

Sokolatopia

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Mary finds herself in a strange land after falling asleep on the bus. There she meets Grenville, the headless immortal knight with great manners, among other strange and wonderful people...

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1 - The Bus

It was the strangest thing. Mary didn't quite know what to make of it. One minute she was on the bus to her grandmother's house, and now here she was standing at a bus stop in the middle of nowhere. At least, nowhere she had ever seen before. It didn't have any highways or buildings or anything she was used to before. It was like being in the countryside. Very deep in the countryside, for that matter. Aside from the road the bus had come on, there was nothing but beaten trails. Miles of grass and field could be seen, and far, far away, if one looked close enough, they could see mountains in the distance, though nothing else. Mary began to wonder why there was even a bus stop there at all. No wonder it had been the last stop.

Of course, now she was stuck there, with no more money to take her back the other way. If only she hadn't fallen asleep, she would have gotten off miles ago. What she thought it was miles ago, that is. After all, she had no idea how long she had been sleeping nor how far the bus actually went. Alas, with no way to go back, she decided the only logical thing to do now was go forward. Maybe, just maybe, she could find someone trustful enough to take her back. She couldn't stay here forever anyway.

As she took the dirt pathway before her, she really wished she had brought different shoes. The ones she was wearing currently weren't really made for dirt and grass and such. They were made only to look presentable. Though, it wasn't like she had to be presentable here. There was no one here to be presentable for. No one in this patch of land that was to say. She only hoped that the next patch of land that could possibly containing life wasn't too far away.

Her shoes weren't much for comfort either. After what seemed like an hour of walking, her feet were already hurting. And to think, she may have had a longer way to go. Disgruntled by the thought, she decided to take a break. With a little huff of frustration, she plopped down in the grass. After a moment, she realized how good it felt on her legs. Aside from the park she and her mother used to go to before she became too busy, she had never really got to enjoy the presence of nature. It was all metal and concrete and buildings where she lived. The only trees were in planters, and the only grass was in designated areas where it was all properly tended to. This grass was different. It was wild and free, with no one to tell it where to grow or how to grow. No one was here to take care of this grass, it depended solely on itself.

There was something particularly different about this grass though. Maybe she was just very weary and letting her imagination get away with her, but to her it felt as though the grass was moving, as of its own free will. Not in a threatening way, or an abrupt way of any kind, more so as in a playful manner. It tickled at her legs and gently waved around in good spirit. Putting her finger into it, she found a little long blade wrap lovingly around her finger, as if trying to shake her hand. She giggled at this. What kind of place could she possibly be that had friendly grass? After all, last she checked, grass did not have a mind of its own, let alone a personality.

Now very curious as to what else this land had to offer, she got back up to follow the trail again. The grass wriggled in a good-bye wave, and she decided that since no one was around to think of her as crazy, she gave it a little wave back. She was then on her way, a little more cheerful than she had been

before. After a while, she soon found herself amongst a vast field of sunflowers. She found this particularly lovely, as she had never seen real sunflowers before. Just as the grass before, they all seemed to bend toward her as she walked through the field, and she began to wonder if everything in the land had a personality. As each one drooped over to greet her, it was as though she were walking through a beautiful sunflower tunnel. It was just dark enough in the tunnel to offer wonderful shade, and the smell was magnificent. Where ever this place was, it was almost dream-like.

That's when she began to wonder if that's what this place really was, only a dream. Maybe she hadn't been woken up by the bus driver at all. Maybe she was actually back on the bus this very minute, sleeping away as though it were nothing. Her thoughts were abruptly interrupted as sun light shown back on her again. She had exited the sunflower tunnel without even really noticing. That's when she saw the subtle outline of a figure standing on a hill in the distance. The sun impaired her sight a bit, but from what she could see it was a lanky figure. Then she noticed the figure's head, and how it seemed to be very oddly shaped. Then again, whoever it was was probably wearing a hat. She journeyed closer so she could see them for certain. If they seemed trustworthy enough, they may be able to get her back home.

As she came closer to the figure, she found that he was, indeed, wearing a hat. Well, it was a hat of the sort at least, though it was no ordinary hat of the sort. Covering the strange figure's face was an old fashioned knight helmet, which was odd, as he wasn't wearing any other armor. In fact, he was dressed pretty modern, wearing a green t-shirt, a black hooded jacket, blue jeans, and a pair of rugged, black Chuck Taylor sneakers. She couldn't help but wonder why he was wearing this helmet so strangely.

"Um, excuse me, sir?" she asked quietly.

"Pardon?" he asked, spinning his head around in surprise. "Someone...someone is there?"

