

**Arabella and the Forbidden Prince**  
**By April Marcom**

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## **PART I**

### **~THE CHOOSING~**

I smooth the skirt of my red dress when I see the dust cloud rising in the road on the horizon. Although it's faded and quite nearly too small for me, it's the finest dress I own.

The prince is almost certainly the one who approaches. It seems strange, but he's chosen to visit my decrepit little village this morning in search of a wife.

The many voices suddenly cutting into the silence tell me I'm not the only one who's noticed that someone's coming.

To my left and right, in the long row of young ladies and their families who stand behind them, it's apparent to me that many of them don't belong here. They all wear plain dresses and ragged shoes, but there are those with perfectly polished nails and heads held so repulsively high and proud that it is obvious they have come in disguise for a chance to become the next queen. Some of the parents haven't even bothered to change out of their splendid clothes. They're liars. They should all be hanged.

The closer the dust cloud gets, the more fearful I become.

I look up at the sky to try and distract myself from this. The sky is perfectly clear, but the smell of rain still hangs in the air from the showers of last night. I take in a long, deep breath.

"Arabella was born for this," I hear my mother whisper to my father behind me. "She's exactly the sort of woman royal borns want in their blood line."

I roll my eyes and let out my breath, tired of hearing her say things like that. Because of my extraordinarily fair skin and hair, she's convinced that I will be chosen by the prince for marriage. Unfortunately, I'm also the one she and my father would undoubtedly prefer the prince to take to wife the least of me and my four sisters. This hasn't stopped either of them from gloating to anyone who will listen.

"You had better hope not, or she'll get you all killed with that mouth of hers," someone else whispers to her. This doesn't surprise me. It's not the first time someone has responded this way.

I have a bit of a problem with my uncontrollable and unpredictable rage. I never know just when it will strike, but when it does, I scarcely know what I'm doing. You can imagine what would happen if my temper ran away from me with the future king, or his parents, the present king and queen.

The stagecoach in the distance is getting very close now. Clearly it's the prince. Only someone of the royal family would ride in such grandeur. The carriage is painted red with shining gold angels sculpted beautifully over every corner.

"Remember, Arabella," my mother whispers in my ear from behind me, "you must control yourself at all costs. A lifetime of wealth and luxury is at stake."

I nod. The more I hear her say it, the deeper it settles in how much me being

chosen by the prince affects my family as well as myself. They would also be moved into the castle, after all.

The front horses pulling the stagecoach are only the length of three men away from my eldest sister when they turn to the side and come to a stop. I cannot see inside the windows with the red satin fabric covering them completely.

I am so afraid at that moment, I would almost rather hide under a damp rock with poisonous serpents than stand there waiting to meet the prince's scrutiny.

The driver climbs down from the front and comes to open the side door. "Presenting his royal highness, Prince Horris the Third," he says

A young lady not far from me gasps and faints when a long gangly leg appears from inside, adorned with one very pointy shoe. The prince steps down, wearing skin-tight trousers and a blue and black striped shirt with puffy sleeves. The ugly, curly white wig upon his head makes him look like an old man with unusually youthful skin. I do not want to marry him, but I do want to become queen.

My heart sinks when he turns to his left and walks to the faraway end of the line without looking at any of the women who stand in waiting. He will obviously be beginning down there, putting nearly all the other girls ahead of me. Escaping my life of planting, weeding, and harvesting in the wretched sun for hours upon hours nearly every single day is moving farther and farther away from my grasp with every step he takes.

That's what this morning is about for me. Not the fancy dresses and crown jewels. Not the extravagant parties or great power. It's for freedom from backbreaking labor and the constant dread over whether or not it will be enough to keep us from

starvation. Like nearly every other woman there, I am desperate enough for this even to marry a complete, and very unattractive, stranger.

When Prince Horris reaches the end, he turns around and begins the slow inspection of ladies, an expression of scorn on his face. He hardly makes a sound as he passes by each one, until he's nearly halfway through the line.

"Get out of my sight at once, Pretender, or I will have you thrown into the dungeons," he shouts at one of the more obvious liars. I like him a little better.

A drop of sweat rolls over my back as he draws closer, sending two more counterfeits and their families away before he reaches me. He walks gracefully past my sisters. His eyes lock with mine a moment later and I smile, even though screams of fear are echoing through my insides.

Then he walks on by. The fear inside me begins to diminish. Instead I am filled with disappointment. Either he has resolved to see every young lady before making his decision, or I have been rejected.

I am relieved to see him reach the very end before he spins around. I feel I have the advantage now, since my face will be fresher in his memory than most.

The prince walks past each lady again until...he stops in front of me. He turns to face me and then begins to look back and forth between me and another young woman somewhere down the line.

*It's her or me, I realize. I could become the next queen.* I can hardly contain my excitement.

The long, merciless moments pass by. I count the number of times he looks at me and then away at her. Twenty-one. Then he fixes me with a sneer I hate and says,

“You are the one I will take to wife. You will come with me now and your family will be sent for on the morrow.”

My eyes open wide. I can't believe it. Even with my mother going on about how I would certainly be chosen, I didn't expect it to happen. It's simply too amazing to believe.

