

COLORBLIND

By Elizabeth Kidder

Chapter One: INTRODUCTIONS

“Do not look the beast in the eye.”

I let my gaze dance away from the amber fire lurking behind those eyes, followed the curve of its spine.

“Rest your gaze on the thrashing tail, the glinting claws, but give the face only the briefest of sweeping glances.”

Our gazes met, and I hurried to look away again. “If you linger in its gaze, you may be lost. It will assume all control, and you will not be able to run, even when the danger is already upon you!”

A hiss of fire escaped its mouth, and I jumped back as the crowd around us laughed and applauded. The dragon handler bowed while the bright red dragon prowled up the handler’s arm to stand on his shoulder, tail curled around the man’s armor protected neck.

“All deadly predators are one in the same, so be wary and cautious when approaching any of the creatures you see here today,” he said. The dragon’s wings flared out and beat the air a few times before settling back, the iron chain attached to the collar around its slender neck rattling. My hand instinctively reached up, and Mother’s hand found it and led us away.

“What a magnificent creature,” she said.

“I thought it would be bigger,” said Giselle, as she skipped around us in her new sea foam green lace dress. I felt the hem of my favorite indigo blue dress on my open slippers, and wondered when I would get a grown-up dress, like my eldest sister, as well as the heeled shoes, with the height difference between us even more pronounced. We used to share everything, but when Giselle turned thirteen last month, her body suddenly changed, as though trying to keep pace with her mental maturity, and she received a brand new wardrobe. She knew that I felt left behind, and came over to hold my free hand, which I was too old for, being very nearly ten, but I let her do it anyway.

“The larger dragons are too difficult to train, and very nearly extinct besides,” said an informed voice behind us. I turned to see Rose keeping pace, her nose so far in an open book it would get caught if it was suddenly snapped shut, which I considered doing for a moment. Mother paused, and I wonder if I spoke that thought out loud. But she only turned to say, “Come along, Rosalind darling.” She did with a startled look when her book bumped into Giselle’s back. Giselle sighed and arched up our connected hands so Rose

could come through and walk in front of us, preventing any more accidental run-ins.

The walkway around us was filled with men and women of society, flanked on either side by hedges that were too tall for me to see over. Giselle could though, in her new heels, and described the maze of a garden we walked through, filled with dragons, chimeras, griffins and other creatures she could not name. Every year the traveling menagerie brought strange, new creatures, along with the crowd favorites, like the aquarium filled with miniature sea horses with manes like sea foam, their front halves hooped like their land counterparts, their back halves finned and scaled. Then there were the unicorn riders, beautiful dark haired virgins who leapt and twirled on the backs of their unicorns, who move gracefully, but with hidden power, their horns sharp as swords.

The traveling menagerie had been a yearly tradition as long as I could remember, since before I could even walk. Some of my earliest memories were of looking out through the frilled curtains of my pram at the strange beasts and strange faces, while Giselle walked alongside, pointing at man and beast alike and saying words I didn't yet understand. We had our favorites. Giselle longed to become a unicorn rider someday, and would often make us wait till after the last show to go and admire the glowing mounts up close. Rose enjoyed studying the animals with magic properties, the fiery salamanders and the ravens that dispensed darkness from their wings when they flew. But I had always liked the predators best, the white tigers and jewel-toned dragons, the dreadwolves, large as lions with louder roars. These hunters were unlike anything else, vast, powerful, a mystery unto themselves.

The elite of our city swirled about us in finery and lilting voices, charming me almost as much as the exotic creatures. My mother's friends approached us with exclamations at our growth and beauty, gossip over the latest scandal, and inquiries at our father's whereabouts and wellbeing. Our father was wealthy, even among the high society we surrounded ourselves with. He was a merchant of the highest degree, as close to the royal family as a man of business could be. He sent out his ships and caravans to trade at the farthest reaches of our kingdom, and he always came out on top. He used his vast wealth to provide his wife and three daughters with every luxury. We lived in a large city, the center of trade and commerce, where the streets bustled with clip-clop horse hooves and whir of carriage wheels, the sharp tap of ladies heels and the clicks of canes. Our house was built of marble and copper, the many windows gleaming in the sun from their daily washings. Inside, the cool stone was muffled with rugs and tapestries. The oaken staircase led up to our private quarters, each room with its own fireplace. We had a battalion of maids, an army of servants, to keep our mansion running and our needs and desires met. Dresses made with lace and silk, bejeweled shoes and hair combs, enough jewelry to make us glitter even in the darkest night, perfumes from exotic lands that smelled of unknown fruits and spices,

and living quarters fit for a princess. In fact, when visiting the castle during the off months when the court was moved to the summer palace, the tour had revealed the princesses' rooms to be much like our own.

