

Prince Tagert's Quest is an 87,000-word, multi-POV, rom-com/romantasy. It pokes fun at gender roles and the striations of the social classes in Medieval England and takes a look at the value of being true to oneself. All with a rollicking sense of humor. It is the first book in the Unfettered Fairytale series.

**Prince Tagert's Quest**  
**An Unfettered Fairytale (Book 1)**

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## **Chapter 1 • Prince Tagert the Putz**

*An English castle, sometime before the Renaissance...*

“Prince Tagert is a putz!” was the wretched sentence repeating endlessly in Tagert’s head. It reverberated like a chant between the sharp metallic sounds of the two broadswords clashing: *Prince* (clack) *Tagert* (clack) *is* (clack) *a putz!* (clack!), over and over again while Tagert sparred with his sword instructor, Fergus. The only other sounds to disrupt the hellishly circular thought were the tread of his boots on the flagstones of the courtyard and the squeak of his leather jerkin as he wielded the heavy sword. The worst part about the nasty sentence was that it had been said by his father. His own father had called him—*the crown prince, for pity’s sake*—a putz!

Tagert, naturally, did not consider himself a putz. The word he would have chosen was... er, *sensitive*. Either way, he knew he was a disappointment to his father—had been all his life. Preferring the lute and poetry to the sword and jousting, he had met his father’s efforts to turn his mind toward the manly arts with indifference. At three and twenty, Tagert had grown into a strapping young buck. He exceeded both the king and his brother Laird in height, and was blessed with broad shoulders, narrow hips, and long legs that put many a young tree trunk to shame. He had a pleasant face and golden ringlet curls, which (he was told) were the envy of every young maiden in the kingdom. A square jaw, emerald eyes, and two rows of straight, white teeth topped off his regal good looks.

But despite having the perfect physique for manly arts, like sword fighting, they had never been his preferred pastime.

*This kind of activity, Tagert thought as he parried his instructor, is like being punished for living!*

“Chin up!” Fergus hissed.

*Oh, bother! You try keeping your chin up when your father has called you a putz!*

Tagert chanced a clumsy lunge toward Fergus, hitting the edge of the instructor’s sword with his own.

He knew he should not continue to feel so perturbed by his father’s statement—he’d heard it over a week ago, after all. That was time enough for the initial sting to have dulled. But when he’d met Fergus in the courtyard where they were now training, he’d looked up the side of the castle and seen his father—standing at the turret window of the king’s private chamber—watching him. Watching him and undoubtedly stewing in paternal disappointment. Seeing his

father had reminded him of the slight, and that had sent the sentence, *Prince Tagert is a putz*, cascading around in his head.

As he fought with Fergus, a breeze blew past him, lifting the golden ringlets of his hair and drying the sweat on his brow. It would have been a refreshing breeze, except that it had drifted to him by way of the moat. The moat surrounded the castle, of course, so all breezes drifted by way of the moat, carrying the various and sundry stenches known to moats the world over: brackish water, mold and mildew, rotting detritus, and of course, good old-fashioned sewage.

As he parried, he told himself that at least his father hadn't made the putz comment directly to his face.

*That's one consolation, isn't it?*

Of course, that meant his father had been making the statement to someone else, which was, in a way, worse. Talking about him behind his back.

*So, no, that's not a consolation!*

Granted, he would not have heard the comment if he hadn't been skulking about outside the door to his father's private chamber—the same tower room where the monarch stood at this very moment. His father's private chamber was a spacious room high in the south tower, where his father took meetings and retreated to work on the small model ships that he built when the stresses of ruling the kingdom weighed too heavily on him. Of course, Tagert had not gone there at the time specifically to eavesdrop. He'd forgotten, in fact, exactly *why* he'd gone there once he'd heard the shameful statement.

“Watch your left!” Fergus snapped.

Tagert shifted so he was fully facing Fergus before lunging at him again.

As he'd waited outside his father's door on that fateful day, Tagert had heard low voices in conversation. The part of the conversation he'd overheard, prior to the bit about his being a putz, had been interesting, although significantly less important to him. His father was speaking to his two most-trusted knights—Sir Reginold and Sir Raleigh—about a special mission. One that involved seeking out ogres or trolls or some such dangerous, disreputable creature. He couldn't make out what the nature of the mission was, but it was clear that the two knights were less than keen to take it on. Sir Reginold, in particular, hinted broadly that he expected some sort of commendation—or compensation—out of the whole thing. Mayhap an extra purse of gold (which, in fact, Tagert could hardly blame him for wanting; ogres were not only ill-tempered, violent, and foul-smelling, but so ugly that grown men were known to cast up their accounts on sight of one). But then he'd heard his father call him a putz, and he'd stalked off in anger, putting an end to his unintended eavesdropping.

