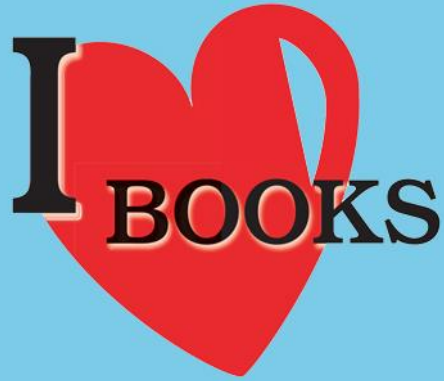




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Opening extract from
The Sleeping Prince

Written by
Melinda Salisbury

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For James Field. For, amongst other things,
getting opening-night tickets to *The Cursed Child*.

Thank you, Strdier.





Prologue

The night guard on the East Gate reached to scratch the sudden sharp itch at his throat. As his legs gave way beneath him and he crumpled, he saw his fingers, slick with blood, black in the dim glow from the lamp that lit the gate. He was dead before he hit the ground.

The golem stepped over his body.

The second guard turned, lips parted to scream, or swear, or beg, his sword rising to meet the creature, but too late. A silver flash through the air and the guard collapsed, his blood mingling with that of his colleague.

The lumpen, blank space where the golem's face ought to be was tilted towards the sky, as though sniffing or listening. It passed through the gate, its misshapen head knocking the lamp, sending it swinging, casting nightmarish shadows over the thick stone wall. As the oil spilled and smoked, and the

flame guttered, the golem trod a trail of bloody footsteps through the gate and into the slumbering royal town of Lortune, dragging a club as long as itself in one hand, a large double-headed axe in the other.

Moments later a second golem followed, an axe and club of its own clutched in its twisted hands. Its weapons had yet to be christened.

The two creatures moved forward, slowly but steadily, their gait rocking and lilting, the motion more reminiscent of ships on the ocean than anything that moved on land.

The Sleeping Prince followed them.

In contrast to the monstrosity of the golems, the prince was beautiful. His silvery-white hair reflected the moonlight, flowing down his back like a waterfall. His eyes, when the light of the lamp caught them, were gold: like coins, like honey. He was tall and slender, and moved with a grace that made each step look like the beginning of a dance. In each of his hands he carried a flat, curved sword, the gold hilts adorned with symbols from a long-dead world, but he had no plans to use them, or to bloody himself at all this night. If all went as he expected, he wouldn't need to. Tonight, the swords were mostly for effect, so that anyone who happened to be awake – an old woman with pains that kept her from sleeping, or a small boy woken from a terrible dream – might look from their window and witness his magnificence, as he walked through their town. He wanted to be seen – not by everyone, not yet, but certainly by a few. He wanted the rumours to spread of how he walked

unchallenged into the city and took it. How with only two golems he invaded the town of Lortune and its castle, killing no one, save for those paid to keep Lortune from being invaded. He wanted the townsfolk to whisper behind their hands of how regal he looked as he strolled past their homes. He wanted them to remember that he could have had them all killed in their sleep but he hadn't; he had spared them. His people.

He wanted his new people to think well of him. Eventually, at least. His father had told him there were two ways to rule: through fear or through love. He could not expect the Lormerians to love him, not yet, but he could make them fear him. He could easily do that.

He followed his golems through the silent streets, casting a critical eye over the dirt pathways and roads, the stains from sewage flung from windows on to the pathways, the buildings that huddled in the shadow of the castle, cramped and dirty, looking more like outbuildings than prosperous merchant houses and businesses in the capital of the land.

His lip curled with distaste as he peered into the windows of some of the homes they passed, with their utilitarian furniture, their drab decor. He looked up at the castle of Lormere, a thick, square keep, flanked by four towers, dark as its occupants slept. Ugly, like the rest of town. But better than no castle at all. . .

The golems did their work again on the Water Gate, the least secure of the entrances to the grounds of Lormere castle,

even with the extra guards assigned by the new king. This time, eight bodies – four armed sentries at the gate and four more stationed atop the battlements – had fallen, forever silenced. The Sleeping Prince had been forced to join in the fight this time to end it quickly, engaging the men on the gate while his monsters slashed and lunged at the archers positioned twenty feet above them on the walls. The arrows had bounced off the clay hides of the golems; if they'd realized they were being shot at, they gave no sign as they harried the men until they fell, before crushing their skulls into the earth.

