



This Is No Time to Panic

I used to daydream about spending my life wandering through the woods, helping animals in need, completely free of the responsibilities that come with being twelfth in line to the throne of Enchantasia. So you'd think being banished to a forest would be a dream come true. Expansive woodlands? Check. A plethora of wild creatures at my fingertips, just ready and waiting to be taken care of? Check. Stripped of my royal status? Check.

But if I've learned anything from my recent run-ins with a certain fairy godmother, it's "Be careful what you wish for."

Because as much as this situation seems like a dream come true, it's actually a nightmare. You see, a few hours

ago, I kind of got me and my friends kicked out of Royal Academy and banished forever.

Banished as in we can't go home or see our families again.

Banished as in the whole of Enchantasia thinks we're criminal outlaws.

Headmistress Olivina has dropped us in the middle of a spooky forest where the air is thick with dew and the trees cast such deep shadows I can't tell if it's night or day. The ground is wet from a recent rain, and we're surrounded by the sounds of a lonely wolf howling in the distance (I think it is crying about being lost from its pack, poor thing), an occasional low rumble of thunder, and sniffing.

My roommate, Raina, is not handling the banishment well. Snow White's younger sister is curled in a ball on a mound of leaves, holding her white gloves and crying. Her brother, Heath, is... Where is Heath? I don't see him anywhere. I can see our friend Logan picking edible berries for a possible breakfast. Logan may not be the outdoorsy type, but he knows how to whip up a meal even in the direst of circumstances. My other roommate, Sasha, Sleeping Beauty's little sister, is fiddling with the mini magical scroll she uses to run her blog to try to figure out our location.

Me? I feel dazed, confused, and quite frankly, angry. But I guess that's to be expected when your school's headmistress waves her wand and *poof!* Banishes you for not going along with her plans. Now the most beloved fairy godmother in Enchantasia is probably telling the kingdom we're a bunch of traitors when it's she who is the double-crossing, power-hungry villain.

"Drooping dragons, this is quite the mess we're in, Lily," I comment to my bearded dragon. That may sound odd, but she can understand me, just like I can understand her when she flicks her tongue at me in agreement. Communicating with animals is my gift.

Hey, that gift might be able to help us right now!

"Lily?" I call again to my lizard, who is camouflaging herself into the color of the tree trunk she's climbing. "Could you find a grasshopper or carpenter ant and ask if they know where we could find Little Red Riding Hood?"

"What?" Raina's response echoes through the early-morning air. She hobbles over to me wearing one shoe and carrying the other, which is missing a heel. Her dark-brown hair has several leaves in it, and her bow is sagging so much I'm sure it's going to fall off her head at any moment. I don't

dare tell her that. One's appearance is of the utmost importance to Raina (Princess Rule 2), even if she is banished.

"Are you seriously asking your *bearded dragon* to help us find Little Red Riding Hood?"

She is pretty worked up, so I'm almost too afraid to reply. I nod slightly to Lily, who hurries up the tree trunk and out of sight before I respond. "Maybe?"

"That's how you're going to fix this...*situation* we're in?" Raina can't even get herself to say the word *banished*. Her eyes are wild. "By searching for a known outlaw to help us?"

"Red isn't an outlaw," I say, sputtering.

"She's as good as an outlaw!" Raina insists. "She was in the same RA class as my sister until she left! We are not talking to an outlaw, and we are not taking directions from a dragon!"

"*Bearded dragon*." Logan looks up from the berries he's collecting. "There's a difference. Lily is a lizard, so she's not a threat like a regular dragon. Devin trusts her instincts, which means so do I. If we need to wait for Lily to find help, we will."

I smile gratefully at him while Raina glares at the two of us. Behind us, I can hear Sasha still angrily tapping at her magical scroll ("Why won't you work?" she mumbles.

“Don’t we have magic out here in the woods? What’s with the bad reception?”)

“I don’t seem to be allergic to Lily either, which is an improvement, but...” Logan sniffs the air, and his brown nose wrinkles slightly. “I do feel a bit stuffy and light-headed.” He touches his head and sits down on a nearby rock. “Maybe a real dragon is nearby. Lily?” he yells into the mist and low-lying fog. “Find Little Red Riding Hood fast! She’s our only hope at getting out of these woods alive!” He claps a hand over his mouth. “Great. Now the dragon’s heard us too. Why didn’t I pay more attention in my seminar, *A Prince’s Guide to Surviving the Forest?* Why?”

“It’s *Red*. Not Little Red Riding Hood and stop yelling!” Sasha drops her scroll on the ground in disgust.

She’s woven her long blond hair into a makeshift bun with the use of a stick. Leave it to Sasha to pull herself together even in the most feared forest of Enchantasia.

“She hasn’t been called ‘Little’ since the wolf tried to eat her,” Sasha adds. “Doesn’t anyone besides me read *Happily Ever After Scrolls?* She runs ads for Red’s Ready for Anything Shoppe almost weekly. She’s not an outlaw,” she chastises Raina. “She just didn’t want to rule her village! I even heard

she's starting a store franchise. That means she isn't hanging out in a forest helping kids who've been banished for finding out their headmistress is a villain!"

Raina gets in her personal space. "Don't say such things! We don't know for certain Headmistress Olivina is evil, do we?"

Dear Raina. Always thinking the best of people, as a princess should. Logan and I are a bit more disenchanted at this point.

"We kind of do," I hear Logan say under his breath.

"Raina," Sasha says exasperatedly, hiking up the hem of her maroon dress. "Yes, we do know she's evil! Olivina knew we were on to her brainwashing ways, and she had us taken care of—and it's kind of your fault."

Raina's mouth forms a big, round O. "*My* fault?"

