

PRINCE TAGERT'S QUEST: AN UNFETTERED FAIRYTALE, a 79,000-word, multi-POV rom-com, 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. *PRINCE TAGERT'S QUEST* has witty, word-play humor much like Loretta Chase's *TEN THINGS I HATE ABOUT THE DUKE* and Sofi Laporte's *LADY AVERY AND THE FALSE BUTLER*. It is the first book in the Unfettered Fairytale series.

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

by Sharon Kayne

Chapter 1 • The King's Plan

Prince Tagert is a putz, King Ripley thought as he looked out over the ramparts of his castle, his gaze landing on the grassy courtyard below and the one person who always made him sigh in discontent: his son. His heir, Prince Tagert. Ripley didn't mean the boy was a putz in a cruel way. The Prince wasn't stupid or even particularly worthless. What he was, sadly, was abominably ambivalent. At three-and-twenty, Tagert should have shown some sort of interest in *something*. Sword play. Barmaids and other wenches. Even animal husbandry, for pity's sake. But nothing seemed to ignite passion in the boy. True, he was, at this moment, engaged in a sword fight – a lesson, actually – but even in the midst of battle, the boy clearly lacked any particular drive. This was the case in part, of course, because he knew his instructor would not actually run him through should his strength flag. And the boy was, at least, holding his own. But it was clear to the King that Tagert was not engaged body-and-soul in the exercise. It was performative at best.

Ripley sighed again. He wasn't getting any younger. Naturally, he had no imminent plans of dying, but he was still quite certain that the kingdom would not be in the best of hands if the crown were to fall to Tagert anytime soon. The young man needed to grow up a bit first. Or, perhaps, just man up. Oddly enough, the boy had matured into a strapping young buck. He exceeded the King 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 that were the envy of every young maiden in the kingdom. A square jaw, emerald eyes, and two rows of straight, white teeth capped off his regal good looks. And he had a sterling character to match – he was conscientious, unfailingly kind, and had the honor of a gentleman.

Rather too much honor. Every woman from the lowliest chambermaids to the highest ladies-in-waiting sighed and batted their eyelashes at him. He could have bedded literally hundreds of women by now, had he been so inclined. But, according to the castle scuttlebutt, the boy had so far declined to sow his wild oats in any field, female or otherwise. Ripley had even gone so far as to send a working gal to the boy's chamber on his eighteenth birthday, but she had sworn that, despite her best efforts, the two had spent the evening playing cards. That was only after Tagert had unsuccessfully attempted to teach the young woman how to play chess. Initially, the King's ever-hopeful ears had misheard her say that Tagert had attempted to play *with* her chest.

“And why didn't you let him play with your chest?” Ripley had roared in disbelief.

“*Chess*, yer majesty, not me chest,” she’d said. “You know, the board game with the little horses an’ castles on it. I couldn’t even get him ta *look at* me chest, an’ it were practically falling out of me gown,” she’d added, with extreme chagrin.

Fortunately, Ripley expected some news today that would put the final piece of his new plan into action. A brilliant plan, he thought. One that would awaken the testosterone that must be dozing far below the surface of the sleepy boy’s sun-kissed skin. It was nothing less than a quest. A royal, magnificent quest. In fact, as Ripley gazed out over the castle, he believed he saw a pair of riders decked out in suits of armor approach the front gate. They looked like the two men Ripley had sent out to track down an ogre. Oddly enough, they towed between them an ancient donkey that appeared to be carrying on its back a pile of particularly vile rags. That could hardly be an ogre in disguise – it was far too small for a start. And the knights had not been engaged to bring the ogre back with them – simply to track it down and secure its services with the promise of large amounts of gold.

