread his fingers, gazing at the individual callow-green leaflets of the duckweed stuck to his skin.

"Holy cow." Croaked Peacock. "We're back." He raked fingers through his hair and suddenly stopped, wide-eyed. He pulled a few strands down over his forehead and looked at them, cross-eyed. "My hair, it's my hair. My blue hair." He stuck a thumb in his mouth and felt his teeth, rubbing the tips of the cutters. "I'm not *her* anymore."

"Guys! Guys! Over here!" Rusty energetically drabbled over through the slush, scooping the weed out of the way.

"Rusty!" Cried Bells, jolted by his voice out of her stupor. She was sitting a few paces away, behind a couple dumbstruck children. They stared at her with a vacant expression, one that needed to be uncorked and filled with emotion and memories.

"Bells! No way, man! Are you all right?" He waved. "We thought we lost you!"

"Yeah, I think so. Can this be true?" she spit out weeds and wiped her lips. "I can't believe it. It worked." She blinked, to make sure the pond stayed in place. It did. It wasn't in a hurry to vanish.

"Grand? Peacock?" She wrung out her ponytail and stood. "It worked, Grand, like you said. The ducks did it." Remnants of the

Mad Tome's cover floated nearly. Bells fished them out, wiped off the mud and turned them over. The leather, dark from moisture, peeled off the mushy cardboard and slid apart in her hands. She pressed them to her chest, fording to the shore.

The boys clambered out after her, oozing rivulets of water, their shoes sloshing with every step.

An amazed smile stretched Grand's cheeks. He gingerly patted his head. "My head...My head is back. I think—" He stopped abruptly.

Beside him emerged a petite girl, staring up with such ferocity, she appeared to be bigger than him. She had oval ice-blue eyes and two braids the color of bleached hemp. Her small-boned frame was clad in an old-fashioned ivory frock with tarnished lace and ribbons, wrinkled and smudged with mud. Her lips had a bluish tinge, and yet she didn't shake, didn't even shiver.

"Hello," said Grand uncertainly.

"You," she pressed a contemptuous finger to his chest. "It was your idea. I *told* you I didn't want to come back. Are you deaf, or dumb, or both?" She turned around to gaze at each of them in turn.

Everywhere throughout the pond children started coming to their senses. One by one they trampled out, surrounding Bells and the boys with a gloomy and wet semi-circle. Their steps

produced rhythmic squelching noises, and that sent goose bumps down Grand's back.

"I—I don't understand—" he stammered.

"Of course you don't, dummy." Declared the girl. "None of you do." She regarded the boys then halted her stare on Bells. "You weren't there long enough to understand. Stupid ducks." She reached to the ground, lifted a rock and hurled it at the maple, causing the birds to screech and scatter.

Bells watched this with horror, recognizing herself in this girl, and recognizing the girl.

"Snow Queen?" She asked in a small voice.

"You aren't as dumb as I thought." Hissed the girl. "And I have a name, if you please."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know you have a name," said Bells with mock politeness, thinking that if this little thing insulted her any more, she would deal with her as she usually dealt with Maria, having honed her craft of near-throttling to perfection. "What would it be, if I may ask?"

"My name is Mary," said the girl and raised her chin.

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary," recited Bells automatically.

"Shut up! I forbid you to tease me!" Angry tears welled in Mary's eyes, and Bells blanched at the hurt on her face.

"Hey, Mary? I hope you don't mind me saying so, but I think you're completely and totally off your marbles." Said Peacock,

moving over to Bells and winking at her. "I mean, come on, we saved you guys from Mad Tome, we brought you back, and you're mad at us? Don't you feel the least bit of gratitude?" His conviction fell flat against the sea of somber faces that unnervingly stayed quiet and steadily inched closer.

There were three almost identical looking sisters holding hands, and a gaunt boy with a bloodless face, and a chubby kid next to a tall stout one, his hand stroking under his chin as if smoothing a non-existent beard. One boy sobbed soundlessly, both hands cradling his head as if unable to fathom it was actually there. A cluster of lads on the fringe of the crowd moseyed around on their knuckles, staring at their reflections in the pond. And way back someone attempted to fly, spreading out arms and making flapping motions.

