

The Princess and the Peas

Alyssa Day

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by Alyssa Day

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived a princess in a tiny kingdom known as Elvania. The kingdom's exact location is long lost in the mists of time; some say it became part of France, while others claim it for Switzerland. The Swiss claim has more merit, perhaps, as the precedent of impartial and wintry-cold neutrality has sometimes been a guiding tenet of that people. All agree that the princess claimed a lovely view of the waters of what is now called Lake Geneva from her turret bedroom.

Not that she cared much for views. Or lakes. Or anything at all, in fact, other than her single-minded, unswerving quest for the perfect husband.

This is her story. (Except where it isn't.)

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“Lucinda!” The dulcet shrieks of Her-Royal-Pain-In-The-Nether-Regions rang through Lucy's skull like a trumpet blown by a particularly incompetent musician. She shot up out of her narrow bed, clutching the threadbare quilt to her chest, blinking stupidly, wondering what was on fire.

With any luck, *she* was. *She* being Princess Margarita Gloriana Dolores Tresor Montague. Glory to her friends—not that she had any. Lady, mistress, and personal hell to Lucinda since the two of them had been ten years old.

When the cry didn't repeat itself, Lucy closed her eyes and started to sink back into her lumpy mattress, hoping that it had been a nightmare. Maybe she could fall back into that

inexplicably tingly dream, although it was curious that Ian, his dark eyes flashing, had been riding his horse through the main hall, coming to get her. Since when did she dream of Ian?

More to the point, since when did *any* dream leave her feeling quite so . . . breathless?

She repressed that line of inquiry and opened a single eye. The glimmers of pink light edging through her narrow window told her that it could be no more than an hour since the princess had finally (*finally!*) pronounced herself pleased enough with the preparations so that Lucy could crawl off to her room—the tiny chamber adjacent to Glory’s own—and catch at least a few short hours of sleep before the guests arrived.

More stinking royalty.

If Lucy lived through the week, it would be a miracle. Why couldn’t she be a cook or a scullery maid or even a laundress? Surely slaving away in the hot kitchens or over the clothes boiling away in the pots must be a stroll in the gardens compared to dancing attendance on the spoiled brat of a princess.

Never mind. It didn’t matter. Sleep. Lovely, blessed sleep. Just a few hours, and then a strong mug or three of hot tea, and—

“Lucinda! Get in here right this minute, you lazy girl! We forgot the peas!”

Lucy startled awake with a jerk and slammed her head so hard into the stone wall that she was sure to have a goose egg on her skull in a matter of hours. Not to mention the headache. She gritted her teeth, threw her legs over the side of the bed and stood up, swaying a little with dizziness from the pain in her head.

“I. Am. Coming. You. Horrible. Monster,” she gritted out under her breath. Then, louder: “Coming, my lady.”

She didn't bother to put a spritely tone in her voice. Glory wouldn't have believed it anyway. The last time Lucy had sounded spritely, it had been the day she'd left a very wet and slimy toad in Glory's bed. She grinned at the memory but then sighed.

Sad to live on the memory of a childish rebellion that had happened nearly eleven years ago.

Lucy stumbled into Glory's room, taken aback as always at the virulent pinkness of it. Wall hangings, rugs, bed coverlets, and even Glory herself, were all a vision in nauseating pink. And rose. And red-tinged violet. It was like walking into the inside of a sow's stomach.

She rubbed her eyes again, hoping it would go away. It didn't. It never did.

"What are you talking about, Glory? What peas?"

"That's Your Highness," Glory snapped. "Or Milady. At least while our guests are here. I can't have it thought that I allow the serving wenches to address me with such familiarity."

"Serving wenches? *Serving wenches*? Whose shoulder have you cried on more times than either of us can count? Whose bed did you climb into for safety and comfort whenever there was a thunderstorm—and that up until you were fifteen years old?" Lucy asked with what she thought was admirable calm. "Mayhap you should rethink that term, or I'll find out if Magda can come help you this week."

Glory gasped at the idea of the pig keeper as her personal servant. "Magda? She hasn't bathed in months. You must be joking. Don't forget that you owe me—"

"I owe you nothing," Lucy said flatly. "I've spent the past eleven years working far and above the value of my keep, in spite of the promise your mother made to mine. I turn twenty-one in three days and am only staying this week as a favor to the Glory I once loved as a sister."

Glory had the grace to look abashed, but only for a span of seconds. “You know you cannot leave me, twenty-one or no. There is no place for you to go.”