Ripley withdrew from the castle turret and took a seat at the table in his private study. He would await his ogre-hunters there. The turret room was more than a study. It was also the King’s workspace where he spent the few hours of leisure he was afforded at his favorite hobby: building miniature battle ships. Presently on his table was a rendering of the new ship he was planning to build. He always enjoyed starting a new model ship, as building the hull and decking were his favorite parts. The finishing work – the rigging and masts – was the fiddly bit, and it required a great deal of patience. It was a job Ripley had to be in the right frame of mind to tackle. He glanced over his rendering with pride and was about to reach for a bit of charcoal to sketch in some detail when a page knocked on the solid oak door and poked his head into the room.

Ripley raised his head and his eyebrows.

“Sirs Reginold and Raleigh are here for you, your majesty,” the page said.

Ripley nodded his head and rolled up the rendering while the page opened the door more widely to accommodate the two men, who entered. They were followed by the pile of particularly vile rags, which was balanced on a pair of very thin and knock-kneed legs covered in filthy black stockings that were almost more holes than hose. The pile of rags hung back near the wall next to the door, which the page then closed. Reginold and Raleigh both bowed to the King – as low as their breastplates of armor would allow. They crossed their right arms in front of their chests in the knightly salute, universally known to mean *I stand with you, my liege* or, after a heavy meal, *I’ve got the devil’s own heartburn*.

“Well, what have you?” Ripley asked. “Did you engage an ogre?”

The two men looked at one another as if each was waiting for the other to start the conversation. Finally, one of them cleared his throat. “I’m afraid, your majesty, we were unable to locate an ogre,” Reginold said.

“Couldn’t find an ogre?” Ripley nearly roared in response. “I thought every bloody bridge from here to the coast had an ogre living under it?”

“That would be trolls, sire,” Raleigh said.

“Where do ogres live if not under bridges?”

“They generally live in mountainous areas, your majesty,” Reginold said.

“And occasionally swamps, sire,” Raleigh threw in.

“There’s plenty of both mountains and swamps in the kingdom. Yet you couldn’t locate a single ogre?” Ripley said incredulously.

“No, sire. Ogres tend to be ... er, touchy about being seen,” Raleigh said.

“They’re good hiders, they are,” Reginold added.

“Good hiders?” Ripley said with incredulity. “But in all the folktales and songs they’re always jumping out at unsuspecting shepherds and the like and grinding their bones for bread.”

“I think we can assume that the folktales are not entirely true to life,” said Reginold.

“Yes, sire. In reality, ogres are rather shy,” added Raleigh. “Even with each other, it’s said.”

“Shy? Whyever would they be shy?”

“Well, they are known to be godawful ugly, your majesty,” said Reginold. “Ugly enough that grown men have been known to cast up their accounts on sight.”

“Ugly to us, perhaps. Certainly, they don’t think of themselves – or each other – as ugly?” Ripley queried. Both men stared at him rather blankly. Raleigh even shrugged his shoulders.

King Ripley found himself nearly speechless at this news. “But, really. If that’s the case, how is it... how do they create *baby ogres* and the like?”

Reginold shivered so severely his coat of armor nearly rattled.

“I’ve never given any thought to such a thing, sire,” Raleigh said (although now he was sure to have some extremely distressing nightmares about it).

“The ... the thing is, your majesty,” Reginold said, recovering himself, “All we really need is a captor. Doesn’t have to be an ogre, does it? Just something horrible and terrifying.”

King Ripley thought this over for a moment. “I suppose so. Although I did think there would be advantages to having a supremely ugly, violently ill-mannered ogre guarding the maiden. But I suppose a different creature would do – assuming it was gruesome enough.”

Sir Reginold and Sir Raleigh looked at one another and grinned. “What we got is truly hideous, sire, truly,” said Raleigh.

“Well then, what is it?”

Sir Reginold glanced back at the pile of rags before addressing the King. “We got you an old hag.”

The head on top of the pile of rags shot up. “Bloody hell! Who you callin’ an *old* hag?” it said, pouting at the insult.

“Manners!” Raleigh muttered at the rags.

“May we present Worts, your majesty,” said Reginold, gesturing at the vile rags.

The pile of rags tottered forward and made an off-balance, rather creaky curtsy. “Pleased ta make yer acquaintance, yer majesty, I’m sure,” it said.