"Yes, your fault! You had to go and tattle on us for trying to figure out what she was up to!" Sasha's voice is rising in pitch. Logan is right. We definitely could wake a sleeping dragon.

"I was trying to save you all! You made a huge mess of things!" Raina shouts.

This could go on for a while. I look for Lily, but she's already headed off to talk to some locals.

“Girls! Calm down,” Logan tries. “The truth is, it was both of your faults.”

Oh, Logan. He’s terrible at talking to princesses.

“I’m sorry?” Raina asks, but she doesn’t *look* sorry.

“I was all excited to taste the roast duck with fig sauce I had suggested Chef make when, *poof!* Suddenly we’re in Olivina’s office learning she’s the puppet master behind every fairy-tale story this kingdom has ever had—and she gets mad and sends us here.” Logan rubs his stomach. “And now I’m hungry.” He looks at his pile of berries. “I wonder what kind of tart I could make with these. If only I could start a fire and find a small pheasant to cook...”

“Fire?” I narrow my eyes at him. “I am not breaking up an animal family by roasting one of their members for dinner!”

Logan nods. “You’re a vegetarian. I respect that. I might be able to make us a salad or a soup, then.”

“How can you think about food at a time like this?” Raina moans.

“Yeah! I’ve got so many more important thoughts rattling around in my head.” Sasha starts to pace and almost trips over a boulder. Her voice gets louder and louder. “How

has Olivina gotten away with brainwashing students for so long? What is she telling everyone at school about us? And how do we reach our families to tell them we're okay?"

"Hey!"

A handsome boy, a head taller than the rest of us, bursts through the trees. He's wearing a double-breasted ivory jacket with gold buttons, black pants, and shiny boots that are covered in mud.

"Where were you?" Raina sounds very unprincessy, but I guess that's allowed since Heath is her twin.

"Exploring!" Heath's blue peepers have been known to make girls pass out in the school hallways. "I walked about half a mile and climbed up a small hill that overlooked a stream. There are some caves nearby that would make a great camp till we get out of here. I doubt there are any banshees or giants in them this time of the year because it's too hot." He slaps a bothersome fly with a quick swat, and Lily crawls quickly back out of the brush to snag the tiny carcass. In the distance, we hear a crack of thunder.

"Hmm. Might be a storm brewing. Or it could be typh-ira? Who can say for sure? We should start hiking to shelter," Heath says.

“Did you say...typhira?” Logan stutters before sneezing loudly. “I thought they were a myth! I definitely wouldn’t want to run into one for real. They breathe fire and cause lightning storms!”

“I could swear I saw one once when I was scaling Mount Olivando.” Heath shrugs. “I would have fought it off if I had to, but luckily it didn’t bother us, so Father and I kept climbing.”

Heath loves to mark off the places he’s traveled on the fairy-tale map he had in his dorm room. His goal is to visit every kingdom in the land. He doesn’t sit still, which is why Royal Academy wasn’t the best fit for him either. For any of us, really. (Except Raina who lived for the place, so I do feel badly about her being stuck out here.)

“As I said, could be a storm.” Heath looks up at the treetops. The canopy is so thick we can’t even see the sky. “Either way, we should find cover.”

“Hide in a cave?” Raina is shouting now. “Are you crazy, Brother? I spent months designing this dress with Marta Marigold. I am not ruining it hiking to a cave!” She holds up the bottom of her midnight-blue ball gown, which is weighing her down. I don’t mention the hem is torn and

covered in black mud. “What we *are* going to do is call for Olivina! Fairy godmothers come when called, right?” She looks around, her eyes wild. “She can poof us right out of here to the castle where we will sort this whole mess out. It’s just a misunderstanding! We could never truly be banished, could we? We are future leaders. We need to go home. She’ll let us go home. Right? Right? *Right?*”

Sasha and I make eye contact. The woods are making Raina hysterical. She needs a sedative. I wonder if there are any medicinal berries nearby. Or chamomile leaves that would settle her stomach.

“Raina, she’s not letting us go back to RA,” Heath says gently. “We’re on our own. We have to find our own way, or find Red, like Devin said.”

I hold up the note Professor Pierce gave me right before we met with Olivina. Lily reminded me I had it in my dress when we were banished here. The note Professor Pierce wrote is cryptic but the line “Be ready for anything” in the woods *has* to refer to Red. After all, her shop is called Red’s Ready-for-Anything Shoppe. Professor Pierce wants us to find her. She’s in the woods. I’m sure of it.

“Running back to Olivina is not going to get us

anywhere,” Sasha agrees. “She’ll poof us somewhere remote next. Do you want to be sent to an arctic tundra run by the Ice Queen? Or banished under the sea with a sea witch?” Raina looks away.

“It’s like the time we were in the burning princess tower at school—the only way we were going to get out of there was on our own,” I tell her.

“Exactly!” Sasha agrees, applauding. Heath gives a whistle.

“This is our chance to save ourselves and every royal at that school who doesn’t know how wicked the fairy godmother truly is.” I stand up on a small rock, feeling empowered by my own words. It’s as if I can hear the music crescendo in my head. Raina is staring at me now. I must be getting through to her.

“Red is here in these woods. Professor Pierce is trying to help us.”

“Yes!” Logan agrees.

“I can feel it, just like I can feel an owl who is crying out for eye drops. Don’t you see? Red must know how to help us stop Olivina! We’re going to get the help we need to take her down and make our own future! Now who’s with me?” I raise my right fist into the air, lose my balance, and slip off

the mossy rock, landing in... Oh my. What is that smell?

“Uh, Devin, I think you fell in a pile of dung,” Logan starts to giggle.

Heath joins him, and so does Sasha. Finally, Raina can’t help herself. As I pull myself out of the smelly muck, I can’t help but let go and laugh at the absurdity of it all too.

Until a package falls from the sky and hits Logan in the head.