

## ROYAL DREAMS

Inora asked Prince Alexander what made a princess a princess.

“She likes beautiful things. She realizes her place in the universe. She knows how to make the world a better place.”

”How does her role change with experience?”

“She learns how to respect the opinion of others. She does not speak out of place.”

“Should a princess feel that she is inferior to a prince or a king?”

“I would not put it in that way. A princess has very unique abilities. But men and women are different. Women sometimes let their emotions get the better of them. For leaders this is not always the best trait.”

“Women do not make great leaders.”

“They can make wonderful leaders. Usually they do best when they work with men.”

“What would a state of all women be like?”

“I have heard of such mythic places. But women would always long for men.”

“Men would not long for women.”

“It is not the same.”

“Sometimes women feel greater demands on their abilities.”

“That still does not mean that they are the same as men.”

“They are not equal.”

“They are equal, but different.”

Inora trusted Alexander. He was there to protect her.

“You are my prince. You have been since I first saw you in the golden light.”

Would that be enough to lead her through the darkness?

“A great prince is a man of honor. He is willing to defend his kingdom under any circumstance.”

Inora thought about the risks that a prince was willing to assume to defend his realm. He lived by his honor. He was committed to his people.

“Give me your hand, Inora. I am your protector. Through an trials, I will do whatever is necessary to give you greater glory.”

He was willing to share his triumphs with his princess.

Inora thought about the blessings that she received by remaining with Alexander.

“I am coming into my own as a princess.”

She was discovering her own powers independent of anyone else.

“I am a true princess.”

Her confident reminded her, “You are no a true princess until someone campaigns for you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Someone does great deeds for the greater glory of your legacy.”

“Who is that?”

“Someone who will pledge himself to you and you alone.”

She asked Alexander, “Are you supposed to campaign for me as a princess?”

“No, not me. A knight.”

“Where do I find such a knight?”

“Knights are always looking to distinguish themselves. You are a lovely princess. Almost any knight in the kingdom would be willing to stand for you.”

Inora thought about the greater glory which awaited her.

At the grand tournament, she watched all the great knights. She was sure that one would speak up for her.

“I have been told that you were looking for someone to campaign for you. I am one of the most capable knights”

It was Gres. He had a great deal of experience. But she was hoping for someone more dashing.

“Where is your horse?”

“I am on foot for now. They are preparing me a another horse. But my horse was killed in the last tournament. I was lucky that I was not killed. Someone was plotting revenge against me, and he attacked when I was on the sidelines. Needless to say, he is no longer around.”

“Needless to say!”

They both smiled.

“I have been wondering what makes a princess.”

“A princess is a special being. She is not like the rest of us. She cannot be charmed by material things. She battles for virtue. She is no one’s woman. She speaks her own mind. She owns the moment.”

“What if she wants to attract a rich prince?”

“She is not worried about riches. She is more concerned with being herself.”

“How do these kinds of opinions ever get you anywhere?”

“I am the best knight around. You only have to ask.”

“You look funny without a horse.”

“A horse will not serve you in all tasks. I am a man who is willing to explore my circumstances.”

“You are a funny man!”

“I hope that you do not take humor in my plight.”

“Not at all. But you are nothing like I imagined a knight to be.”

“You, my dear, are everything I imagine in a wondrous princess, and way more!”

“You love to flatter.”

“A princess is like a shooting star who has no idea where gravity will take her.”

“I feel as if I am only along for the ride.”

“We are all along for the ride. Only a few of us go up in the night sky.”

Gres only seemed more impressive.

“Where will your campaign take you?”

“I am going to the Flower City?”

“What a coincidence. That was going to be my destination.”

“I am going to take the Pilgrim’s Road.”

The Pilgrim’s Road was the most dangerous way to the Flower City.

“That will surely be a challenge.”

“I would not be true to my name if I was not willing to take on a challenge.”