“There is the world, Glory. There is the world. Or do you forget?” Lucy waved her arm and the scattered pillows, clothes, and assorted frippery covering every inch of Glory’s floor flew gracefully to their assigned places in trunks and the wardrobe.

“Now. What peas?”

# # #

“Oh, sure. You had to ask. ‘What peas?’ Addlepatet twit,” Lucy muttered sourly as she slammed the final mattress down onto its gilded wooden frame with a thump. For the past hour and a half, she’d stomped up and down the corridor, crawling under mattresses in the guest chambers to deposit a single pea-sized iron pellet underneath each one. Finally she’d come to the royal chamber, kept free for visiting princes or Fae lords, and deposited the last pea. Now she was done.

Of course it had to be iron. Her magic didn’t work on iron or the chore would have been done in a matter of moments. That was why she was here in the first place, according to Glory. To hide the tiny bits of iron that would block the Fae from working magic in their rooms during the treaty negotiations.

Fae magic did not work well in the presence of iron, either. Still, something about Glory’s reasoning seemed unsound to Lucy’s exhausted mind. After all, iron’s properties or no, Lucy knew there was no chance that she was even the slightest bit Fae. She repressed the desire to touch the very round, very non-pointed tip of her ear for reassurance. She claimed a bit of the old forest magic, mayhap, but never Fae.

She turned toward the door, longing for her bed more than ever, and attempted to brush some of the under-bed dust from her night shift. She needed to speak to the housekeeper about the lack of cleaning. No. It was no longer her concern.

“Like any of the elvish slugs are going to notice, anyway,” she said to the empty room. “This is the stupidest idea—”

“Elvish slugs, hmm? I was unaware my race boasted that particular member.” The voice was sensuality turned to music; teasing, hypnotic, and pitched exactly right to make Lucy feel warm in places a man’s voice had no business warming.

Fortunately, such tricks had no effect on her.

She gave a slight effort to wiping the scowl from her face before she looked up, but the sight of him brought her scowl back in full measure. The Fae lord was beautiful, of course. They all were. A few inches taller than most human men. Silvery hair shimmering in a fall of moon-kissed silk to his waist. Long, lean muscles. Eyes the blue of the sky reflected in ice.

Ice to Ian’s fire. Wait. What? Ian? She narrowed her eyes at the thought of the man who seemed to be popping into her mind with a growing frequency, and returned her attention to the man who was actually in the room with her.

Yep. He was an elf. She couldn’t bear the sight of them. Pompous Fae with their overblown sense of importance. This one would be worse than most, since he wore the green and gold of the High House of the Seelie Court.

“Rugs. I said, ‘too bad we don’t have any elvish rugs,’” she said quickly, although she didn’t exactly add the “milord.” It would be bad form to start a fight with one of the visiting princes on the very first day of the treaty renewal meetings, but truly a girl could only put up with so much.

He leaned against the doorway, effectively blocking her escape, and folded his arms across his chest.

“Yes,” he drawled, sweeping a leisurely glance from her head to her toes. “We of the Seelie Court are known for our . . . rugs.”

“I—”

“Are you a gift to me? If so, I know not whether to be honored by my host’s graciousness at giving me such a beauty or insulted that he would send such a filthy hoyden to my bed.”

Lucy gasped at his effrontery. “You *insufferable* . . . you . . . you—insufferable...”

“Yes, insufferable. I believe we’ve established that,” he said dryly. “Or do you expect me to believe you have framed yourself before the fire in such a manner that your gown is nearly transparent merely by accident?”

Her face flushed so hot that she knew it must have turned bright red, which contrasted hideously with her dark red hair. Not that she cared what this pompous ass thought of her. She took a deep breath, twirled her hand in a semi-circle, and the room was plunged into darkness as the fire extinguished itself.

“There. Now you can see nothing.”

“Oh, so you wish to be alone in the dark with me?” Amusement shimmered in his voice as he took a step toward her.

“In your dreams, milord Pointy Ears,” she snapped. “Get out of my way or I’ll make those flames spark to life again, but this time in your trousers.”

He paused for a beat, probably thinking of ways to order her tortured in the palace dungeons, but he surprised her: he threw back his head and laughed. Still laughing, he bowed

and moved away from the doorway. “As you wish, milady, in spite of your obvious fascination with my . . . trousers. But you will at least surrender your name to me for my trouble.”

She raced past him, pausing only once she’d reached the safety of the corridor. “Of course. My name is Magda.”