"Y...yeah, me," Mary said, looking up at the figure.

His helmet visor turned toward her, gazing at her through the holes etched in it. He said in a surprised but pleasant voice, "Why, so there is! That's very odd. You know, I haven't seen a person in these parts in...well, forever, so it would seem."

"I would believe that," Mary said shyly. "I must have walked for miles without seeing anyone. Well, besides you..."

"Yes, I'm about the only one who comes around here anymore," he said. "Most of the people anymore like hanging around the castle."

"Castle?" she asked herself out loud. Talking to the figure again, she asked, "So...where AM I exactly?"

She had never heard of castles being anywhere near her hometown before, especially within a bus ride. She was wondering how far this bus had taken her...IF it had. She still was leaning toward the theory that she was dreaming. It seemed a more logical of an idea anyway. The figure answered, pulling her out of her thoughts once again, "This is Sokolatopia, the land of King Baklava. Have you never heard of it before?"

"No," Mary answered sheepishly. "I...I came from the bus."

"The bus?" he asked, tilting his helmeted head. "I wasn't aware the bus ran this year...then again, I haven't kept up with the bus in a while."

"This year?" she repeated. "Why, doesn't the bus run every year? Or even have a daily schedule for that matter?"

"Oh, I should say not," he answered. "I've never heard of a bus doing that before. No, the bus only runs every five years. Or so I think...like I said, I haven't kept up with the bus in a while."

"Every five years? So it's not coming back until then?" she asked, a little frantically now.

"No, I'm afraid not," he said. "Once it is gone, it won't come back until the next five years."

"But...but...how am I to get home?" she asked, concerned now. If this wasn't a dream, she was in quite some trouble.

"Well...of that I am not sure," he said in a confused voice. He put the chin of his helmet in his hand as if in thought. Finally he concluded, "Of course, there are other ways to travel than bus, I'm sure we can find one. Where is it that you are from, anyway, to have not have heard of Sokolatopia?"

"Vandersberg," she answered. "It's a large city, with many buildings and streets."

"Hmm...I have never heard of such a place before," he answered. "Then again, I've never been outside Sokolatopia before. You have to forgive me, my mind isn't what it used to be..."

"Oh, quite alright," Mary answered. "And you have to forgive me! My name is Mary. Sorry for not introducing myself sooner."

She put out an opened hand, and the strange fellow shook it. He replied, "I am Grenville, sorry for not doing the same!"

"Well, Grenville, now that we are properly introduced," Mary started, "might you tell me more about Sokolatopia? After all, I may be here for a while..."

"It's an old place, hundreds of years old even," Grenville said. "It was already hundreds of years old before I was around."

"You make it sound as though you've been around for hundreds of years yourself," Mary said. "You couldn't possibly be that old! You hardly look like you're past your twenties in build."

"Well...yes, that is a story all on its own I suppose," he said quietly, as though he had given away something he hadn't meant to. He scratched the back of his neck (or at least what little of it was exposed under the helmet) nervously.

"Well then, perhaps you should tell me more about yourself then," Mary said in an interested tone.

"O...okay," he said slowly, "but...you have to promise me that you won't get frightened. Will you do that?"

"I'm unsure..." she answered. "I can't promise I won't be frightened of something I don't know about."

"You must, though!" he said. "I...I don't want to frighten anyone..."

"I suppose I will promise then," she said. "Though I will only promise to my best ability."

"I will accept that," Grenville said, tilting his head again. He seemed to use head movement in place of facial expression, since his face was not exposed. "Now, to get to the story I suppose..."

"See, hundreds of years ago, as I said before, I was a knight for the king's army. Not King Baklava, mind you, but the king at the time. His name was Chruscik. He was a fair man, but not an entirely great ruler. Needless to say, this caused some conflict, and some riots rose against him. I, as well as the rest of the knights, did not care about this though. All we cared about was serving our king, as we had been taught was right. With the commands ordered, we were sent out to control the riots.

Battles became brutal, and soon we were killing each other. I am a man of a peaceful nature, and didn't like having to take another man's life. However, out there, it was his life, or mine. Unfortunately, I found this out the hard way. Despite that I was trying to fight to my best ability and kill people against my morality, I still couldn't help but hold back. I found myself combating one on one with a particular rioter.

I attacked him, but never hit to do any real damage. I was hoping he would just fear me and run, but he didn't. He attacked me, and wasn't holding back like I had been. With a smash to my head with the end of his sword, he knocked me back, causing my helmet to fly right off. With my head exposed, he took the sword and beheaded me in one powerful swipe."