I knew very little about my father. He had built his empire of trade from the ground up, and remained involved in all aspects of his business, from the wagon trains to the ship manifests, from the inspection of goods to the apprentices and hired hands under him. His level of dedication kept him away from home most months of the year. We only saw him at the most important of occasions, or at evening meals in between his trips; most of his days at home were spent in his private quarters.

Giselle and I gravitated naturally towards our mother, light of every conversation and the patience of a saint. When most women turned over their children to governesses and maids until they were old enough to care for themselves, our mother remained involved with our upbringing, offering valuable lessons in subjects not covered by our tutors, like using words as weapons or bridges, speaking both sincerity and flattery, valuable tools for making our way in society. Our mother introduced us all into society at a very young age, and I was quickly bedazzled and charmed by the colors, the lights, the tinkling of glasses and quick strums of violins. Every time my mother told us of a new soiree, I'd spend hours putting together the outfit I would wear, my maidservant indulging me as I draped myself in chiffon scarves and ropes of pearls, my hair haphazardly pinned as I attempted to walk in Giselle's heels, without her knowledge of course, before Mother would come in and set my appearance to rights with experienced hands before she, Giselle and I left for the next party. She would ask Rose to come along, so her mother could introduce her beautiful daughter to all of her friends. But she'd simply shake her head and return to whatever book had recently grabbed her attention. Our mother would look at her with a sad smile, place a gentle hand on her head, and usher the rest of us out to the waiting carriage.

The menagerie was one of the few places that Rose came along with us to, much less showed any interest in. When she wasn't reading about the creatures we saw, she was writing notes in a journal, much to the amazement of others witnessing a seven-year-old question a handler about the diet of the unicorns, and then informing him that the moonbeam plants they were feeding them were too ripe and needed to be cut closer to the full moon to ensure a healthier coat and a stronger performance.

All too soon, the last unicorn was led away, the doors closed on the caravans, and the sun sank behind the nearest buildings, casting our exit into shadow as we made our way to our waiting carriage and began the trip home. Giselle and Mother sat together facing Rosalind and I, engaged in conversation. In the dim light, the two looked so similar, the way they held themselves, laughing at jokes I didn't understand. I turned to Rosalind, haloed in the illuminated carriage window. "Rose?"

"Yes, Evelyn?" she said, face not leaving her book.

“Do you ever wish you were older?”

“We’ll all be older soon enough,” she said pragmatically. “You are older than you were when the day began.”

I sighed. Sometimes, Rose’s smart answers annoyed me to no end. Giselle couldn’t stand Rose’s book smarts, but she was nearly six years Rose’s elder, and I think there was a little jealousy on Giselle’s part of the kind of quiet power Rose had, content in her own knowledge and none other. It was that honesty I liked. Beyond her fount of information, she always gave a truthful opinion to any question I asked.

“I don’t mean eventually, I mean now. Do you ever wish to skip everything and get to the end?”

At this, she looked up from her book at me, sunlight bouncing off her golden hair. “I think I understand what you mean,” she says, slowly, and I know she’s thinking through her next words. “Sometimes, when I’m reading a book, and the characters are in an awful state, waylaid or injured or mourning, I want so terribly to turn to the final pages and see how everything ended, even if I know it ends badly, just to be done with it. But, I think it’s important that you keep going through, page by page, because even if things are bad, it’s worth it to learn more about them, and about yourself. Then, at the end, you’ve earned the victory, or learned from the defeat. Does that make sense to you?”

“Yes, I think so. I think...you’re saying that I’m going to be defeated?”

She laughed, a child’s laugh so unlike the way she spoke. “I’m saying that life has to be lived. You can’t skip to the end, and even if you could, I don’t think it would be worth it.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I know I am,” she said matter-of-factly, and returned to her book.