“Er... Mistress Worts?” King Ripley asked.

“Just call me Worts. Ev’rybody does.”

And Ripley could see why. The old woman’s face – what could be seen of it beneath the mass of tangled grey hair and a ragged hat – was covered in warts. Even the lids of her beady eyes had them, as did the single hand he could see, which was holding up the edge of her ragged clothing as if to protect it from picking up muck off of the wooden floor (which, having been scrubbed just yesterday, was far more sanitary than her gown). She had a nose so peaked it could be pressed into service as an eagle’s talon, and to say that her hair was as untidy as a bird’s nest was an insult to self-respecting birds everywhere.

She cracked a toothy grin at the King. *There was no question that this hag is among the most revolting of my subjects across the kingdom*, the King thought (and he was including actual ogres in that score). But how could something that is, in reality, simply an old woman – ugly or not – keep a young maiden captive? The pile of rags did not look particularly dangerous. Not even terribly authoritative.

“Er... Miss Worts,” King Ripley began again.

“Just Worts, yer majesty.”

“Right. Er... Worts, while there is no question that you are, in fact, quite horrible–”

“Why thank ye kindly,” Worts interrupted him again.

“Be that as it may,” the King said, his patience fading, “How can I be certain you can keep a captured maiden under your control? Have you a dungeon? With bars and vaults and rusty locks?”

“Worts lives in a cave,” Raleigh broke in, “and it’s guarded by–” he shared a glance and a smile with Reginold before continuing, “–A fearsome dragon!”

For the first time since the two knights had entered the King’s study, Ripley’s eyes lit up and his countenance began to lift. “A dragon, you say? Wings and scales and all that?”

Worts and the two knights nodded in unison.

“And it breathes fire?”

“A 'course it breathes fire!” Worts said, her pride clearly wounded. “It ain't no overgrown lizard.”

King Ripley nodded, and the start of a smile began to show on his face.

“There's more,” Reginold said. “Worts is handy with potions and the like.”

“I can brew you summin' that will grow hair on Tagert's chest, if that's yer wish,” Worts said with a wink.

“Sleeping draughts?” King Ripley asked pointedly.

Worts paused. “Sleepin' draughts is extra. Tricky things, them.”

“And where is this dragon-guarded cave?”

“In the Nefarious North Mountains, sire,” Raleigh said.

“Ah, the Nefarious North Mountains – where you were unable to locate a single ogre?” the King replied even more pointedly.

“Ain't been no ogres 'round fer years. Hortense keeps 'em away,” Worts said with pride.

“And who is Hortense?” King Ripley asked.

“Me dragon,” Worts replied with a smile.

King Ripley took a deep breath and a moment to consider the deal before him. It had all of the requisite elements – allure, danger, the promise of valiance. The promise of violence. He finally nodded his head. “That will do,” he said, addressing his two knights. “As long as Tagert must face and vanquish a dragon to free the maiden, that will do.”

“Vanquish?” said Worts with shock. “As in *slay*?”

“Well, yes, of course, Tagert must slay the dragon. How else is he to rescue the maiden?” Ripley replied.

“Deal's off then. No one's to put down me Hortense,” Worts said defensively.

King Ripley sighed gruffly and loudly enough to be heard in the courtyard below. “Of course he's got to slay the dragon. How else is he supposed to rescue the maiden? Sneak her away in the dead of night? Some folktale that would make! I can hear it now, troubadours singing about the stealthy prince and his shivering maiden tiptoeing around the fearsome dragon while it sleeps. Good heavens! He'd have to take off his chainmail and spurs and whatnot!”

Worts addressed the two knights. “No one said nothin' 'bout no slaying. Deal's off.” And then, to punctuate her remark, she spun toward the door behind her to leave.

“Wait!” exclaimed Raleigh. He turned to address the King. “Does his highness really need to *kill* the dragon? How about if he runs off with the maiden while the dragon is busy ... er ... eating up his squire?”