"Ugh," Mary cringed at the thought.

"Ghastly, I know," Grenville replied. "Now, you would think that without a head, I would certainly be a dead man. Of course, after your head has been separated from your body, you don't die right away..."

"I've always heard that," Mary said. "Though I've never known anyone who survived long enough to ask..."

"Oh, yes, it is quite true," Grenville concurred. "And most people do not survive such a horrible fate. However, I thought fast...a pretty hard task when one no longer has a brain attached...and with my last dying breath, I felt behind me and grabbed my empty helmet. I put it on fast enough to keep my soul from leaving my body through my severed throat, and it became sealed inside.

I soon came to find that I was now somewhat immortal. As my body had thought that it had already died, it no longer aged, no longer needed to be feed, or anything. However, with my soul still inside, it flourished on. It did not rot nor waste away. No natural cause could kill me. With this partial immortality, I survived on for years and years past my time. My opened neck soon grew over, and I was able to remove the helmet without releasing my soul, but the fact still remained...I had no head. So I kept the helmet on ever since, using it in place of a head, and that is how you find me today."

"My, that is quite an ordeal!" Mary said. "But...it certainly couldn't be true...could it?"

"I assure you, it is," said Grenville. "In fact, this is why I made you promise that you would not be frightened, for I will take off my helmet and show you..."

"I promise," Mary nodded. "Head or not, you are a kind man. You will not frighten me."

"Thank you," Grenville said, a little surprised at the compliment. "Now for the revealing..."

And with that he put his hands on either side of his helmet and pulled it off. Mary gasped out of surprise, but kept it brief as to not make Grenville think she was frightened. Just as he had said, no head was to be found. There was only a stub of a neck, grown over with flesh where the head used to be. He said, though Mary was now unsure of how he said it, "Horrible, isn't it? To live without a head? Even the helmet is as empty as old mother Hubbard's cupboard."

He handed it to her. Sure enough, there was nothing inside, just empty and hollow, nothing but metal. She handed it back to him, feeling slightly uncomfortable holding another person's head. That is, at least what another person used for a head. Holding it in both hands he put it on just as easy as anyone else would put on a hat. Tilting and turning it to just his liking, he let it go and let it presume doing its duty as a replacement head. He then tilted his head as he did in place of his facial expressions, and continued, "Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to have just died there like a normal man would have."

"Oh, now, don't say that," Mary said, trying to comfort him. "You have been oh so helpful to me. If you had died there, I would still be wandering here, wondering where I was..."

"That is a good point," Grenville said, looking up as though thinking it over. "I suppose you are right. Though you are found, however, you are still not where you need to be. We must find you a way home without the bus."

"THAT is a good point," Mary said. "But how? Not to pester, but you know more about this land than I do."

"Indeed I do," Grenville agreed. "Though I am not sure of how to get you home myself. However..."

"However?" Mary asked as Grenville trailed off.

"The king! King Baklava might know a way," Grenville finished. "He IS king, after all. He should know many things to be so..."

"Yes, to be a king he would have to know the land," Mary said enthusiastically. "How could he rule it if he was unfamiliar with it? And if he knows the land..."

"Then he knows how to leave it," Grenville finished for her, his enthusiasm rivaling hers. "Yes...then we shall go see the king then!"

2 - With Absolutely Fresh Eyes

"So, how exactly do you see and hear and talk?" Mary asked Grenville as they walked along, the castle being their destination. "Without a head, it must be very difficult..."

"Oh, but of course!" Grenville said. "It was very difficult at first. I suppose anything is possible if you really work on it though. I just wanted to be able to so bad that it just kind of...happened."

"And do you have to have the helmet on to do so?" Mary questioned on.

"Not exactly," Grenville said. "It isn't a REAL head, after all...but it does help. It's LIKE having a head, and therefore easier to focus with."

"That's very curious," Mary said. "I would have never imagined such a thing."

"Me either, to be truthful," said Grenville. "Of course, I wouldn't have imagined me living without a head, especially for this long."

"Very true," Mary agreed. "How long until we get to the castle?"

"Oh, we probably won't get there until tomorrow," Grenville told her.

"My goodness!" Mary said. "Where will we stay the night?"

"Not sure at this point," Grenville admitted, "but the locals around here are fairly social, I'm sure we'll find one kind heart willing to give a place of rest."

"That's wonderful," Mary smiled. "I just hope my mother and grandmother don't worry about me being absent for that long."

"One can only wonder, I'm afraid," Grenville said, unfamiliar with Mary's family of course.