I feel weightless, like a bird in flight, as I follow him to the carriage that must be worth more than everything my family possesses, including our house and land.

Women begin to cry behind us. Parents scold some for falling short.

As the prince climbs into the carriage, I look back at my family. My mother waves and my sisters are beaming at me proudly. I wish one of them had been chosen. They will still get to live in the castle and receive nearly all the advantages I will *without* having to marry the pompous man I despise. I climb into the carriage behind him and sit across from him on a long cushioned seat. The red curtains allow plenty of light to filter inside the wide riding space.

There is only one other person inside, and when I see him, my nerves come apart. The rich, brown hair that has fallen over his eyes is shaken away when he looks up from the book he's reading and sees me. One eyebrow lifts higher above his gorgeous charcoal-black eyes. “So you're the lucky one,” he says to me. “I'm Horrid's younger brother, Harold.”

He reaches his hand out, but Horrid slaps it before I can even lift mine to shake it. “Don't call me that. And don't touch her common filthy hands until they have been thoroughly cleaned. You know she was only chosen to be molded into exactly the sort of wife I desire. She is obviously poor enough she will have no education or intelligence

and will be easy to train however I see fit.”

I stare at him even more wide-eyed than before as the carriage begins moving and he opens the window beside him. He’s chosen me because of how poor and stupid I look? I know right then I will never love this man, but marrying him is still more appealing than a life of poverty.

I choose to ignore him and speak to his much kinder, more appealing brother.  
“I’m Arabella.”

“What a lovely name?” he says.

“Hold your tongue,” Prince Horris says to Harold. “We both know you’re as stupid as she is. We will have to give her a nobler name before the wedding ceremony.”

So he’s an arrogant pig all around. At least he’s speaking to his brother, though. He hasn’t looked or spoken to me once since the choosing, like I’m a dumb animal who doesn’t understand everything he’s saying.

Harold rolls his eyes and returns to reading his book.

I feel my inner demons gnawing at my insides and try to distract myself by staring out the window. This is the last time I will ever see my village.

The ride to the castle is long and hot. I have never left our village, so I am absolutely rapt in the new sights all the way there. Occasionally we pass a lone house built inside the deep foreboding woods or in the center of a lush field. There are villages laid in lovely valleys and surrounding sparkling riversides. None are anywhere near as muddy or dispirited as mine. I suppose that must be why the prince chose it to come to in search of a bride.

The sun is just setting when I catch my first sight of the castle. It’s tall and

circular, made up of brown and gray stone. It's so large, our village could almost fit inside it. Whatever cruelty I must endure at the hands of the prince will certainly be worth it to live inside those walls.

Prince Horris finally turns to acknowledge me as we ride through the open front gates. "You will be known as Sophia from now on, but I will call you Dearest. It's tradition for the king and queen."

I nod, hating this new name and the man who's given it to me. But I suppose it might help the transition into my new life. Perhaps "Queen Sophia" will even be able to tame the anger I never could.

A nervousness I've never felt before fills me as I consider all the new people I am about to be surrounded by. I have heard the names of King Eldric and Queen Luciana mentioned many times over the course of my life, but never a word concerning what they might be like.

The carriage comes slowly to a stop. A moment later the driver opens the side door, letting in soft gusts of the chilling outside breeze. "My lady," he says, holding up a hand to help me out.

"Thank you," I answer as I take it.

"We never speak to the servants except to give them orders," Horris says to me.

I watch the driver's expression, but it never changes. I suppose I will have to become like this, immune to the offensive mouths of the royal family.

Horris and Harold climb out of the carriage after me.

A man and woman with long trailing cloaks are crossing the courtyard to meet us. Several more normal-looking women follow behind them.

For a moment I think a large insect is crawling over the face of the woman I assume to be Queen Luciana, but soon realize it's only an inconveniently placed mole that's nearly as big as one of her eyes.

The crown, haircut, and oddly shaped beard of the man who must be King Eldric give his head the overall look of a perfect square. The pair seem rather strange to me.

As they draw closer, I imagine they might welcome me to the family, say hello at the very least. I've never curtsied before, but I attempt one for them. They only meet me with a pair of discouraging frowns.

"You have certainly succeeded in what you set out to do," the queen says in a dignified, manly voice. "Addy, take this filthy peasant out of my sight at once. I do not want to see her again until she has the appearance of a civilized human being." The king raises a disdainful eyebrow as one of the women behind them comes to take my hand with her crooked, stringy fingers and lead me toward the castle doors.

I hate my future family.

No one says a word as I'm led through two wide hallways and into a warm room with a blazing fireplace and a large tub of water beside the door. It smells of sweet potatoes and cinnamon, making my mouth water. Without warning, the women begin pulling my clothes off and taking down my hair.

"Excuse me," I say, trying to get away from them. "Stop it!"

"You must be made presentable, and very quickly at that," Addy says. Her well-aged face is just as cold and callous as the queen's. "While you will not be able to eat with the king and queen tonight, they will want to see you once you're all cleaned up. They wish for very beautiful grandchildren and must be sure you are able to produce

them."