###

Rhys na Garanwyn, high prince of the High House of the Seelie Court, stood staring after the lass as she raced down the corridor away from him. Human, surely. Perhaps with a touch of simple magic. But he’d sensed nothing in her that should have allowed her to resist him so defiantly. Humans were drawn to the Fae like dragons to jewels; irresistibly and inexorably.

Yet this one scorned his attention, even when he’d opened his senses to her and infused his voice with a bit of enchantment. She should have been on her knees, begging for his touch. The idea, oddly, held a slight repugnance. She was beautiful and she’d been half-undressed, but there was no sexual appeal for him there. More an inexplicable fondness, which made him wonder if some previously unencountered spellcraft were involved.

The sound of tramping feet interrupted his mental wanderings and he took a deep breath, banishing all thoughts of the impudent Magda. He’d find her tomorrow, perhaps. Or request her company as a guest-gift from his host. Entering his chamber and pushing the door closed behind him, he smiled.

This treaty renewal might prove to be far more fascinating than any in the past six hundred years.

###

*Evening, the next day*

Lucy trailed down the staircase behind Glory, muttering dire and mostly impotent threats under her breath as she tried not to trip over the gown she hadn't wanted to wear. Glory had decided that she needed a lady to serve her personally at all banquets during the week, since she'd heard that the elven ladies indulged themselves in such a manner. Of course, only Lucy would do.

She'd won the battle against the pink dress, at least. After a long and painful argument (which had included much brush-hurling and foot-stomping on Glory's part), Lucy had come up with one perfect, irrefutable point: if she, Lucy, wore pink, it would take some of the focus away from Glory's own marvelously beautiful pink-clad self.

Glory's anger had transformed magically into an expression of thoughtful consideration. Then she'd turned toward her wardrobe, bent to yank something from the floor in the back, and pulled out one of the most beautiful gowns Lucy had ever seen. The emerald silk of the bodice and skirt draped richly over an underskirt of sheerest gold. Delicate golden beads—which appeared to be formed of actual gold—shimmered at the neckline and sleeves.

Lucy had caught her breath at the wave of utter longing that swept through her at the sight of it. Then she'd flatly refused to wear it.

“No. Not a chance. Those are the High House colors, so the gown must have been a gift. You know how political those elves are. If I wear it, it will send a very insulting message, and they probably invented the phrase ‘kill the messenger.’ No. Absolutely not.”

Well. *That* had gone well. Now here she was, wearing the gown that would be the death of her, her hair done up in a ridiculous tangle of curls, and her mother's silver ring on a chain around her neck. Add in the oversized embroidered slippers (Glory's castoffs) and she looked

exactly like a child playing dress up. She yanked the skirt up from around her toes and wondered how many bones she'd break when she went tumbling down the stairs, head over heels.

Without warning though, a surge of heat flashed through Lucy's nerve endings, shutting down her internal complaints and heightening her senses. The triple heralds of warning, danger, and threat trumpeted through her mind. She snapped up her head and scanned the area, only to see Glory's profusion of pink ruffles blocking her view of all but the livery of one of the palace guards.

"Milady." The deep voice was respectful, as Ian—for surely it was he, no other mere human had that delicious voice—bowed to Glory. The princess ignored him completely, of course, and swept on down the stairs, leaving Lucy standing there staring at Ian like a fool, with a handful of skirt and a mind full of very naughty thoughts.

Ian's mouth curved in an admiring smile and heat flared in his dark eyes.

"Lady Lucinda, you are more beautiful than a verdant summer day in that gown. It matches the emerald of your eyes," he said, his voice a little rougher than usual.

Lucy blushed, then scowled, then nearly tripped over the hem of her dress. "Have you been at the ale already, Ian? This infernal gown will probably get me killed, when the house which gifted it to Glor—um, the *princess*—sees me in it. Elves are not known for their tolerance." She blinked, suddenly remembering his words. "And since when do you call me anything but Lucy?"

Ian flattened his mouth into a thin line, and a muscle clenched in his jaw. "I thought to compete with the damned Fae Lords and their penchant for flattering words and poesy. Evidently a mere guardsman has no such hope. If you have need of me, send word. It will be no easy task to get through me to you, Fae or no."

His gaze dropped for an instant to her absurdly low bodice, then returned to her face. In that instant Ian, whom she'd known for nearly all of her life, transformed into a stranger.

A hard and dangerous stranger.

A faint, uncontrollable shudder ran through her as his eyes narrowed.

"If the princess or her father believe they will use you as a bargaining tool, they are sadly mistaken," he said flatly, menace icing his words.