Hours went by, and the sun sunk lower and lower. The sky glimmered with all assortments of beautiful colours. It probably would have been a great sight, had the minds of Mary and Grenville not be so preoccupied by the thought of where they were staying for the night. It did not really matter whether the locals were kind hearted or not, for there had so far been no houses to ask for boarding for in anyway. Grenville noticed that Mary seemed uneasy at this, and he felt foolish for giving her false hope. After all, he had honestly thought more houses would have been around at this point. They had moved closer to the castle than he had thought. His head, or rather, lack of one, prevented him from being social, and he had become unfamiliar with the setting.

"I am terribly sorry," Grenville apologized. "I was really under the impression that more houses were still around here..."

"It is okay, Grenville," Mary assured him. "The sky looks clear and beautiful. If we should have to stay the night outdoors, it is a good night for it."

"That is well, then," said Grenville. "My head...it makes socializing very difficult..."

"I understand," she said quietly.

The pair had spoken too soon, however, because through the slowly dimming light, a small cottage was visible up ahead. Mary grabbed Grenville's sleeve in excitement and exclaimed, "Grenville! Look!"

"I see!" he agreed. "Let's hope they are one of those kind hearts I was speaking about earlier. While I am bad at socializing, I do not wish to stay outside."

Mary smiled at Grenville's enthusiasm, liking to think that he would be smiling too if he had a mouth to smile with. Still arm in arm, the two approached the tiny building. A little fire could be seen built in front of the house, and a strange-looking figure was standing next to it cooking in a big kettle. The fire danced around the kettle longingly, and an odd smell was coming from it. Mary whispered to Grenville, "I wonder what they could be cooking?"

"I am unsure," Grenville said sheepishly. "I am unfamiliar with food smells. As I cannot eat, I stopped bothering with it all."

"Oh, right," Mary said equally as sheepishly. "Sorry, Grenville."

"Quite alright," Grenville told her. "I understand that I can be...hard to comprehend."

"Indeed," she answered. She began to wonder if Grenville's inability to eat would be why he was so gangly-looking, or if he was even able to be affected by it at all since the rest of him didn't seem to be.

Her thoughts were quickly thrown to the side, though, when the fire before them emitted a small explosion and flashed a spark of green colour. Grenville quickly seized Mary by the back of her dress and pulled her behind him. He exclaimed, "Mary! It is a witch!"

"A witch?" Mary asked in a shocked tone, more so from being abruptly pulled back rather than from the information.

"Yes!" Grenville hissed, trying to keep quiet. "And if I learned anything long ago, it is to not meddle in the affairs of witches."

"That's nonsense, Grenville," Mary said, standing up straight again from where Grenville had pulled her back. "I've read the stories, and there are good witches just as well as there are bad ones."

"That is nonsense," Grenville retorted but keeping a friendly tone. "Those are but stories. Witches have always been bad in person."

"No offense, Grenville," Mary started, "but up until today, people such as yourself existed in but stories. In my world, at least..."

"And so far I have come to find that our worlds are very different," Grenville said. "So what are we to do?"

"Well..." Mary said, not sure what to say as she had not thought the whole situation through. "I suppose we could go talk to them. That way we would know if they were bad or not."

"And if they ARE bad?" Grenville asked.

"Then you are a great knight and will be able to handle them," Mary smiled assertively.

"Was," he said. "WAS a great knight. I lost the sword when I lost my head."

"A lost head does not make one any less than what they already were to begin with," Mary said. "At least not mentally..."

Despite the fact that she could not really say that without running into a contradiction in some way, she grabbed Grenville by his hand and pulled him along with her. He followed her, but did so reluctantly. She could feel his palms beginning to sweat as they came closer to their newfound company. As she approached the figure, they saw that she was a woman scantily dressed in animal skins. Her skin was ravaged-looking, she had a hunched posture, and despite her scrawny build, a pot belly. The nails on her hands were exceedingly long, and her bony fingers were covered with warts. She was not so much an old woman, but a very worn down one, so that she appeared to look greater in years at first glance. Mary gaged that she seemed middle aged.

Wherever she moved her hands, the fire followed. With another small explosion and a flicker of light, the fire turned from green to purple, and the smell became different as well. Mary decided that it was a plant-like smell, but was unaware of what kind of plant. Grenville's hand began to shake a little in her grip as the witch stood before them. Before she even had a chance to tell him that all would be okay, the witch's head spun around, making Mary jump back in surprise. She let loose her grip on Grenville's hand, and he jumped so violently that he caused himself to fall on his behind. He put his hands on his helmeted head as if trying to hide. Mary stood speechless herself.