"Can't any of you talk?" Asked Peacock. "I mean, besides Mary."

No answer, only more stares.

"They're insane." He tapped a finger at his temple, turning back to Bells. "You know, cuckoo, crazy, mental?"

Bells beamed. "You're such a moron, Peacock."

"Hey, I missed you too." He snorted, and then added, "I was worried about you. We all were."

"You? *Worried* about me?" Bells's eyebrows went up. "Did I hear you right?"

"Seriously, I'm not kidding. I have this new appreciation for girls." Explained Peacock.

Bells tilted her head. "Oh, do you? Care to share?" It was Peacock's phrase, and she used it to taunt him.

"Yeah, I can't explain it..." he said dreamily, not biting, "it's something about feeling all this stuff, all this worry about *everything*, it drives you nuts, and you want to talk about it, talk and talk and talk, you know, to get rid of it." He checked himself.

Bells had an amused expression on her face. "Go on."

"Enough of this gibberish!" Interrupted Mary. "Or I will have Henry decapitate you!" She pulled the blubbering boy out by the sleeve, yanking one of his arms away from his head. "Go on, Henry. Where is your ax?"

Henry bubbled something incoherent, snot hanging out of his reddish nose.

"If you can't perform your duty when your queen asks you, Louis will do it. He is infinitely more capable than you. Louis!" She raked her eyes over the assembly, singling out the tall kid who stroked his chin. "Louis, do you have your ax on you?"

"Sorry." Mumbled Louis.

"You *left* it? How dare you!"

"What did you expect?" Said the bloodless boy coldly. "Did

you expect us to crawl on our knees and do your every bidding?
Traitor."

Mary gasped, her chin trembling.

The four friends passed an understanding look.

"Um." Said Grand consolingly. "I don't think we need to do this, Mary. I already went through that, it wasn't actually that bad. It made me feel weird, though, holding my own head. I thought I felt ideas move in it."

Rusty, who was meanwhile attempting to pet one of the ducks, leapt up with an open mouth. "Wow, Grand! For real? What was it like?"

"Well, you kind of sense thoughts moving through your mind, like..." He groped for words.

"Like an electrical current." Offered Bells.

Grand lit up. "Yeah. That's it."

"And then you think it will singe you to cinders," continued Bells, inspired, "and fry your brain to a bubbling mush, and then you're afraid it will leak out of your ears and fall on the floor with a hideous plop, and—" She stopped, her heart drumming.

Grand grinned so hard, his cheeks crumped. "That's exactly *it*. Bells, how did you..."

"I just never told you," admitted Bells, casting her eyes down. "I think these thoughts, but I never say them to you guys,

because, well, I'm not supposed to, as a *girl*, to think about horrid bloody things like that."

"Who says?" Exclaimed Rusty. "It's the coolest stuff ever! Bells, you're the best *girl* I know."

Bells blushed. "Really?"

"Whoever says what girls are supposed to or not supposed to do are a bunch of slowwitted dolts, and they can all eat dirt in the duck pond or something," concluded Grand, first the tips of his ears, then his whole face blooming bright magenta.

"Yeah," said Bells slowly, speaking with difficulty through a smile, "something like that."

"Can you tell us more?" Asked Rusty. "What happens to the boiled brain after it flops to the floor? Does it crawl away?"

"You want me to?" Asked Bells breathlessly.

The boys nodded.

"Where are your manners?" Demanded Mary. "Have you forgotten that we're right here? You pay us no regard, you talk about disgusting things as if you were alone. This is exceptionally rude." She haughtily put out a foot, stretching to her full height, which wasn't much. "We shall consult about your punishment." She spun on her heels and called to the children, "follow me. Let's go over there where they can't hear us."

When the soggy sluggish mob departed, halting by the maple on the opposite end of the pond, the children looked at one

another and let out a long anxious exhale. The masks of pretense slid off their faces, giving way to a mix of dread and uncertainty.

"What are we going to do about them?" Asked Bells and sneezed. Her teeth chattered, and she stepped from foot to foot, but it didn't make her any warmer.

"I dunno." Rusty wiped his dripping nose. "Call the police?"

"And tell them that a bunch of children fell out of a book? They won't believe us for a second."