This was going to be marvelous journey with many obstacles in Gres's way. This was his very skill. This was what made the contest into something real.

"We are willing to defend our beliefs. This same commitment dates back to the date of our first campaign."

"This is how we are blessed with knowledge."

"It is a lot more than this. We are all challenged by greatness. I can make you truly great."

"Gres, I am an adult. Why do you think that I need your help?"

The Princess Inora had powers of her own. Those were the very attractions for Gres. Why were they not enough to counteract the forces which assailed her?

"You have no idea what you are up against."

Gres wanted to paint a picture for her.

"If I battle these forces, will that make me powerful?"

"That will make you triumphant."

Gres set out with the blessings of the princess. They would meet together at the Flower City.

Close to the city was Camp Jericho. This was the living quarters for thousands of indigents. Many were veterans of the great campaigns. They had been abandoned to fend for themselves.

"So much for honor until death."

"That does not diminish our quest."

"And what was that for? The greater glory of the wealthy?"

Jacob was preaching to the faithful. One day they would rise up. Until then, they haunted the city like ghosts.

"They think that we can do nothing. But there is power in numbers. We have our rights."

Jacob argued for access for work and housing. He sought medical care. He wanted respect.

"As long as they don't see us as humans, we will continue to live like animals. We need to stand up for our rights."

Camp Jericho was a special place. They were a city in a city. They sought their own civil order. They defined the world in their own way.

Further out from Camp Jericho, there was a no man's land. There were no laws. It might have been a scarier place. But all the inhabitants were struggling. They barely had the strength to scare their own shadow.

The Glitter Palace rimmed the edge of the neutral zone.

"I think that some people see glamor by partying where most people barely have enough to eat. It gives them more of a sense of danger. This is all about gambling. They all believe in their immortality. These are angels who are still testing their wings.

"Right in the center here is the so-called Voice of Truth. This is the new Tower of Babel. These are people who are still convinced of their own authority.

"The princes still need this place of language. This Library of Alexandria. They are just better at turning out their own propaganda."

"It is always the same story. An army of noble soldiers face the wrath of brigands. This

is like the truth-telling wall. Everyone descends here ready to confess their own sins. But they end up attacking their enemies more vociferously than before.

“I don’t think that it is the impossibility of being heard. It is a Tower of Babel because those who know better are willing to drown out their opponents. The end of civil discourse.”

From Camp Jericho to the Tower, there is a very different feel. Language in the camp is vibrant. People will challenge each other. The only challenges at the Tower is the effort to reimpose one law.

“Human rights are what are enemies will not give up.”

“Are we becoming that cynical?”

The Dean was getting ready to challenge the very notion of universal truth espoused from the tower.

The Dean would prepare himself earlier in the evening. He had his ritual. Now he was accustoming himself to the silence. He was praying to he very order which would later ask him to be silent.

“I am not silent because I have nothing to say. I have a great deal to say, but I realize that my words must attain the right form for dissemination. I am preparing myself. I am organizing. I am learning the right rhythms.”

“On this tower, there is no coherence. These voices are always contradicting each other.”

Later in the night, there will be no noise coming from the Dean. He will have crossed over to the other side.

Jamal devoted himself to silence at a much earlier part of his journey. He was already floating in the zone. His body had been surpassed. And he had been sent into space. His presence guarded the Orbit. The Orbit was a small patch of land which people circled to get to the Boulevard

During the festival to Essa, the Orbit would be teeming with people. There would be games and contests. People would be eating and drinking. It would be like a circus.

The temple of Essa rose high above the Orbit. The Orbit curved into the Boulevard of Fire. It was lit up with great torches. The Boulevard led to the temple of Essa. The Boulevard represented the descent into total self-indulgence. This meant gratification of the senses. It was the progression from temptation to complete surrender.

There was no doubt that Gres was a great knight. He may have been without his steed, but he still represented greatness. As he got closer to the temple, he was lost in the throngs. People were coming from everywhere to worship the great queen Essa.