"Hello!" the witch said in a scratchy voice, her tone being a playful one. She smiled a snagged smile as she looked her guests over. "It is not often I get company, where have you two come from?"

"V-Vandersberg, ma'ma," Mary stuttered at first. "And...and Grenville..."

"From the fields!" Grenville answered bluntly before shrinking back behind Mary again.

"Intriguing," she answered. "So what brings you to my humble cottage?"

"I need to find a way back to Vandersberg," Mary answered her. "It is not part of Sokolatopia, I came from the bus."

"I was not aware the bus ran this year," the witch interrupted her.

"That is what I said," Grenville chimed in again, still yet hiding behind Mary.

"Right...well, Grenville here is taking me to see King Baklava in hopes that he will know how to return me home," Mary finished.

"Is that so?" the witch said, looking around Mary at Grenville, who had not even bothered to pick himself up yet. "He doesn't look capable of doing much of anything."

"How now!" Grenville snapped. "I'll have you know that I was once a great knight! And for King Chruscik no less!"

"Goodness!" the witch began to chuckle. "My dear, your friend here...he does not know what he is talking about. He is leading you on."

"Am not!" Grenville said. "I WAS a knight for King Chruscik. Some...complications occurred, however..."

"Nonsense!" the witch laughed at him. "For you to have been a knight for King Chruscik, you would have to be ten times my age! Maybe more!"

"And who is to say that I am not?" Grenville said, crossing his arms. "We have just met, you know not of me."

"Your face may be covered, but no one that age would have a body like yours," the witch said, eyeing Grenville. "And I bet you look even younger if you were not covered as such."

"I beg your pardon!" Grenville said, hunching over as if to cover himself.

"Look," Mary said, "Ages and whatever other arguments aside, we are left without shelter. Might you have extra rooms for us that you would not mind sharing?"

"But of course!" the witch said, stretching out her arms. "My name is Matilda, by the way. If you follow me, I will show you the rooms..."

"I am Mary," Mary introduced herself, "and this is Grenville. You must forgive him, he was under the impression that all witches were evil..."

"And I still am," he added quietly.

"Well," Matilda started, "I wouldn't count that out just yet. However, I would not so much consider myself evil as I would...beneficial, I suppose."

"See?" Grenville said. "She admitted to it!"

"I only do what I find best for myself," Matilda said, ignoring Grenville. "If that means being evil, then so be it. If your friend decides to be honest anytime soon, then he will agree that it is a hard life out here away from the castle."

"I've only been honest!" Grenville snapped.

"Grenville, please!" Mary said. "You do not want to sleep outside do you?"

"No...I suppose not..." Grenville said.

"Then you will get along with Matilda," Mary said.

He knew that she was right. He was not happy about that, however, and it was visible in his body language. It was the only way he could show emotion without a head, after all. Mary began to look worried, as she was concerned that Matilda would become displeased and deny them shelter because of this. Matilda, just as she said, was not all bad, however, and pitied Mary. She decided to give Grenville a chance to explain himself to better their relationship. She asked him, "Well now, if you ARE as old as you say, why is it that you do not look it...or are even alive for that matter?"

"It is a long story," Grenville said, perking up at this, his helmeted tilted in enthusiasm, "but I am willing to tell it if you are willing to listen."

He then explained how he had lost his head but had acquired immortality in the process just as he had explained to Mary. He then explained how he was still able to talk and such along with it. Matilda had become increasingly curious as he told his tale. Once he had pulled off his empty helmet she was amazed. Soon, she inquired, "Do you ever long for a new head in its place? One that could see and hear and smell naturally? One that would not come off?"

"I suppose," Grenville answered her, "but I am unsure of how to get one. I suppose to get a head, I would have to take a head from someone else."

"That is true," Matilda said. "But you would have your own head again."

"Unlike you," Grenville said with still a hint of annoyance in his voice, "I do not wish to harm others for my own benefit."

"That is understandable," Matilda agreed, surprising Grenville. "You were a knight, after all. Knights are far more noble than witches."

"Well...that is not always true," Grenville said, beginning to think different of Matilda and witches in general now. "There were some knights who worked a long beside me, and they were not always that noble. Some where not very nice people at all..."

"Then I suppose we are even," Matilda smiled. "Now...I wonder, which part of your head do you miss the most?"

"Hmm...my eyes, I suppose," Grenville said after a little thought. "When I was a knight and wore my helmet but for protection, my eyes were still visible through my visor. It still let people know that was normal under here. Now they look into my visor and see nothing. They know my helmet is empty, and they become disgruntled."