"Right." Agreed Rusty. He plopped down, pulled off his sneakers, and started squeezing the water out of them. It dripped on the grass in thin brown squirts.

"Don't they know their way home?" Wondered Peacock, following Rusty's example. Only Grand stood still and unperturbed like a mountain, healthily pink in the face and showing no signs of being wet and cold.

"Did you see that dress Mary wore?" Rounded Bells on him.

"Um." Grand paused. "Yes."

"Did that look to you like something girls wear now?" Bells passed her eyes over the boys and stopped on Peacock. "Like something I would wear?"

He spread his arms, a sneaker in each hand. "You? But you don't wear dresses."

Bells shot him a look. "Okay, fine, not me, some other girl."

"What the heck, Bells. How would I know? It looked like a normal dress to me."

"It's old, you doofus." She heaved a disappointed sigh. "Very old. Maybe fifty years old, maybe more. I don't know, maybe she is from the last century!"

"Does anyone have any food?" Asked Grand. One of the ducks insolently nipped at his pants, demanding a doughnut.

"I'm going to check my bike." Said Peacock, stepping into his wet shoes and ambling over to the pile of bikes.

"Wait! We're not done talking yet." Bells put hands on her hips, forgetting the pieces of Mad Tome she was holding. They tumbled to the ground.

"What's that?" Rusty picked one up, brushing it off.

"Mad Tome." Said Bells. "Or whatever is left of it."

Peacock dropped his bike and hastened back.

Rusty studied the swollen front cover, turning it in his hands. Empty depressions once filled with golden paint spelled out the title. He traced the letters with his finger. "Aesop's Fables. Wait, it was an actual book?"

"It wasn't lying then," said Bells appreciatively. "It told me what it was, before it died. It said children read it so many

times, it has lost all of its pages and started looking for other ones, dead ones, the ones badlings didn't finish reading."

"Man, that is crazy. We were *inside* this thing." Rusty scratched his head and sniggered. "I still have these urges to climb things, you know? Like, I want to climb this tree right now." He seized up the maple.

Bells rolled her eyes. "You always had these urges, Rusty."

"I sure don't miss being a vampire." Said Peacock, shuddering.

Sharp cries prompted them to look over to the other maple.

A fight broke up in the middle of the crowd. Led by the tall bloodless boy, about half of the children were leaving, pushing their way out. Those on the fringes of the group wove deep into the park already, but a handful struggled against Mary, Louis, and Henry, who held them back. Mary shouted commands left and right, her pallid face scrunched up in fury.

"It appears they are disputing something." Observed Bells. "I wonder what it is."

"Who cares?" Peacock saddled his bike. "Let's get out of here. I never wanted to get home so bad in my life."

Bells stared at him. "We can't just leave them here."

"What do you suggest?"

She twisted her ponytail. "I don't know, but we have to do something."

"We're not responsible for them, Bells, we're not their parents." Reasoned Peacock.

"Don't you worry about them?"

Peacock opened his mouth to retort and stopped, his eyes shining with mirth. "I'm a *boy*, remember? An insensitive irresponsible unfeeling boy."

"And a jerk, too." Snapped Bells.

"And a jerk." Agreed Peacock.

"Dolt. Idiot. Blockhead. Doofus! But mostly an idiot."

Bells sucked in air, and added, "I'm glad you've got to be a girl. How did that feel, by the way?"

A corner of Peacock's mouth crept up and he said, "I liked it. It felt splendid. My very bones were flooded with *worry*."

"Peacock!" Shouted Bells, looking for something to throw at him.

He ducked, miming terror. "Don't beat me, don't beat me!"

"Hey, that's my job." Rusty sniggered, casting a look at Grand, who was preoccupied with looking over the crowd of the children, now silent. He didn't like that silence, and a nagging coldness spread over his gut.

"So you're not mad at me?" Asked Peacock.

"Mad?" Bells snorted. "Not at all. If not for you and your whispering vampire sisters, we wouldn't have done this. It was

insane, yes, but also amazing. Only if we keep standing like this, I will catch a cold." She suppressed a sneeze.

"Maybe there is another book buried somewhere." Said Rusty in one breath. "Want to look?"