“She lives in a world of total perversity. She is given to complete degradation of the self. Hedonism without limit.”

The queen knew that Gres was in her kingdom. She wanted to conquer him. She had her men lead him to her.

“Who are you?”

“I am Essa. I am queen over the realm. One day I will control all of the universe. People will submit to me.”

Her sorcery was based on the devotion to chance.

“We are all playing a game which we may eventually lose, but Essa makes us feel like winners.”

She was a testament to the world of risk. She made time have a special power. Any single moment could be the time of liberation.

“Will we find that liberation in ourselves?”

“We are the liberation!”

This commitment was difficult to understand. Everyone was ready to make it as a celebrity. They could use their glamor to bargain for higher rewards.

“What kind of payments do you have now? We can make you a deal.”

How could you get your pound of flesh on the contracts? These contracts were very misleading. At first, it seemed that you were giving nothing away. But you were bargaining your body and your soul. There would be no protection for your well being. There was no future. This was the lure of an eternal now.

“What does that mean?”

“Have you ever felt your heart beat so fast? You felt as if you were coming out of your skin. You couldn’t think about anything else. That is the power which you can feel here. This is for the thrill-seekers. The war lovers. This is a forever conflict.”

Gres thought what she meant by the war lover. He hardly loved conflict.

“I just want to make it home. I am here to bring greater glory to my Princess Inora.”

Hearing that name was like putting a dagger in her heart. She did not want to give Gres any credit for his honor. She simply ignored what he had said.

“Do you want to make a play? Do you want to join our games?”

“I am a free man. I can respect your beliefs. But I have a code of my own. And I have to carry on.”

Gres took his things and made his way. The fires all burned around him. The shadow of the temple fell over him. He knew what was happening here.

“There is great sacrifice here.”

“It is time to put aside human sacrifice.”

“These are people who want to risk. It is for fame, for love, for fortune, for true liberation.”

“Too much pleasure can make a man immune to reality.”

“It can help soften the blow of his pain. Do you not want to end your suffering?”

“I did not say that I was suffering.”

“That is the lot of man.”

“I have no problems with my nature. I am free in my skin.”

“We can teach you how to fly.”

“I have enough blessings to help me on my way.”

“We can tempt you. Read my motto: *A million occasions contemplated, a thousand temptations won!*”

“I do not live with temptations. I need the real thing.”

“It is one and the same.”

“Not where I am from.”

Gres realized that he would have to fortify himself before he hit the road. He was risking himself to Essa’s trickery. He had little choice. This was why he was a knight. He would bear any challenge whether it was physical or supernatural.

For her part, Essa was going to show him her dance of the seven veils. Gres represented reason. Essa stood for irrationality. Even on mental level, he felt that he was being challenged by his hostess.

The real contest will be physical.

He was strong. That was why he had been assigned to his Inora.

“I am supposed to be true to her order.”

The first veil represented indulgence. Gres needed food, but he was not going to take too much. He was not going to get drunk with the other revelers. Essa was doing what she could to sway his appetites.

“I have already had my full.”

“You have a long trip ahead. You need to be prepared.”

He needed to be prepared for more formidable opposition than a couple of more helpings of food might prepare him.

“Eat up, Gres!”

She could barely affect him. She tried to inflame his anger. Gres was doing what he could to resist her culture. He was not going to get caught up in a shoving match with Essa’s compatriots.

Gres was quite satisfied. And he was very relaxed. He was not going to give in to Essa’s taunting.

With the next veil, she tried to attract him to her charms. She was a very appealing woman. Everything spoke of her experience in matters of the flesh.

“I am a knight. A man of my honor.”

“This place is full of your lusty sort all falling over themselves.”

“None of them have a great journey ahead.”

“I have a much longer journey ahead of me. I am trying to find myself, not lose myself in pleasure.”