"Can you blame them?" Matilda laughed. "I am accepting of a headless immortal, being a woman of magic and such, but I can see how it would be hard for others to accept it."

"Indeed," Grenville agreed. "At least with a set of eyes I could set off the illusion of having a head within my helmet. Unless they inquired me to remove it, they would think that I am a normal human being."

"I do believe I can help you with that," Matilda said.

"How so?" Grenville asked.

"Well, I may not be able to make you a new head, especially without taking one from someone else," Matilda said. "But a set of eyes just to make an appearance of having a head is a different story..."

"You would not have to take them from someone else as well, would you?" Grenville asked her.

"Well, not entirely," Matilda said. "I have already taken them, that is to say, a long time ago..."

"You took someone's eyes?!" Mary gasped, after being quiet and listening this whole time. Grenville agreed with her.

"I told that I am not good all the time!" Matilda said,. "and these were taken a long time ago. To not use them now would be a waste of eyes on their part."

"Well..." Grenville started. "I suppose it would be bad to have taken their eyes in vain..."

"Then you will take them?" Matilda asked. "It will be a simple spell...they will hang right in your helmet just as if they were in sockets. And they have lids too..."

"Lids?" Grenville asked enthusiastically. "I would be able to blink and such then?"

"But of course!" Matilda said. "You might even be able to cry, if you try hard enough."

"That sounds amazing!" Grenville said. "What do you think, Mary?"

Mary pondered aloud, "Well...if the person cannot get their eyes back, and they would be more help to Grenville than just...staying wherever you put them...then I suppose it would be alright."

"Fabulous!" Matilda said, clapping her hands together. "Then we shall get to work! Mary, I will show you your room and let you get settled in. As for you, Grenville, if you will follow me to the cellar, then I shall give you a new set of eyes..."

3 - Vorsnash!

"Mary...Mary...Are you awake?" Mary heard Grenville's voice calling out to her softly. She opened her eyes to find Grenville standing over her bed. There was something different this time, however.

"Grenville, is that you?" she asked, gazing into the eyes before her, shrouded in the darkness of his helmet.

"Yes! Do you like them?" he asked.

"Very much so!" Mary said, sitting up and looking into his lifted visor at the new eyes he had. The corneas were a yellow colour from being pickled for so long, and the irises were a dark brown-black colour. They were very strange-looking, but Mary found them beautiful all the same. "They're lovely, Grenville."

"If you say so," Grenville said. "Frankly, I think they look repulsive, but the fact that they are there pleases me to no end!"

"And that's all that should matter," Mary replied. She stretched her arms greatly and got out of the bed, still wearing the dress she had come to Sokolatopia in. After all, she didn't have any other clothing to dress in. This was fine, though, as Grenville had not packed anything either. He was not accustomed to leaving his field.

"So, I suppose we should be going," Grenville said, now that she was up and about. "The castle is still very far off, it is best we travel as early as possible."

"Indeed," agreed Mary. "Let me tell Matilda good-bye, first. She has been quite a help to us."

"Same here," Grenville said. "She is out in the yard chopping fire wood."

They meet her in her backyard, where she was still standing with the ax. Mary called to her, "Matilda! I'm afraid we must be leaving. We wished to tell you good-bye first, though."

"Oh, yes, I can agree to that," Matilda said, laying the ax down and approaching them. "It is still a long way, after all."

"We will greatly miss you, Matilda," Mary said. "And we are very appreciative of your help."

"Indeed," agreed Grenville. "These eyes will make much difference when meeting new people now!"

"Thank you," Matilda said. "I will greatly miss you two as well. I really hope that you are able to find a way back home, Mary, but if you do not...feel free to visit me anytime."

"Oh, I will, Matilda!" Mary said. "But we must be going now. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" Grenville joined in.

"Good-bye!" Matilda said to them in return.

And with that, they were on their way again. Grenville kept his visor up this time, though, so as to show off his new set of eyes. Travel seemed easier today, and it wasn't too long before they started running into little villages. These villages were not quite what Mary was expecting to see, however. While the rest of Sokolatopia had been primal-looking, like something out of a story book, this village looked like a little suburban setting. Little pastel houses were on either side of the road, and what was once a beaten path was now becoming paved street. Pastel cars that matched to the little houses they belonged to were parked alongside the road. Every hedge had been trimmed just so, and every yard was blooming with beautiful flowers. Perfect little families were seen everywhere, living their lives as they normally would. Everything just seemed perfect, like an old-fashioned family sitcom.

"I was not expecting this!" Mary exclaimed.

"I know," Grenville said. "I figured someone would have inquired about my helmet by now."