"Rusty." Bells clasped her forehead. "I think we've had enough for one day. Besides, we still have to figure out what to do with all those badlings." She gestured back without looking.

"I'd do it again," said Grand slowly, his eyes on the children, "if we had time to prepare properly, pack sleeping bags, snacks, doughnuts..." he trailed off.

"What is it?" Bells turned and froze.

The day was warm for autumn, the sun was high, yet a keen chill crept over the grass. The water in the pond sloshed, furrowing in rows of ripples. The ground throbbed. The ducks fled to the maple with agitated cries. A few yellow leaves seesawed to the ground.

The children stopped arguing and moved toward them, only they weren't children anymore. A thin layer of fog paved their way, swirling in tongues. Grim silence preceded them, and in that silence, a dozen of bent dodderly figures shuffled forth. Time took hold of them, time they have spent in Mad Tome. They looked ancient. There was no rush of air ahead of them, no murmuring, nothing but steady advance.

"Um." Said Grand. "Is this when we run?"

They couldn't, poised on the edge of terror and curiosity.

The elders limped closer. With every step one of them crumbled and disintegrated into dust, until only one old hag was left, her rugose dessicated skin barely holding on to crooked bones, only a pair of ice-blue eyes still young and shining.

Chapter 26. Girls, Books, And Diamonds

To you the last page of a book heralds the end of the story. Not to the characters. The moment you slam the cover shut (or, preferably, gently lay it down), they gather to congratulate themselves on the spectacle well done. "One less badling in the world!" They exclaim, clapping hands, patting shoulders. "One less badling!" They hope whoever reads the story next won't have to taste a badling's fate.

"But...but..." you think. "Mad Tome is gone!" *This* Mad Tome is gone, that's true. And yet...who knows how many more Mad Tomes are out there, lurking in hidden places, waiting for you to find them? They might have varying appearances and different names, but rest assured their purpose is the same: to teach bad children who abandon books a lesson.

But back to the pond.

"Disgusted, are you? Scared? Did not expect me to look like this, did you?" Wheezed Mary through her gaping toothless mouth, a line of spit running down her chin. "This is what will happen to you, badlings." She struggled to say every word, chewing on it, her head shaking so bad, it threatened to unscrew and fall off the thin wiry neck that fastened it to her bony shoulders.

"One day you will forget what you've been through and leave a book unread." She doubled over, racked by a grating cough.

The children watched her claw at her chest, petrified to move or say anything, or even to breathe.

At last she raised her head, and where there was a face before, now papery skin stretched over a skull that wanted to cave in, brittle, weak, and misshapen.

Bells gulped air and let out a long exhale. "What happened to you?" She asked, rubbing the numbness out of her hands, her teeth chattering uncontrollably.

Mary let her jaw drop, but no sound came out.

"Man, they're all gone." Breathed Rusty.

"This is sick," proclaimed Peacock, covering his mouth. "I'm going to be sick." He made to flee, but Grand snatched his arm and held him.

"I could really use a doughnut right now." He muttered, ignoring Peacock's frantic tugging. "A fresh sugar-glazed doughnut and a long nap to forget everything."

Mary took another step, and her legs broke with a hideous snap like that of breaking twigs. Her color faded: she was no more than an image of herself held together by will alone, balancing on stumps.

"Badlings!" she rasped. "How pleasant it is to see you in blood and flesh, when I am no more than a bag of skin and bones.

This happened at your hands. You are the responsible for my torment." Her milky eyes flashed. "You think you have escaped my fate? You are mistaken. Mad Tome will come for you, one way or another. You can count on that. I did not wish to end like this. I wished to live on, in books. You have robbed me of my choice!" With an inhuman effort she curled the bones of her right hand into a semblance of a fist and shook it. "I curse you! I curse you to forever—" Whatever she intended her curse to be, it has never materialized. It was cut short by no other but the most insolent duck of all who lived at the pond, the one who always begged Grand for doughnuts, the one who pulled out Mad Tome.

It waddled over to Mary and nipped her in the leg, or whatever remained of her leg. That was enough to puff her into dust.

The startled duck edged back. Grand picked it up and held it in one arm, petting it protectively.

"Can I?" Croaked Rusty, his eyes as large as saucers.

The duck quacked contently.