“Maintain your stance!” Fergus said in exasperation.

Tagert held up his left hand to indicate that he needed a moment to catch his breath. Then he bent over, his left hand braced on his knee, while he tried to rid his head of the thought.

It hadn't particularly surprised him that his father would say such a thing about him. He didn't have that devil-may-care swagger that most of the knights had, and which his father favored. He didn't chase after pretty maidens or get himself into manly scrapes brought on by too much drinking, boasting, and carousing. He didn't go riding off into the woods on jaunts of danger and daring. In short, he wasn't the sort of man that his father wanted him to be: a man in search of the next conquest. A man like his father. Or his brother Laird.

Tagert was more like his mother, to be honest. His mother was quiet, sensitive, and thoughtful. She believed the kingdom should be ruled with a wise head and a kind heart. Rather than at the point of a sword. His father believed the most effective king ruled with fear. "Make sure they fear you, son," his father had said time and time again. "If they don't fear you, they'll never follow you."

Fergus walked around the courtyard, slashing his blade through the air as though killing time, or imaginary foes.

*Does Fergus know the king is watching us? Tagert wondered, glancing again at the turret window. And, if so, is he putting on a performance? Motivated, mayhap, by fear of the man?*

Tagert stood up. "Fergus? Do you fear my father?"

Fergus stopped attacking the air, glanced quickly up toward the tower window, and gave Tagert a frightened look—as if the very question was more fearsome than the king himself. "I... er... I beg your pardon, Your Highness?"

"Are you afraid of King Ripley?"

Fergus looked down at the stones at Tagert's feet. "I... er... It's difficult to say. That is... um..." He paused before finally looking at Tagert and saying rather pathetically, "Yes?"

Tagert smiled. "And that, I am sure, is the answer my father would prefer."

Fergus relaxed enough to smile feebly.

"Father believes a monarch should be feared, but I disagree. I'd prefer to be respected." Tagert paused and then smiled again. "I suspect, however, that you neither fear nor respect me."

A look of sheer panic came over Fergus. Tagert could see the man's mind working furiously, grasping at whatever straws of personal diplomacy he could reach, however nebulous. "I... er... I, I very much both fear and respect the power of the crown, Your Highness," he said, his eyes back to the ground in front of them. "Of course, I know you far better than I know the king, so that helps to... er... ease the... um... bit about fear. And you are a very amiable young man," he went on in a rush, "which makes you far less fearsome, while, at the same time, more... respectable?" He looked back up at Tagert, a hopeful look of apology clear on his face.

"Ah, but you must admit, as a swordfighter I am mediocre," Tagert replied with a grin, "Which makes respect more difficult."

Fergus' expression changed to shock. He'd obviously never heard a royal person make such an honest and self-deprecating statement. But then it seemed to calm him, and he took a deep breath. "If I may... er... begging your pardon, my lord... but if I may speak plainly?"

"Please do."

"You have all the makings of a skilled swordsman. It's just that... well, you seem not to enjoy it terribly. Your mind seems to be elsewhere, as though there are any number of things you'd rather be doing."

Tagert smiled again.

*Fergus is not only a very astute man in terms of reading people, but he is also brave enough to be honest—a very appealing quality.*

Tagert looked down at his princely sword, allowing his gaze to follow the length to its end, the steel glinting in the few beams of sunlight that managed to break through the cloud cover. It was a beautiful sword, and while he understood the need for the crown prince to be trained in its usage, there were, indeed, other things he'd much rather be holding. His lute, for example, from which he could coax dulcet melodies. And while the clash of swords made a kind of music, it was discordant. Disharmonic. Not only would he rather be making music with his lute, but it was something he was infinitely more skilled at than sword fighting.

"I daresay Laird is a swordsman you'd fear and respect, were you to meet him in combat."

"Oh, aye," Fergus replied, his worry about his previous statement now gone. "Prince Laird is, without a doubt, the most skilled swordfighter in the kingdom. He surely loves the sport, and he approaches it with a ferocious focus. The sword is not a mere tool in his hands. It becomes a part of him. An extension of himself."

Tagert nodded. But being good with a blade was only part of what made his brother so enviable. Laird was everything their father valued in a man. King Ripley had made it clear he would have much preferred Laird as the crown prince. Laird had the charisma that gave the people hope that the kingdom would stand strong once Ripley passed on. But Tagert was the first born, so the task of carrying on the monarchy fell to him.

In truth, Tagert believed he'd make a much better king than Laird would. For a start, he paid far more attention to his tutors during their classes on military strategy and government function, and he actually attended the meetings that their father held with his advisors. Tagert took his future role seriously, knowing that one day all of the responsibility would fall to him. He wanted to be prepared. Laird, on the other hand, enjoyed shunning responsibility as much as he enjoyed chasing pleasure.