“You are not accepting my hospitality.”

“There is only so much that I can take under these circumstances. I have modest needs. And I must soon be off.”

Essa felt that she needed to go further. She needed to play upon Gres’s insecurities. She was doing everything that she could to get into his head. Gres played it like an open book. He was keeping no secrets from Gres.

Her next play was much more bold. She was ready to besmirch the honor of fair Inora.

“Now, you are getting nowhere, you are showing yourself to be even more boorish than I thought.”

There were two more veils to come.

I still have the chance to bring you down.

“It is better to leave your other dances a mystery.”

But Essa was a true witch. And it was her job to drive Gres crazy. He could feel the effects now. It was like a fever coming over him. As much as he fought, the effects became worse. That only made Gres more resilient. He needed to resist.

He was weak from battling the fever within. This was difficult. He was about to start a major journey, and his powers had been sapped. This was hardly the kind of preparation that he

needed. The Queen of Darkness was now ready to subdue him completely.

With that final veil he was giving way to the powers of sleep. If she overcame him here, she would be triumphant.

Gres had faced similar challenges in the past. He had a great many of his own resources. But Essa was an expert. She could battle against these more traditional defenses. Gres knew various wizards and magical guides who could rescue him when he was in this state. It was as if his entreaty was sent out to his allies, and they came to his rescue. None of them were able to pierce the veil.

Gres lay in his seat unable to move. He felt paralyzed. He needed to find some way to free himself. He felt the spell sap him of any powers which he could use to overcome his opponent.

He knew that his mission would be compromised if he remained in Essa's temple. What possible solution was his.

He thought about fair Inora. And she represented such a commitment to light. How could her dreams ever be sullied by such a completely foul place? He was seeking a greater purity within himself. All his dreams were crashing to the ground. Had he let his own pride blind him to his own weaknesses. After all, he felt that Essa could not get the better of him. He had let her do her dance while he wine and dined. He had given in to his own physical comforts and forgot about his mission. Even this realization was not sufficient to enable him to regain his strength. He was lying there just waiting for Essa to deliver the final blow.

"Dance over him. It only adds to his indignity."

There could be nothing sadder. Gres was without allies. And he was being made a mockery by Essa's allies. One of her more experienced allies understood who they were dealing with.

"You have already humiliated him. You better take care of him quickly, or he will come back and raze this temple to the ground."

Essa laughed, "He doesn't look like he's going much of anywhere."

"You can do whatever you will with a helpless knight, but that hardly gives you any courage of your own."

"Courage is not such a great thing when you are fighting a real war."

"Your disrespect for your humanity does not give you long to reign. You will be destroyed from within."

"You are supposed to be one of my men."

"I have always been honest with you."

This seemed like the suitable cue to revive Gres. Essa was not smart enough to heed the advice from her liege. She was giving herself up to fate.

All the festivities diminished some of the effects of the spell. A groggy Gres was pulling himself together.

"Did one of your knights want to meet my challenge?"

The wise knight stepped forward: "I was defending your right to carry on with your mission. There might be some others who are willing to take your challenge."

The others realized that the wise knight knew better than stand in the way of Gres. They were hardly of the same caliber. And too much revelry had blunted their skill.

“It is you and me, Essa.”

Essa had used her last veil. She couldn't recall the same spell. Gres wondered who protected Essa in her impregnable temple?

“You have your knights. But who has built this place. Where did you get all of these revelers?”

“They are people lost in pleasure. They hang on. They serve me.”

She was discovering what kept the palace together. This was what made the party a party. There were so many who were prisoners of this place. And they were all forced to submit.

“Their own desires hold them captive.”

Gres did not want to become one of them. He needed to make his break once and for all. The temple loomed large as he made his escape. He was going to a much more dangerous place. There were no knights with codes. There was only madness. He was descending to a world of utter darkness. It was a deep darkness of the soul. Total damnation.