"That solves our problem." Said Bells with a voice she didn't know she still possessed. "About what to do with the badlings, I mean."

Peacock stumbled over to the bike pile and retched.

"I think after this I will either read every book I touch or not read them at all," continued Bells, soothed by talking

aloud. "Although I suppose I will have to read books when I study science."

"Right." Agreed Rusty.

"Right." Agreed Grand.

Peacock wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Distant voices floated over from the alley hidden between the line of maples and the park's fence.

Bells jolted. "Someone is coming."

"Crap." Rusty hurried to his bike. "We better get out of here."

They all gazed at the trail of shredded rotting clothes that indicated the passage of the dead badlings from the maple across to their feet. They could be mistaken for rags, they hardly looked like clothes anymore, thinning out and blown apart by the breeze, thread by thread.

"Most excellent idea, Rusty." Said Peacock, saddling his ten-speeder. "Come on, guys, let's get out of this madness, or my stomach will explode."

The voices in the alley turned toward the pond, joined by a pair of footfalls crunching on the gravel.

In a flash Bells, Grand, and Rusty hopped on their bikes and sped off, furiously pedaling after Peacock.

Clearly disappointed by such swift departure and lack of doughnuts, the ducks loudly quacked in their wake, but the children were too far to hear.

Bells broke out to be the first, ignoring the path, racing straight out across the lawn and veering into the asphalt road that led out of the park. Sensing the boys lagging, she slammed on the breaks and skidded, misjudging her speed. The bike bucked from under her and she fell headlong, scraping her knees and hands bloody. The boys squealed to a stop next to her.

"Bells! Are you all right?" Asked Grand worryingly.

She sat up, panting, her heart drumming, a sunny grin spreading over her face. "Never been better. Feeling alive and whole, you know?" She picked out a tiny rock from her palm and licked it.

"Hey!" Protested Rusty. "You told me licking blood is gross!"

"Sorry. I was wrong." She said, eyes shining.

"Tastes kind of salty, doesn't it?" Peacock stretched out his hand to help her. So did Grand.

Bells pretended to linger, and then gripped Grand's forearm with both hands, heaving herself up. His already red face colored scarlet, making him look like a ripe sweaty tomato.

"Thank you, George," said Bells politely.

"Um." Grand's face blazed as if it was about to melt off. "You're always welcome, *Belladonna*." He blinked and slapped a hand over his mouth, mortified.

Rusty sniggered.

Peacock quickly snatched his hand away and busied himself with lifting his bike and adjusting the seat that got crooked.

"I think I'm starting to like it, actually." Said Bells, remembering how Blackey pronounced her name, with reverence and style. "Belladonna. Doesn't sound so bad, does it?"

"I like it." Said Grand softly. "It's very...queenly. It fits you."

"Does it?" Bells stretched tall, hands on the handlebars, back straight, chin high. She gazed at the gap between the trees ahead, the place where the park ended and the street began. It milled with people, cars, and muffled city noises.

"Shall we?"

"I thought," began Grand, "I thought you didn't want to go back home? I mean..." he held on to his bike to stop his hands from trembling, "you can hang out at my house for a while, if you want to. My mom is working today, and my brothers are with my auntie for the rest of the—" The idea of spending an afternoon alone with Bells struck Grand speechless, and his words fell short.

"We can all hang out together." Blurted Peacock.

"I can't, I have to help grandma walk the dogs." Sighed Rusty. "Can I stop by later?"

"Yeah, can I come later too?" Asked Bells. "I have to show my mom something first. Would that be okay?" She felt her bulging pocket, a terrific feeling of pride flooding her from the tips of her toes all the way up to her ears and even higher.

"Sure." Grand shrugged and heaved himself over the saddle, pushing at the pedal to roll it up. "I have doughnuts," he added hopefully.

Bells's eyebrows went up. "Doughnuts sound good. I like doughnuts, especially the old-fashioned ones. They're thicker, denser and more buttery, so when you bite in, the dough just—"

"Will you stop talking about food?" Snapped Peacock. "I'm feeling queasy."

"Hey, chill." Warned Rusty. "Or I'll shove an open book in your face, make you start reading it, and then run off with it. How about that one about vampires," he demonstratively scratched his head, "what's it called again?"