Tagert also saw his future role as being more than just the defender of the kingdom against neighboring enemies who would pillage and loot you just as soon as look at you. And he certainly did not see himself as a leader in search of another conquest to add to the kingdom's coffers and land. No, he believed that his work as a ruler would require building the kingdom up from the inside. He knew this made him unpopular among his father's advisors. When, for

example, the subject had come up of building roads that had no military purpose but would help peasants get their goods to market, he had been the only voice in the room to speak in favor. But he hadn't let that keep him from stridently making his case. In short, he believed in himself. At least far more than his father did.

Thinking again of his father caused him to glance up at the tower window. The king was now looking out past him—beyond the ramparts, in fact, at the front gate of the castle. He followed his father's gaze and could just make out a pair of knights on horseback entering at the portcullis that was situated just this side of the moat. Oddly enough, the two knights led between them an ancient donkey that was carrying on its back what appeared to be a pile of particularly vile rags. The mounted pair was likely Reginold and Raleigh returned from their secret mission, but Tagert had no idea what (or potentially *who*) was on the donkey.

He decided he didn't care what his father and the two knights were up to. He raised his sword to Fergus in a salute to indicate he was ready to fight again. He was not going to be further annoyed by his father's disappointment in him. He wanted his father's approval, yes, but he wanted it for the man he *was*. Not for the man his father *wished he were*. He was not a putz, and it was time to stand up for himself. And since he had a sword in his hand, now was a perfect time to start.

As he circled Fergus, their swords rang with a new series of blows. A new rhythm was established, and Tagert filled the silent spaces with a chant of his own. *I* (clack) *am* (clack) *not* (clack) *a putz* (clack). He thought and rethought the words so forcefully he would not have been surprised to learn that Fergus could somehow hear them, like Gregorian monks in chapel, calling out in unison: *I* (clack) *am* (clack) *NOT* (CLACK) *a putz!* (clack!). Then he did it again. And again, until the rhythm was synchronous with his movements.

He stepped forward, forcing his instructor to parry back. Fergus raised his eyebrows in a show of surprise (and, possibly... *respect?*) at this sudden new ferocity. Tagert threw himself into the lesson in a way he never had before and his whole feeling about it began to change. Sword fighting, he realized, had a very theatrical flair. A meter. A rhythm. A harmonic resonance, like a well-struck chord on the lute.

*I do like the showmanship of it all!*

Mayhap that was how he could focus more forcefully on his actions. He imagined he was fighting for the approval of an adoring audience, who cheered him on. He was no longer just himself fighting his instructor. He could be anyone—an entitled nobleman, a desperate highwayman, a simple soldier. Even a violent pirate. And he could be fighting anyone—or anything. A fire-breathing dragon, even. He imagined the gasps of the worried crowd as Fergus' sword met his own.

As he thrust and pushed his instructor towards the edge of the courtyard, a wonderful idea came to him. A wonderful, truly inspired idea. The inspiration made him fight even more strongly, and before he knew it, he had his instructor backed up against the castle wall, his blade held just inches from the man's neck. Fergus gave Tagert a look he'd never seen directed at himself

before—a look of fear mixed with... *is it really that? Yes! There is no doubt.* It was a look of respect.

Tagert took a deep breath, stepped back, and slid his sword into his scabbard as a signal that both the fight and the lesson were over. He gave his instructor a minuscule bow, which Fergus returned with a great deal more deference, before Tagert turned and began walking toward the back entrance of the castle. He would head directly to his bedchamber, where he could sit down with his lute and bring his wonderful idea to life.

Of course, that meant running the gauntlet of people who lived and worked in the castle. He knew it would be acceptable to ignore virtually everyone he saw—as every person who was not a member of the royal family knew not to make eye contact with him or speak to him directly unless in reply to his own words. But, as a friendly lad, he couldn’t help but acknowledge and smile at all the people he passed. This was one of the many reasons he was generally well liked by the people, and it was only problematic when he passed women. As fragile as his confidence in sword fighting was, it stood head and shoulders above his faith in his ability to tangle with a woman. Sadly, his reticence toward women did not seem to quell their enthusiastic reaction to him.

Keeping his gaze straight ahead, he passed through the castle corridors while countless young women—from the lowliest chambermaids to the highest ladies-in-waiting—sighed and curtsied deeply as though exposing their bosoms for his personal benefit. They blushed and batted their eyelashes at him. He kept walking, hoping to keep his willy from getting woody, as it had a wont to do when women curtseyed and showed him their bosoms. He finally rounded the last corner, opened his bedchamber door, and entered his place of sanctuary.

And that was where he spied it—the one gently rounded body that made him warm with passion, lying as though reclining on a comfortable chair awaiting his special attention: his beloved lute.

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