“Are you volunteering to be that squire, Raleigh?” Ripley asked.

“Er, I’m a *knight*, your majesty,” Raleigh squeaked.

“At the moment.”

“How about,” Reginold ventured, “Tagert and the squire simply chained the dragon up? Or gave him a nasty wound. You could cure the dragon of a flesh wound, couldn’t you?” he asked Worts.

“No one’s hurtin’ me Hortense.”

King Ripley took another moment to consider the scenario. *Who would know – besides Tagert himself and, of course, his squire and the maiden (both of whom could be paid off) – whether Tagert killed the blasted dragon or not? For that matter – who would care? Besides the vile rag woman?* Ripley could promise Worts that Tagert wouldn’t *try* to kill the dragon – even though it was Ripley’s deepest desire that Tagert do something just that dramatic and courageous. But whatever actually happened during the rescue was entirely up to Tagert. Never mind that it was Ripley’s deepest worry that Tagert would take the wuss’s way out and not even try to engage the dragon. He looked Worts in the eyes.

“Tagert is a princely young man. A gentleman. I’m sure he would never hurt another creature – unless his own life was at stake.” Sadly, Ripley knew this to be all too true. When the boy went out on hunting parties, he never took credit for any kills. Even though he was a crack shot with a bow and arrow, having been well trained. As with sword play, Tagert had shown himself to be a conscientious practitioner – as long as it was just a matter of practice.

Worts did not look mollified. “So, I have yer word, yer majesty?”

“On one condition,” Ripley said. Worts nodded in anticipation. “That the dragon doesn’t hurt Tagert.”

Worts nodded again in reply. “All that’s left, then, is the matter o’ the purse.”

King Ripley rolled his eyes. Only the lowliest peasants would be so coarse as to bring up a subject as sordid as money with the King himself. He scowled at his two knights.

“Er, we’ve made Worts aware of the purse, your majesty,” said Reginold. “And she’s agreed to the amount. The thing is she ... ah, she wants half up front,” Reginold continued, bringing his head down as though to stall a royal outburst of rage.

Ripley sighed, opened a carved wooden box on his table, and took out a small purse of royal purple velvet. It should have the right amount of gold coin in it to end this tedious transaction, although he would be damned if he was going to appear concerned enough to actually count it. He leaned over the table, tossed the bag to the rag woman, and gave her a look that could not be interpreted as anything other than absolute dismissal.

Worts hefted the small bag in her hand, sketched a bony curtsy, and turned to leave the room. And leave it, she would – had she the strength to open the solid oak door.

After watching her unsuccessfully try to wrench it open twice, Sir Raleigh intervened, opening the door for her and then closing it behind her after taking a moment to watch the pile of rags totter slowly down the corridor.

The King relaxed again in his chair. “And what of the maiden?” he asked.

“The maiden has been found and her services have been acquired, sire,” Raleigh said.

“She doesn't know?”

“Of course not, your majesty. We bargained with her father,” Reginold said. “A local candlemaker, he is.”

“And she's lovely?”

“Breathtakingly so,” Raleigh said. “Raven hair. Skin as white as ivory.”

“Very well,” Ripley said. “So, we are all set to begin. On Grouching Day next.”

“On Grouching Day next,” Reginold said as the two knights bowed and retreated from the King, closing the door to his private study behind them.

The next Grouching Day was nearly a week away and Ripley was eager to set his planned quest into motion. Perhaps he should move things along by setting the stage with Tagert ahead of time. It was, in fact, past time to speak to the lad man-to-man and encourage him to enjoy a dalliance with a woman. Or two. Opening his eyes to the joys of sexual conquest would surely put the young man into the right frame of mind to pursue his royal quest. Not to mention, give him the balls to complete it.

King Ripley got up from his chair, made his way into the corridor, and walked toward Tagert's bedchamber.

If you are a publisher or literary agent who would like to read my full manuscript please [email me a request](#) and include your name and the name of your publishing house or agency.