Lucy gasped and scanned the stairs, relieved to find that Glory had moved much further ahead. "Watch what you say, Ian! You are dangerously near to speaking treason."

He stepped closer to her and caught her chin in his hand, tilting it up so that his face was mere inches from hers. "Treason is the very least of what I would dare to protect you, Lucy. Remember that. Two days until you are twenty-one, milady. Two days. And then I am coming for you, no matter how many elven princes stand in my way. You are mine."

Lucy stood, frozen in shock, as he pressed a brief kiss to her lips and then released her.

"Two days," he repeated, before bowing and resuming his journey up the stairs.

Lucy touched her lips with trembling fingers, wondering how such a slight touch could cause flame to sear through her body. She turned to watch his broad-shouldered, muscular form climbing the stairs and shivered.

Ian was King Padraic's captain of the guard, and all knew he had earned the post. He was easily the king's best warrior, best leader, best . . . everything. To hear him speak words of treason—*on her behalf*—it was too much to comprehend.

But she could still taste his lips on her own.

"Lucinda!" Glory's shriek echoed off the stone walls and through Lucy's skull. "Get down here now!"

Grabbing a fistful of her skirt in either hand, Lucy took a deep breath and resumed her descent. Two days, he'd said.

Much could happen in two days. And, considering she'd be following Glory around the entire time, probably none of it would be good.

###

The dining hall was a scene of utter chaos, and Lucy nearly ran over Glory, who'd stopped dead at the threshold. Fae lords stood nearly nose to nose with the lords of the court and members of the palace guard, and all of them were engaged in shouting matches. At the high table, the king sat blinking in disbelief or—more likely at this late hour—sheer drunkenness.

“Glory, I think maybe we should return to our rooms. This looks as if it could go very badly, and I fear for your safety,” Lucy said, speaking loudly so that Glory could hear her over the cacophony.

“Very good idea, your highness,” Ian said, suddenly appearing at their side. Only now he held a very sharp and deadly sword loose and ready in his hand. “I would feel much better if you were both to retire before these . . . debates . . . get further out of hand.”

Glory tossed her head and flashed her most dazzling smile. Lucy had seen human lords, princes, and kings hypnotized by that smile. Even the lesser Fae lords were not immune to Glory's beauty when she chose to employ it.

Ian, however, never even blinked. “*Now*, my ladies.”

Glory somehow looked down her nose at him, though Ian stood several handspans taller than she. “I recommend you consider to whom you are speaking, guardsman.”

“If I had not considered that, Princess, I would have thrown you over my shoulder and carried you upstairs before you could endanger yourself and the lady Lucinda,” Ian said evenly.

Lucy's eyes widened, expecting Glory to throw one of her legendary tantrums, but to her surprise the princess only laughed. "Oh, there is no danger to me. This is the night I am to be engaged to wed," Glory said, almost absently, her gaze sweeping the room.

"What?" Lucy caught Glory's arm. "What? You did not tell me! Who is it?"

Glory shook her arm free, then smoothed down her skirts. "I don't know yet, of course. Come help me find out who had the most difficult time sleeping last night on those horribly lumpy mattresses."

Her laughter tinkling like the sound of tiny bells, Glory lifted her chin and floated into the room like the delicate flower she had never, ever been.

"Oh, no," Lucy moaned. "The peas. This is going to be really, really bad." Casting an apologetic glance his way, she raised the skirt of her dress and hurried after the princess.

# # #

Ian wanted to break something. Or someone. His eyes narrowed as he caught sight of one of the fanciest of the elven lords staring at Lucy.

Oh, yeah. He definitely wanted to break *someone*.

The Fae prince was dressed all in green and gold, signifying that he was the highest of the treaty lords here to negotiate. Elvania's neutrality had long made it the perfect site for the renewal of treaty agreements between the various Fae factions. They came, they ate everything in sight, they ran through serving maids as if women existed only to give them pleasure, and then they departed for another year; if not pleased than at least content. From the look of things as they stood now, *pleased* wasn't on the table, and *content* wasn't looking very good, either. But if one of the lordlings thought he'd sample the pleasures Lucy might have to offer, Ian had a sharp objection to make. He grinned and glanced at the honed steel of his blade.

A *very* sharp objection.

If he could keep his mind off how Lucy would look in his bed, that lush dark red hair spread across his pillow, those lovely breasts uncovered for his hands and mouth to touch and taste.

Or how she would look when he wed her, with flowers in her hair and his ring on her finger.