If Gres was immersed in his descent, the princess was seeking her own transcendence. The great knight had already encountered the lowest point of his travels. He had journey through the underworld. He was about to face the physical challenges of the higher levels. He was still making his way to the Flower City.

He was beckoned by the lights of the Pilgrims' Highway. Despite the apparent joy of its welcome the Highway was anything but a friendly place Gres paused to prepare himself for what would follow.

Magda was waiting for Gres escaped from the temple. He was sure that she had seen how stooped over he was from the terrible experience. She was bestowing charity on the unfortunate around.

“I am heading down the Pilgrims' Road.”

“I can give you a ride whatever way you're going.”

“I am going west. Just the opposite direction from which you came.”

“That is no big deal. You can pay me for the journey.”

“Pay you? I may be a proud knight. But I have fallen on hard times. All that I have is my nobility. I am off in search of greater treasure.”

“Keep searching my brave one. When you find the gold, tell me, and we can make great plans.”

The Pilgrims' Road was quite dangerous. To deal with his fright, he called upon his princess. Inora could inspire him in his quest. And she was battling great odds herself. Gres was undergoing this outward journey. And she was going deeper in herself.

She had great concentration. She was creating these lovely patterns in her mind. She was the great draftsman. She was designing the patterns of the universe.

This was only the first stage in her greater enlightenment. She was exploring herself. She was delving into the mysteries of the cosmos. She was discovering about the basic elements. She was seeing the connection of love.

Gres was confident that Inora was blessing him with the power that he needed. He felt the inspiration of her wind. It helped him share in the greater glory of the world.

The Pilgrims' Road was beset with threatening brigands. They would tear a man from limb to limb. Gres thought of them as wolves. They would attack in group. They lived off the



main road. But they would keep watch until the time was right. Then they would make their vicious attack.

The road was frighteningly quiet as he made his way. There were a few weary pilgrims who had made camp. They had nothing. They wanted redemption. At each crossroad, Gres looked for the wolves. When he finally reached Enlightenment Bridge, he needed to be ready. He could see them snarling on the bridge.

What he did not see was the wolves attacking from behind? They just came from everywhere. They poured over from the bridge. They chased him from both ends of the crossroads. They attacked him from the back. He did what he could to fight them off. But they were many, and he was one man. He was able to make his escape. He was limping. He was all bloody. He was barely able to survive.

He went under the bridge. At the other end of the bridge, the shadow guards moved back and forth. They guarded the Shrine of Knowledge. They were too late to do him much good. He seemed on his last legs.

Gres would not stop moving forward. And he reached the garden. Gres was blessed by the garden of contentment. He felt the miracle cure touch him all over. He smelled the sweet fragrance of the roses. They gave him their healing powers. That was all that he needed.

Gres was more powerful than ever. He had weathered a terrible attack that would have killed any other man. In the garden, he had been refreshed.

The guards warned him: "You have escaped the wolves. But there are wild dogs ahead."

After the ferocity of the wolves, he was ready for anything.

Princess Inora had already begun her own journey. These roads were much safer. But she needed to just as vigilant. She was expected to progress on her spiritual path.

Wild dogs patrolled the west side of Pilgrim's Road. These were once the pets of human being, but they had escaped and made their own way. Their barks and disobedient manners took the place of real fury. If they caught a weakness in you, they would pounce. Otherwise, they were all noise. They did have their dramatics. They would get all huffy and run around like little monsters. There wasn't much that they could really do.

"All bark and no bite."

Gres knew that he would have to be careful. One slip up, and they would take advantage of him. He had escaped the wolves. Another attack would be too much to bear.

He felt a presence lead him on. He surrendered to its influences. There was a certain gentleness in its influences. Gres also felt directed by this human force. He was determined to carry on his journey no matter what were the odds.

The dogs came up on him from the heart of the neighborhood. They all sported the same angry demeanor. For his part, Gres barked back and continued on his quest.