"No, I mean to say that I was expecting everything to be...well, village-like," Mary said. "Like Matilda's house had been."

"Oh," Grenville said. "Well, that would come naturally from someone not from Sokolatopia, I suppose."

"So...what else is Sokolatopia like?" Mary asked. "If it is part medieval and part modern?"

"I...am not sure," Grenville said. "Your home land seems to separate things. Things here...they are not separated so much."

"It is very confusing, coming from one land to another," Mary said. "Nothing is how I was taught it was here, and you know nothing of where I come from...so we have many misunderstandings."

"Mayhaps," Grenville said, "but we have gotten along so well despite."

"And that is all that matters, I suppose," Mary said.

"Just like my eyes," Grenville beamed as best he could without a mouth.

"Very much so," said Mary.

At that moment, a small, fat little man in a regal uniform approached them. He cheerfully took Grenville by the hand and shook it, saying, "Hello! Hello! I must say, I don't believe I have seen you around here before!"

"That is because we are not from around here," Mary said as he took her hand next and placed a gentlemanly kiss on it. "We are only traveling through."

"Yes, we are on our way to the castle," Grenville said, tilting his helmet in confusion, his eyes matching his emotions now.

"Oh well, you will stay for but a small visit, won't you?" he asked. "I am the mayor here, and would love it if you explored our humble town!"

"I am not sure," Mary said. "We must get to the castle as soon as possible. What do you think, Grenville?"

"I think we should keep going," Grenville said. "But...I suppose it would be rude to turn down such an offer. This town is quite small anyway..."

"Lovely!" The mayor said, taking them both by the hand and leading them down the road. "Then I will show you everywhere! Starting with town hall, of course..."

"Of course," Grenville agreed offhandedly, not really meaning it. Mary herself remained quiet.

The tour of the town ended up taking much longer than they had thought, and the mayor almost made it seem as though he were trying to hold them up. He did so so cheerfully, though, that Mary's kind heart could not be mad at him. Grenville, on the other hand, remained polite, but often tried to intervene. He kept saying to the mayor, "That is lovely, but we REALLY must be going!" and "It is getting late, I'm sure we have seen the majority of the town by now!"

The mayor did not listen, however, and soon it became dark again. Grenville was regretting agreeing with the mayor now. He looked at Mary with apologetic eyes for dragging her into the situation. She looked back at him as if to say she understood. The mayor then interrupted their silent conversation by stating, "And that is our humble town!"

"It's very wonderful!" Mary agreed, glad that the tour was over. "And now that we have seen it all, we must be on our way."

"Indeed!" the mayor said. "But...how will you travel with it so dark now? Our tour seemed to take longer than I thought..."

"THAT is a GOOD point," Grenville said, trying to hide his aggravation. "What would YOU suggest?"

"I suggest staying in one of our comfortable hotels!" the mayor said in his increasing strange, cheerful way. "And since it was I that disrupted your journey, I shall pay for the expenses."

"Oh, that would be very, very kind of you," Mary said. "Would you really do that?"

"But of course!" the mayor said. "Now come, I will show you to one of them."

Mary looked at Grenville for advice, and he answered for them both, "Very well then. It would be a shame for us to turn down such hospitality."

The mayor then cheerfully took them to the nearest hotel, where they were set up with two rooms next to

each other. Mary's room was a soft pink colour, and graciously supplied with the toiletries women cared so much about like perfumes and hair products. Though it was a bit overly feminine for her taste, she found this quite wonderful, as she had really been wanting to freshen up for some time now. Grenville's room was a beautiful emerald green colour, with a huge bed inside. This was perfect for Grenville's taste, because he had the perfect bed to sleep in and test his new eyes. Once they were settled, the mayor left them to their own business.

After Mary had showered herself and was settling into her outrageously soft bed, she heard a knock at her door. Curiously she got up and opened it, to find Grenville standing uneasily in the hall. She said in a surprised tone, "Grenville? I thought that you would have been in bed by now."

"Admittedly, I would," Grenville said quietly, "for I am quite tired. However, now that we are left alone, there is something I must say. This town...there is something not right about it."

"Whatever do you mean?" Mary asked. "It seems like a dream come true to me. It's almost TOO perfect..."

"Exactly," Grenville said. "I am sure that you have heard the saying about being too good to be true."

"Indeed I have," Mary agreed. "Of course, I have never put much thought into it. I have never had a scenario where I have had to put much thought of it."

"Now is the opportune moment, then," Grenville told her. "I am sure that something is afoot here."