Peacock paled. "It's not funny."

Rusty sniggered embarrassingly. "Relax, man, I didn't mean it. All cool. I was scared too."

"We all were." Said Bells.

Three pairs of eyes contemplated Peacock.

He mussed his hair. "Sorry. *Sorry*. Go ahead and say it. Duncie, dolt, doofus, or whatever."

"You're not going to chicken out on me, are you?" Demanded Bells.

Peacock looked up, puzzled.

"You have a rare chance of proving yourself worthy," she said melodically. "My offer still stands. We're jumping off the roof of that abandoned house tonight, and I will *beat* you."

"Is that a challenge?"

"What does that sound like?"

Peacock smirked, relieved. "Okay, I'm in. I guess I'll see you guys later." And with that he was off.

"I have to go too." Rusty waved at them, the tires of his bike swishing on the road.

Bells inhaled a lungful and turned to Grand. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck." He mumbled.

Bells mounted her bike, acutely aware of Grand keeping pace with her, until it was time for her to break off into the side road. Another couple minutes, and she was dropping her bike in the garage and breathlessly mounting the steps inside her house, listening for any movement or noise. Her mother's car was still parked outside, and that meant that both her and Maria were home.

"How much time has passed?" Wondered Bells, frowning. It appeared as though no time has passed at all, save for maybe an hour of her pedaling to the duck pond, then talking to the badlings and to Mary, and pedaling back.

She tiptoed from floorboard to floorboard, avoiding those that creaked, and stepped into the kitchen to grab a glass of water before venturing to her room. Bells reached for the handle of the cupboard when something sighed behind her. Startled, she jumped, spinning around, fully expecting to see someone dead and rotting clamoring for her. It was none of those things.

It was her mother.

Catarina sat slumped in the chair, a wadded napkin in her hands, her eyes rimmed red, two lines of smudged mascara tracing both of her cheeks, her face puffy.

"Mom?" Said Bells, staggering back.

"Belladonna." Catarina's voice caught at the end. "Bells." She corrected herself.

"Were you crying?" Shocked, Bells didn't know what else to say. Her mother never cried, not even when her father left them.

"The choir practice—"

"I'm not going." Declared Bells. "Not now, not ever. And you can't make me."

Catarina only shook her head.

Heart pounding in Bells's ears, she shoved her hand into her pocket and slammed a handful of stones on the kitchen table, smudging the pristinely white, starched and ironed tablecloth (the pride of her mother) with flecks of dirt. She made sure to wipe her fingers on it before letting go, leaving greyish traces on the intricate needlework, the untouchable Spanish family heirloom her mother cherished and screamed at her and Maria every time they spilled something on it.

It gave Bells an immense satisfaction to watch her mother's face contort with disgust.

"What is this?" She asked.

"It's what you wanted." Said Bells, her lips trembling.

Catarina picked up a stone and turned it in her hands, squinting at it. Then she gasped, recognition flooding her face.

"It's payment." Said Bells levelly. "So you won't ever make me go to any more ridiculous classes. I'm going to study science, and this is my payment for you to leave me alone. I suppose this should cover rent and bills and even college."

Catarina stared open-mouthed. In her hands glittered dully a handful of raw diamonds, each the size of a quail's egg, some a bit bigger, some smaller.

"Where did you get this?" She asked.

"I dug it up." Said Bells proudly.

"Where?"

Bells wanted to say, "by the duck pond," and held her tongue. "Does it matter? I didn't steal it from anyone, don't worry. At least, not from anyone real, that is. And there is plenty more where this came from, only I won't be able to visit that place again, so...is this going to be enough?"

Catarina struggled to find her voice.

"See?" Continued Bells, riding the steam of her sense of injustice while it lasted, afraid it would ebb as soon as her mother spoke. "I didn't crawl back asking you for money, I brought you money. How is that for a *poor scientist*?"

Catarina dabbed the napkin at her eyes, carefully placed the diamonds on the table, and stood, towering over her daughter. "Belladonna Monterey." She began.

Bells rolled her eyes.

"You will have to explain this. Precious gems like these don't just lie around in the dirt."