She was his, as he'd reminded her, and that meant his to protect in this madness. Ian tightened his grip on the sword and shouldered his way through the battling lordlings after Lucy. Although she'd easily slipped through the crowd, he took a certain grim pleasure in shoving his way through to the king's table. One of the Fae lords Ian elbowed out of the way drew his dagger halfway out of its sheath, but a look at Ian's face seemed to give the elf pause. A true Fae would never back down from a fight, but of course a fight could be avoided. The lordling suddenly seemed to find something on the opposite side of the room to be fascinating.

Just as Ian reached the single step leading to the king's table, the princess's sharp, clear tone cut through the room. "I beg your pardon, my lords and ladies," she said with an arrogance that made it clear that—in spite of her words--she *would* never and *had* never begged anyone's pardon, ever. The room fell silent as everyone turned to face her. "I understand there was some problem with your rooms?"

# # #

Not without admiration, Rhys watched the deceitful little princess pose her deceitful little question. Some problem with the rooms, indeed. Of course he'd found the iron pellet the moment he'd stepped into the very grand and overdone room assigned to him; of all the myths

surrounding the Fae, *that* one was true. The higher-born the Fae, the more critically sensitive to iron.

Great power always seemed to come with great weaknesses, which seemed to Rhys to itself be a weakness in the basic ordering of things. Not that he'd ever voice such a supposition. To admit to even the slightest touch of philosophical thought would ruin his calculated image of languid boredom.

To that end, he adjusted one of his jade-green lapels, yawned, and then raised one eyebrow. "Problem?"

A faint look of disgust moved across the princess's face so quickly that another, lesser being might have believed he'd imagined it. Rhys knew better. This reaction to his affected pose was exactly as it should be.

As the room erupted in complaint, all to do with the iron placed under the mattresses and accusations of conspiracy, he wondered why such a reaction bothered him for the first time in centuries.

But he was far too brutally honest with himself to pretend he didn't know the answer.

It was *her*. The wench from the night before, standing a step behind Princess Glory. Wearing his house colors, as though she belonged to him. He drew in a sharp breath as he realized the feeling he had at the thought was one of smug satisfaction. For a woman with such fire to belong to him . . . to be his friend.

*Friend?*

The wench—what was her name? Magda?—focused intently on an approaching guardsman, a man of prowess and sure strength, from the look of him.

*Friend? What was happening to him?*

He shook his head free of the unusual thoughts. It was irrelevant, in any case. She was taken. Her heart was involved. Once, that might have made it a challenge. Now, he was merely resigned. What purpose to weave forgetfulness over true love for a brief time of . . . friendship?

He gave in to the impulse. Some mental imperative all but demanded he claim her friendship. Thus, he must destroy any possibility of it.

“Let us dispense with the charade, shall we, your highness?” Rhys called to the king, his voice cutting easily through the bickering. “Your daughter has broken the treaty by her use of as, no doubt, part of her childish quest to find a powerful Fae husband. The penalty is death or enslavement. I see no reason to execute such a lovely, if empty-headed, wench, so the princess will come to my bed until such time as I grow tired of her.”

Glory shrieked and all of the color drained out of her face as her drunken sop of a father tried to pull himself to his feet, spluttering and blustering. A shocked silence fell over the rest of the room. Idly, Rhys noticed that the warrior—the guardsman—held his blade at the ready as he stood at battle stance, protecting the princess.

But Rhys was uninterested in any of their reactions. He focused his attention on the only woman in the room who held the slightest interest for him.

Her face too, was pale as death, but her eyes flashed deadly defiance. “You will not have her, my lord,” she said clearly. “At least not while I live.”

As she lifted her hands into the air, preparing to work some form of magic to protect the princess, a flash of silver at her throat caught his attention. It couldn’t be.

It *couldn’t* be.

Quicker than thought, he was across the room and bending toward her, catching the silver ring she wore on a chain in his hand. “What is this? Where did you get it?” he demanded.

“Release her or die,” the guardsman all but snarled at him, his sword raised in a lightning-quick motion to Rhys’s neck. “In fact I may kill you anyway, for daring to touch her.”

Rhys knew a moment’s amusement and looked into the man’s furious grey eyes.

“Negotiating, then, is not your skill, one can assume?”

“Release her or die,” the man repeated, pressing harder.

The excruciating pain of steel cutting into his throat barely distracted Rhys as he lost interest in the mortal’s nonsense and stared down at the girl again. “Where did you get it?” he asked, daring her to lie. Staring down into her dark green eyes.