There was blood on the Sleeping Prince's golden tunic and he wiped at it, smearing it across the velvet. His face darkened and in response to his mood the golems swung their clubs and stamped, their movements agitated. He stalked past them, striding along the path that led through the outbuildings, through the kitchen gardens to the castle that loomed up ahead of him.

Then, impossibly, a horn split the night apart. He spun back towards the Water Gate and broke into a run, the lumbering footsteps of the golems behind him. On the ground a white-faced guard, clearly not as dead as he ought to be, was breathing frantically into a horn, his eyes bulging with each blast. The Sleeping Prince plunged one of his swords into the man's chest, the blow stopping his heart, and the horn, in its tracks.

But it was too late. As he turned back to the castle, he saw lights flaring in windows that had been dark moments

before. He heard new horns sounding the alarm, heard the shouts of men, and he sighed. He reached into his pocket and pulled a sheaf of parchment and a writing stick from it. Frowning thoughtfully, he scribbled some words, then tore the paper in two. He gestured to the golems and they each held out a hand, allowing him to place the torn parchment on their palms. For a moment it rested on the surface. Then the clay-flesh turned liquid and the paper sank into it, reforming around it until the paper was concealed within. The shouts became louder, closer, and the whip-thud of arrows began to pierce the air.

The Sleeping Prince sighed. Then he and his golems began to walk silently towards the commotion. The Sleeping Prince swung his swords and smiled.

In the Great Hall of Lormere castle, the king of Lormere stood in pale cream breeches and a billowing white shirt, the laces of his boots uneven, watching the Sleeping Prince warily. The Sleeping Prince in turn eyed his opponent, his head angled with curiosity, his own clothes now torn and soaked red, his beautiful hair tainted with gore. His eyes burned in his blood-splattered face, fixed upon the king. Behind him lay piles of bodies: soldiers, and guards, and any servant who had been foolish enough to try to defend their king, sprawled like broken toys across the stone floor. He'd left a trail of corpses marking a macabre path, beginning at the Water Gate and winding through the gardens and hallways to here, where the battle would climax.

On the opposite side of the Great Hall, near the door leading to the royal solar, lay one of the golems, inanimate. Its arm had been severed by a lucky guard, weakening the alchemy controlling it, giving a second guard the chance to remove its head. In a fit of delicious irony, it had crushed its destroyer as it toppled in a final act of retribution. The second golem stood in the doorway of the Great Hall, waiting for any final guards who had yet to join the fray.

There were none.

The king held something in his hands: a metal disc on a chain, which he brandished at the Sleeping Prince as though it were a gift. The Sleeping Prince smiled indulgently.

"If we could talk," the king said urgently, his face pale, his hair a frenzy of dark curls around it.

"No talk, Merek of Lormere," the Sleeping Prince said, his smooth, calm voice a contrast to his maniacal smile. "Your men are all dead. Your castle and kingdom are mine. The only words I'll hear from you are your pleas for mercy."

Merek's dark eyes flashed. "I assure you, you won't," he said. "I won't die begging." Then he lunged.

The Sleeping Prince stepped to the side and raised one of his swords, arcing it through the air until it found its sheath in the unprotected breast of the new Lormerian king.

King Merek made a soft sound of surprise, turning his eyes to the Sleeping Prince, his disbelief childlike. Then those same eyes fluttered closed and he slumped to the ground. The Sleeping Prince watched him, his expression unreadable.

He stepped over the king's body and crossed the hall,

mounting the steps to the dais. Behind the long wooden table, the sigil of the House of Belmis hung, a shield emblazoned with three golden suns and three silver moons on a blood-red background. With a snort of disgust he tore it down and walked over it, to the high carved seat at the centre of the table. Slumping into it, he ran a finger over the carving, his lip curling once more. Cheap, peasant craftsmanship. He deserved better.

And now that Lormere was his, he would have it.