*What a horrible thing to say.* I almost wish I was back home. At least there I would be around decent people. I console myself by putting Addy and her band of course ladies on the top of my list of people to send away once I am queen.

The thought helps me to endure the terrible grooming process. Two women yank on my hair with a brush while another forces me into the tub. Soon every part of me is being scrubbed clean. Someone keeps putting scented soap in my hair and then pouring water over my head. My eyes are beginning to throb. Four women tackle my hands and feet, scouring away all the dirt and grime, along with half my skin. Before I can think much about the tenderness, I'm being pulled onto my feet, forced out of the water closer to the fire, and wiped dry all over.

I've never felt so exposed and so humiliated. I feel awful.

*Yes. These women will be the first to go.*

Undergarments are placed around me before someone slides a breathtaking red and gold dress onto my body. I reach up to run my fingers along the satin neck-lining, but Addy grabs them and jerks my arm out straight so she can adorn them with glittering rings instead.

"Ouch, I wish you—"

Someone cuts me off and sends me into a fit of sneezing when they begin putting powder all over my face.

Addy paints something all over my lips as one of the other ladies begins poking my head with the pins she's using to fashion my hair.

I close my eyes in frustration and pain and wait for it all to stop. More jewelry,

makeup, and a pair of stockings and shoes are added aggressively before it all stops.

"What do you think, ladies?" Addy's voice causes me to open my eyes. "Are we finished?"

"Oh, yes."

"Stunning."

"Fetch the mirror from the corner, Mildred," Abby instructs the youngest looking lady.

"Yes, ma'am." Mildred goes to the corner of the room and begins pushing a tall standing mirror over to us.

The reflection that moves closer and closer to me is one I don't recognize. My hair is poofed out around my head and the ends of it are rolled up on top. My skin is ghostly and they've painted my face to perfection. I feel beautiful.

I hate the women surrounding me just a little bit less. "Thank you," I say to them.

Addy lets out an irritated breath. "You cannot talk to us that way. And you will follow me to show Queen Luciana what we have done with you."

She walks out of the bedroom so I follow her into the hallway. The other women go in the opposite direction.

The tall pointy-heeled shoes I'm wearing cause me to wobble as I walk. The corset under my dress makes my body feel stiff and unnatural.

Addy slows down a bit so she can walk right beside me. "You must hold your shoulders back and your head high. Keep it perfectly still when you are moving about. Conversation must be short and to the point. No emotion may ever be shown..." She goes on with these stupid royal rules all the way to the black dining room doors.

When we stop in front of them, I smooth my skirt as I always do when I've nervous. I still can't believe I'm here in the castle!

"Now, you will remember everything I have said," Addy says as she turns to face me. "And do not speak unless you are spoken to."

Then she opens the doors and puts a hand on my back to shove me into the room, where the royal family sits alone at an extraordinarily long table with tremendous space between each of them. Candles burn brightly around the food and people. Two guards stand beside the door. And everyone's staring at me.

## PART II

### ~THE PERFECT NIGHT~

"Now she looks more like a princess," the queen says.

"Yes, though she still needs a great deal of work." the king adds.

I am too lost in watching Prince Harold smile at me adoringly to care much about what they're saying. "You look ravishing," he says in a dreamlike voice.

Suddenly the attention is taken away from me and Harold's family is staring at him like he's committed some terrible crime. I am too afraid to thank him.

"No one said *you* could speak," the queen snaps.

"Honestly, Mother, I don't know why you let him eat at the same table we do," Horris says.

Anger bubbles inside me at the way they're talking about him. I don't want to be there hearing it.

"We have no choice. It's tradition for the royal family to eat together every night," says the king.

Harold stares at his plate darkly and pokes his fork at his potatoes.

Queen Luciana turns the sneer she's fixed upon her obvious least favorite son on me. "This Sophia will eventually have to eat with us as well...Addy, I want her here tomorrow night. I expect her to be polished and refined for our meal."

"Yes, ma'am." Addy shepherds me out of the room.

My stomach growls to alert her of my hunger. I haven't eaten since this morning. She ignores it, though, and walks me straight back to my room.

The clicking of her heels against stone floor becomes a hammer beating against my ears. It's a relief when it stops outside my bedroom door.

"Get a good night's sleep," she tells me. "I will be here very early in the morning to begin your training." Her heels hammer away again as she leaves me behind.

When I open my door, I am surprised to find a plump little woman sitting on my bed, wearing a light blue bonnet that matches her eyes. She stands and I realize she's holding a golden-brown turkey leg in one hand. "Hello there." Her eyes crinkle when she smiles. "You must be Arabella."

"I was. Prince Horris said I am to be called Sophia now."

"Come now. Don't trouble me with all that nonsense. Harold said your name is Arabella."

"Harold told you that?" My heart fills with enough light to brighten the dark windowless room to my eyes.

"Yes, ma'am. We're both right happy to have a commoner marrying into the royal family. Perhaps things will finally get better around here."

"He said that, as well?"

"Mm-hm. I'm Cherish. My job 'round here is to look after Harold, and has

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