Her oh-so-familiar dark green and slightly tilted eyes.

His own eyes. His sister’s eyes.

“You’re her child,” he breathed. “My sister’s child.”

Her eyes widened, and she began to shake her head *no*, but he’d had enough of guesswork and supposition. He dropped the ring and caught her face in his hands, then touched his forehead to her own. The immediate family bond flared to life with almost painful intensity.

She *was* his own, and suddenly his aversion to anything but her friendship became poignantly clear.

“You’re my niece,” he said, almost laughing with the first unfettered joy he’d felt in the three hundred years since his sister had disappeared. “You’re my family.”

She looked up at him, blinking. Dazed. “I . . . I know,” she said. “Somehow, I know.” She turned to glance at the guardsman who still held a sword to Rhys’s throat. “Don’t hurt him, Ian. He’s my . . . uncle.”

Ian slowly lowered his sword, clearly not understanding and just as clearly unwilling to trust the woman he loved to Rhys and his claims of family.

“Ah, and that is another matter,” Rhys said, drawing himself up to his full and quite considerable height. “You are not nearly good enough for my niece.”

In the space of a unicorn’s heartbeat, the sword was at his throat again. “I’d suggest you rethink that statement, *Uncle*,” Ian said grimly. “I’d hate our first outing as husband and wife to be attending your funeral.”

Rhys’s niece gasped. “Ian! He’s my uncle— Wait. What? Husband and wife?”

Rhys looked from one to the other and began to laugh. Gently moving the sword to one side so the human male would not be threatened, Rhys bowed deeply to the king. “I return to you your daughter’s life, though it were forfeit to me by right and by law. In exchange, I shall take this woman as my own. She is my kin, and it is my right. I hereby claim the lady Magda.”

Every single Fae in the room, silent and motionless throughout the encounter, dropped to their knees and proclaimed their fealty and accord. “*A Garanwyn!*”

The king dropped back down into his chair and stared at Rhys, befuddlement clear on his red face. “I don’t understand. What on earth do you want with our pig keeper?”

###

*Two days later*

“I still can’t believe Glory wed that little round man,” Lucy said, shaking her head in disbelief. “After all of her years of declaring that only a man whose beauty matched her own would do, she is overcome with joy to have secretly married a man who is a head shorter than her, at least five stone heavier, and who has very little hair.”

“Ah, but he loves her beyond distraction,” Ian replied, putting his hands on her waist. “There is much to be said for that. Happy birthday, my love.”

“I may become ill,” Rhys pointed out as the annoying human kissed Lucy. Not that either of them could hear anything beside their own maudlin prattle. He held the reins of the silver mare he’d acquired for his niece and watched closely as Ian, after aiming a perfunctory glare Rhys’s way, helped Lucinda into the saddle.

“Have a care as to how you lay your hands on a princess of the High House of the Seelie Court,” Rhys snapped.

Ian smiled and deliberately raised Lucinda’s hand to his lips. “My *future wife* and I will lay our hands on each other however we want, *Uncle*.”

“Don’t call me Uncle,” Rhys said between clenched teeth.

Lucinda arranged her divided skirt on the saddle, sighing in either dismay or resignation. “Is it going to be like this all the way across Elvania? Because if you two cannot manage to come to some form of accord, I may have to strike off on my own and abandon both of you.”

“You can’t—” Rhys began, offended.

“You would never—” Ian began.

“Watch me,” Lucinda interrupted.

Rhys scowled fiercely at her, trying his best not to let his own smile escape. “You’re my sister’s daughter, all right,” he admitted, swinging up onto his own horse. “The stories I could tell you . . .”

“Wonderful,” Ian put in as he settled into his saddle and maneuvered his horse closer to Lucinda. “Lucy and I will have no time to ourselves at all on this trip, will we?”

Rhys smiled as his expected companion stepped out from behind the stable door and stood waiting quietly, her arms held up to him.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Rhys said, stopping to catch the beautifully voluptuous woman by the waist and lift her onto his horse in front of him. “I may be a little busy at times.”

Ian blinked. “Who—?”

Rhys smiled again but said nothing, enjoying the scent of the lass’s lavender-scented hair. She snuggled back between his thighs with a contented sound.

Lucy looked startled for an instant, but then slowly smiled. “Ian, meet Magda.”

Ian’s eyes widened. “Magda? The pig-keeper?”

Magda smiled shyly and nodded. “I had a bath.”

The End (in which they all lived happily ever after. Or at least for a very long while . . .)