

THE HEROS OF TITLE

by Shayla Miller

**Note before you begin: This is chapter one of a many part series! I will be uploading one chapter per edition! Hope you enjoy! ~ Shayla*

Everyone had gone to bed after a long day of work. The kingdom of Title was so quiet that a pin could drop in the soft blanket of snow and you would hear it, the only interruptions being the whispering breeze or the gentle breathing of the slumbering guards. The shops were closed, the laughter and cheer was put away for the evening. Nothing stirred for a moment and nothing disturbed the peaceful night.

But there were more mysteries lurking about the history of this dark yet magical place. The answer to the old prophecies lay in an ancient library in the catacombs. The villagers had grown up listening to the stories of what beasts protected them, and it planted fear into their hearts, keeping them all from exploring what was under the village for centuries.

These are the things that Hunter had been fantasizing since his grandfather had told him about the stories. He was not traveling alone though; his friends had grown up listening to the same man's stories as well. Elliot was a small, thin skeptical boy. He was very unsure about the truths of the prophecies. Talbot couldn't care either way; he just wanted to join in the fun. He was never that smart, but his brawn made up for that.

Valentine or, as she likes to be called, Val, was quiet and a bit timid, her curiosity won at Hunter's invitation.

The young group had been slowly making their way from Talbot's father's blacksmith shop to the entrance of the catacombs. Anticipation and intensity swelled the closer they came. What kinds of horrors would they find down there? Could they handle them by themselves? Would they reach the prophecies that they were going down there for? Were those prophecies even real?

The group finally reached the bakery: they were halfway there. Everyone looked in all directions to make sure there was no one following them and that all the guards weren't alerted.

"Ok, the coast is clear. Let's go," Hunter whispered behind him. His amber eyes looked mischievous in a nearby lamp's light. "We mustn't wake the guards. Move slowly and carefully. Ready?" They all nodded in answer.

Hunter and his friends moved slowly across the snowy path with lanterns in hand. The moon peeked from behind the clouds and made the snow glow a faint blue. A chill traveled down Hunter's spine. It was very eerie.

They were just about to pass the last of the buildings when a faint *psssst* was heard. Hunter looked around in panic, hoping none of the guards heard it as well. A shadow appeared from behind the bakery that they had passed. The figure was small and dainty and seemed to be a young woman.

“Hey!” she whispered loudly. She was being quiet. It seemed she did not want to wake the guards either. The group hesitated before slowly tip-toeing their way back to the stranger. “What are you doing out past curfew?” the stranger said.

“None of your business,” Hunter snapped. “Who are you to judge us? Curfew is a rule that applies to everyone, including you!”

The stranger stepped out into the light of their lanterns and they could see her perfectly. It was Princess Addison. Her long golden locks that were normally lying down over her shoulders were tied up in a tight bun. She also ditched the dress she often wore for a pair of boy’s clothes.

“I will ask again, what are you doing out at this time?” A sly smile spread across her face.

“Uh, just out for a midnight stroll, Your Majesty,” Hunter lied. “Hehe.”

“Yeah! To the catacombs!” added Talbot a bit too loudly. Hunter winced.

“Shut your mouth!” Elliot hissed. “Our plans are not for others t-”

“The catacombs, huh?” Addison interrupted. “In that case, I’ll let you die a miserable death down there. Or....”. She paused. “Or....I could alert the guards and you would be locked up for the rest of your filthy, peasant lives.” She smirked and began to walk away.

“Wait!” Hunter called in a loud whisper, “You could come with us! I’m sure you, the princess, are not allowed outside the castle at this time as well, right?”

Addison froze in her tracks and slowly turned back around. A look of contemplation on her face.

“There’s a guard right over there that I could wake up just for you! I’m sure he’ll be glad to escort you back to your cozy little castle,” Hunter continued. He scrunched up small and said in a mocking, squeaky voice: ““Oh, Mr. Guard, sir. I was in my house reading when I noticed something pass by my window. I thought it might have been my dog, so I went outside to bring him in and discovered that it was the princess trying to make an escape!”” He looked up at Talbot with big puppy eyes. Everyone but the princess chuckled.

“Fine! I shall come with you, then! No *if’s*, *and’s*, or *but’s* about it!” she hissed. “But if *I* die down there, it’s on all of *your* heads!

She huffed and stormed off.

“The catacombs are *that* way, Your Majesty.” Hunter pointed in the opposite direction that she was going. Everyone chuckled again. She turned around and stomped up to Hunter and grabbed his collar and yanked him down to her level. She was so close that their noses were almost touching.

“Just because I don’t want you to be sending me off to the jail that people call a castle, doesn’t mean that I have suddenly become your little dog that you can command where I go, *peasant!*” A vein was beginning to appear on her forehead from straining to keep her voice down. “Got it?”

“Yes ma’am!” he said, grinning.

They continued their journey and finally made it to the entrance of the catacombs. A haunting pause lingered in the air. Who knew what kinds of creatures they'd find down there?

"Does anybody need to use the bathroom?" Hunter's attempt to lighten the mood didn't work as well as he hoped. "We would have to be fast and careful to get in. It looks like it's about to crumble any minute. Who's first?"

They all turned towards Hunter.

"Why is everyone looking at me?" he exclaimed. He guessed that everyone knew that he would volunteer to go first anyways, which was true. "Ok, I can go. Wish me luck."

He dashed in a few meters and paused to look around at the structure. It was groaning under the pressure of the rocks that it was supporting. It was going to collapse soon. *Maybe there is some way that I could support the beam*, he thought. As if his thought was a prayer to be answered, he saw a thick plank of wood. He grabbed it and propped it up against the entrance to help stall the collapse. He gently kicked at it to test its integrity. It was solid.

"Ok, I think it will hold up long enough for everyone to enter," Hunter called from the darkness.

One by one, they all filed into the cave-like catacombs, fearful of the terrors that lurked in the depths.

"Everyone here?" Hunter was looking around with his lamp. Everyone's face glowed orange.

“I think so,” Elliot answered. “I was the last one through.”

Hunter looked around and double-checked to make sure everyone made it.

“Uh...guys?” Val said quietly. Everyone spun around at the sound of her voice; she rarely spoke aloud. “I think you should take a look at this.”

Hunter raised his lamp, illuminating the catacombs, and revealed what was worrying Val. “Oh, man....” was all he could say. There was a short path that branched off to many other paths and shortcuts and passages.

“The catacombs are a giant labyrinth!?” Elliot exclaimed.

“Welp, isn’t that just dandy?” Addison said. “What are we going to do next, genius?”

Hunter knew she was trying to tease him, but there was no time for games. He just gazed into his worst nightmare. “I...I don’t know...”