The wild dogs all looked at him as he distanced himself from them. Each one maintained that Gres would have been easy sport. That was not to be.

Gres started to walk with confidence. It was night time, but he made his way forward through the city market. He had faced enough threats. There were more to come.

He felt himself being beckoned forward. He was caught by insane powers. He could not resist. The pull became more intense. He hardly resisted. This was the direction in which he was headed. But it all felt very strange. He felt his feet give out from under him. He had trouble

staying upright. He was slipping, and he couldn't regain his balance. He just went down.

He felt that he was being blasted with water. He couldn't recover. He couldn't resist. The water soaked him everywhere. He was getting caught more and more. The waters swirled around him. He was being pulled under. He wasn't just passing through water. He was becoming overwhelmed. He was tossed by these turbulent currents. He was losing his sense of direction.

The currents pulled him into a giant cataract. And the waters poured down on him from above. He was caught in a whirlpool of water. It was now twisting back and forth. He was surrendering all control.

He was now being sucked down. He had submerged. He would have to use all his resources to escape.

Gres was now wet and cold. But the worse was passed. He simply paraded on. Little did he know that he was the perfect lure for a pack of wild cats. He could hear the howls.

"This is the Tiger Garden."

These were not tigers, but their bite was just as deadly. The pack surrounded him. They took advantage of his solitude.

"What do you want with me?"

"We want everything that you have. We have come for your life."

He continued moving. He was not going to give them an easy target. One of the cats block his path, but he simply moved around him. He was taunting all of them. He would not yield. They each tried to act fierce. They were real monsters. They were not like the dogs. Their bite was deadly. But they were inexperienced. They did not know the right moment to attack. Gres was separating from he pack. Each cat waited for the other. When Gres forded a stream, he made it much more difficult for the cats to follow him. They each roared. That only gave him more time. They never were able to set themselves. He ran off.

The Flower City was in his view. He had made it through multiple challenges, and he had survived. The flowers were resplendent. The city welcomed the great knight. He looked more noble in the grand lights of the city.

His princess was waiting for her.

"Alexander is supposed to join me."

"I am glad that he could take time out of his busy schedule."

"You do not like Alexander."

"He is not man of my kind."

"He is a true noble. What would you have him do?"

"He is your prince. He is not mine."

"You do no serve him."

"Not at all. He is from another realm."

"Will you have to challenge him?"

"I have my own loyalties."

"I am your princess. What if I ally myself with him?"

"Why would you do that? To get me angry?"

"Do you think that much of yourself?"

"Are you mocking me?"

Gres had gone through quite a great deal to bring honor to his princess. She seemed to be belittling his great achievements.

“If I knew that you were doing all this to get close to me, I might not have asked you to take these risks.”

“This is what a knight does. Do you even know what a princess does?”

“You are challenging my prince.”

“I am simply not willing to serve him. Are you?”

“He is a great man.”

“He is more given to riches than honor.”

“Where has your honor taken you?”

“Do not misjudge on the basis of appearances. Have you not learned from your spiritual challenges.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You did not learn your lessons.”

“We were on very different journeys.”

Gres realized that the princess had been given all the signs to complete her journey. But she had learned nothing. Gres was greatly disappointed. He had been inspired on his quest by this virtuous princess. But she was impetuous. She only observed the exterior trappings of nobility.

Gres felt like challenging the rude Prince Alexander. That was not his style. The best revenge would be to leave the two of them to each other.

“Do you not love me, my glorious knight?”

“Inora, is that some kind of trick question. If I say yes, you will only return to your Alexander.”

“You have not said no!”

He gazed in her eyes. Then he found his fiery mount, and he sped off. He traveled the same route from where he had come. This time, he was prepared. He was on a powerful horse. He claimed his destiny!

Alida liked this story. The princess Inora had the opportunity to learn from experience. But her experiences were not dear enough. She did not cherish the great knight.