

*A medieval romantasy, PRINCE TAGERT'S QUEST: AN UNFETTERED FAIRYTALE is a 79,000-word, multi-POV rom-com. 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 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 of a series.*

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

Sharon Kayne

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

*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-fighting instructor, Fergus. The only other sound to disrupt the hellishly circular thought was the squeak of his leather jerkin as he wielded his large 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!

“Chin up!” Fergus said.

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

Tagert lunged at Fergus, hitting the edge of the instructor's sword with his own.

He should not have felt so perturbed by the statement at this point – 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 grassy area 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 his own paternal disappointment. Seeing his father had reminded him of the slight, and that had sent the sentence 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, so it carried with it all the various stench known to 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 him. *That's one consolation, isn't it?* Of course, that meant his father had been making the statement to someone else. 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. Of course, he'd 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 said.

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

The part of the conversation he’d overheard prior to the awful statement had been interesting, although significantly less important to him. It had sounded like father was speaking to his two most-trusted knights – Sir Reginold and Sir Raleigh. *Father is sending them on some sort of special mission*, he’d noted. A mission that involved seeking out ogres or trolls or some other 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, had hinted broadly that he expected some sort of commendation – or perhaps an extra purse of gold – out of the whole thing (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 lose their lunch 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.

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 think such a thing about him. He’d long known he was a disappointment to the man. He knew 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 manly sort of man that his father wanted him to be. He wasn’t a man in search of the next conquest. Or a man, to be honest, like his own father. He was far too quiet, sensitive, and thoughtful – much more like this mother than his father. His mother believed the kingdom should be ruled from the heart as well as the head. His father believed the most effective king ruled with fear. “Make sure they fear you, then they will follow you,” his father had said time and time again.

Fergus walked around the grassy area, slashing his blade through the air as though killing time. Killing time and burning energy – or, perhaps hiding a nervous tick of fear? *Does Fergus know the King is watching us?* Tagert wondered. *And, if so, is he motivated by fear of the man?*

Tagert stood up. “Fergus? Do you fear my father?”

Fergus stopped walking and gave Tagert an odd look – like he was more afraid to answer the question about the man than of the man himself. “I ... er ... I beg your pardon your highness?”

“Are you afraid of King Ripley?”

Fergus looked down at the grass 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.

“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 grass in front of them. “Of course, I know you far better than I know the King, so that helps. And you are a very amiable young man, which makes you far less fearsome.” He looked back up at Tagert, the implied apology clear on his face.

“Ah, but you must admit, as a swordfighter I am quite mediocre,” Tagert replied with a grin, “Which makes respect an issue.”

Fergus’ expression changed to shock. He’d obviously never heard a royal person make such an honest and self-deprecating statement. It seemed to calm him, and he took a deep breath. “If I may ... er .... I beg 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.* He found that a very appealing quality. He 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 my brother 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. Tagert had long known that their father 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 King 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 in favor. He hadn't let that keep him from stridently making his case. In short, he believed in himself. At least a far sight 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, to 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 he had no idea what (or potentially who) was on the donkey.

Tagert decided he didn't care what his father and the two knights were up to. Nor was he going to be further annoyed by his father's disappointed assessment of him. He decided it was time to stand up for himself. And, given that he was holding a sword, now was the perfect time to start. Not that he had anything to prove to anyone – most especially *not* his father – but more as a way to buoy himself. He raised his sword to Fergus in a signal that he was ready to fight again. Then, as he circled Fergus, he changed the annoying sentence that had been circling in his head. He allowed his brain to repeat the new thought a couple of times before he shifted his body into a fighting stance. He thought and rethought the words so forcefully he would not have been surprised to learn that Fergus could somehow hear them. At the same time, he swung his sword, making the blade meet the other sword with a resounding clack. *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 at this sudden force. This made Tagert feel like throwing 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. He felt himself being drawn into the showmanship of it all. Perhaps 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 grassy clearing, 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 just a tiny bit of ... *wow, was it really that?* Yes! 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 miniscule 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 getting through the gauntlet of people who lived and worked in the castle. He knew that he could 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 only problematic when he passed women. As fragile as his confidence in sword fighting was, it stood head and shoulders above his own 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, curtsied deeply as though exposing their bosoms for his personal benefit, and batted their eyelashes at him. He kept walking.

At three and twenty, Tagert knew he had matured into a strapping young buck. He exceeded both the King and 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. And he had a sterling character to match – he was conscientious, unfailingly kind, and had the honor of a gentleman.

Rather too much honor, he'd been told. In fact, Laird had told him he could have bedded literally hundreds of women by now, had he been so inclined. Tagert liked women. He did. He just hadn't met one yet that he wanted to get to know in *that* particular way. In truth, he was so nervous around women that he'd never met one he'd wanted to get to know in *any* particular way.

Tagert tried to squelch his thoughts about women as he walked to his bedchamber. Such thinking would just get his willy all woody, and that would be no help. He finally rounded the last corner, opened his bedchamber door, and entered his one place of pure sanctuary. The chambermaids had come and gone, he happily noted, as was clear from the state of the bed, which was made up. Then 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 lute.