"Yes, they do." Protested Bells, feeling she was going to lose this match. She simply had no more strength left in her to fight, not after somersaulting through ten stories and facing death countless times.

There was no stopping Catarina now. "Where exactly did you find them? I must explain to you how this works. They don't belong to you, Belladonna. It doesn't matter that you have found

them. They belong to whoever owns the property. Do you understand?"

But Bells was done. Her eyes itching, she spun around and stormed out of the kitchen, leaping up the stairs two at a time.

"Belladonna, come back this instant!"

She answered with a slam of the door.

"What are you doing here?"

Maria looked up from a book, her face tearstained.

"Get out of my room. Now." Bells shook, barely having control of her mouth. "I want to be alone."

"I'm grounded." Said Maria, and sniffled tragically, wiping her face with the hem of her pink gaudy dress skirt.

"You're disgusting." Said Bells.

"And you're dirty." Retorted Maria. "Mom will scold you for this." She pointed to Bells's bloodied knees and hands.

Bells cracked open the door and pointed. "Now."

Maria scowled. "I don't want to be all alone in my room." She said it in such a pleading voice, that Bells softened. A thought passed her mind. "Wait. Why aren't you at the choir practice?"

"I told you, I'm grounded."

"Why? What did you do?"

Maria played with her skirt hem before finally answering. "I didn't want to go without you."

"Oh." Fury whooshed out of Bells and she leaned in the doorway. "You didn't?"

Maria shook her head. "I'm to sit inside all day and read this stupid book, and I don't want to. You always read to me. Why do I have to read it?" She slapped the page she was on and pushed the book away.

"Wait! Don't." Bells flew to her, glancing at the cover. "The Snow Queen." The queen looked out at Bells with her icy blue eyes, a sinister smile frozen on her beautiful arrogant face, as if she was laughing.

Bells's stomach lurched. "Let me finish reading it to you." She offered Maria. "What page did we stop on, do you remember?"

"I don't want to." Said Maria petulantly. "It's a dumb story anyway."

"No, it's not. How do you know?"

"What's going on here?" Catarina stood in the door, composed and ready to hand out a doze of parenting at her fighting daughters.

"Belladonna is being mean to me." Said Maria petulantly, glaring at her sister from under downcast brows.

"No, I'm not. How am I being mean? I offered to read you a book!" Cried Bells, suppressing the urge to lunge at her sister and throttle her.

"And I said, I don't want you to." Maria kicked the book out of Bells's hands with her foot, sending both the book and her pink patent leather ballet flat flying.

"Don't do this!" Screamed Bells.

"I'll do what I want! It's my book!" Shrieked Maria, jumping up and seizing it before Bells could, Catarina's hand preventing her from moving.

"Let go!" Bells tried to wiggle out of her mother's hold.

"You have to stop teasing your little sister." Said Catarina sternly. "What kind of an example are you showing her, Belladonna? Think about that."

Maria showed Bells the tongue, flipped the book open and tore out a page.

"Maria!" Catarina released her grip and marched to Maria who pressed her lips into a line and proceeded ripping out page after page, sending them flying, multiple faces of the Snow Queen regarding Bells from every angle.

"NO!!!" The cry broke from Bells's throat, reverberating around her room. She slid to the floor, hands on her face in horror.

Naturally, you're wondering what happened next. Of course, it was as expected. Only I can't tell you about it, because it's a whole different story that belongs in a different book.

This story has ended.

Congratulations, you made it to the end!

You're not a badling after all!

Isn't it a great feeling? Now, be a good sport, close this book, and go read another. But remember to finish it, okay? You know what will happen if you don't.

Mentioned books (you better read them all):

1. The Snow Queen by Hans Christian Andersen
2. Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes
3. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll
4. The Masque of the Red Death by Edgar Allan Poe
5. Bluebeard by Charles Perrault
6. The Headless Horseman by Mayne Reid
7. The Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor by Unknown
8. The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen by Rudolf Erich Raspe
9. The Little Black Hen by Antony Pogorelsky
10. Hansel and Gretel by Brothers Grimm
11. The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett
12. The Dwarf's Nose by Wilhelm Hauff
13. Dracula by Bram Stoker
14. The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling
15. Aesop's Fables by Aesop