"Why would you think so, Grenville?" Mary said. "That saying cannot be true all of the time."

"I would think so, but," he said, growing quieter and looking around to make sure no one was listening. "don't you find it odd that no one even asked about my helmet? Not even once?"

"That is true," Mary said, "but..."

"I know that you are unfamiliar with what is common and what is not here in Sokolatopia," Grenville cut her short, "but I will have you know that my helmet is out of place, even on Sokolatopian standards. That is why I live so far away from everyone."

"Then I do find that odd then," Mary agreed. "But what do you think will happen, Grenville?"

"That is the problem," Grenville said. "I cannot fathom what could be going on here. I just know that something is amiss..."

"Very well then," Mary said. "So if we do not know what is going to happen, how shall we prepare for it? Do we just...leave?"

"Well...no..." Grenville said, rubbing the chin of his helmet. He was not sure of what he was to tell Mary, and was afraid that he was beginning to look foolish. Finally he said, "We shall stay, and we shall act as though there is nothing wrong. However, we must keep on our toes. If anything does go wrong, we will need a way to communicate with one another..."

"How about a secret knock?" Mary suggested. "Our rooms are right next to each other. All we would have to do is knock. Then, just to know that it is a specific meaning and not just some other knock, we will decided on a pattern. One we can count on that is easy to remember and fast in case of emergency."

"That sounds very logical," Grenville agreed. "Now what kind of pattern should it be?"

"Hmm," Mary thought for a moment. She then answered, "I know! How about three rapid knocks, wait a second between, then three more rapid knocks? Like this..."

She then knocked on a table to the side to demonstrate, "See? It is not very suspicious either!"

"Ah, that will work then!" Grenville nodded. "Now I suppose I shall head back to my room before anyone thinks that anything is wrong..."

"Alright. Goodnight, Grenville," Mary said.

"Goodnight!" he answered and stepped back to his door.

Mary then went back to bed and settled down. After she had gotten comfortable, she turned off the lamp next to her bed and began to fall asleep. As she drifted off, she could not help but wonder why Grenville did not trust this place so much. It had absolutely no sign of threat. Maybe he was just tense after his knight days. After all, the king probably had more threatening situations going on for him. Soon her thoughts put her sound to sleep.

"Knock, knock, knock...knock, knock, knock!" Mary heard quietly in her sleep. She murmured a little to herself and turned over. Then it came again, "Knock, knock, knock...knock, knock, knock!"

She soon found herself awake. Then she heard it a third time, "Knock, knock,knock...knock, knock..."

It had been cut short. That when she realized what it was. Quickly she sat up and yelled, "Grenville!"

That's when she found a sack being put over her head. Someone put their arms around her and was carrying her away now! She struggled to get loose, but their grip was too tight. She screamed, "Let me go! Let me go!"

the person only answered, "I am not here to hurt you! I am here to help!"

The voice was not one of familiarity though. Mary cried, "Who are you? Why are you doing this?"

"I am here to help!" the voice repeated. "All will be perfect soon!"

Mary Felt herself being dragged through a hallway. Behind her she heard Grenville's voice, "Mary! Mary! Where are you? Do they have you too?"

"Yes, Grenville, yes!" she cried out. "Oh, Grenville, you where right!"

"That does not matter!" Grenville shouted to her. "And do not worry! I will get us out of this!"

She then heard the sounds of a struggle behind her. Grenville was apparently putting up a fight with his captors. Grunting and shuffling was heard and various taunts from Grenville were uttered. A man's voice of unknown identity called out, "Do not resist! All will be perfect soon! All will be perfect soon!"

This was followed by a grunt of pain as Grenville had apparently struck him in some sort of manner. Footsteps were heard from all around, and Mary was under the impression that more men had come to fight with Grenville. Suddenly a loud clang sound was uttered and all was still. Mary screamed, "Grenville! Grenville! Did they hurt you? Are you okay? Grenville!"

She was answered by a woman who sounded rather old, "He is fine, we just had to subdue him."

"Why are you doing this?" Mary asked again. "We have shown no harm to you!"

"All will be perfect soon," the woman answered just how all the others had.

Mary soon found herself let go and thrown down on her knees onto some kind of cold, hard, carpet-less floor. She heard Grenville's helmet clang as he was apparently thrown down beside her. Now that she was free, she grabbed the sack on her head and tore it off. Looking around, she found herself in a well lit room full of all the families and citizens they had seen earlier. Despite the violence they had just shown, they were all smiling brightly and looked very pleased to see them. Grenville was coming to next to her, and slowly pulled his helmet free from the sack that had been placed over it. Now sitting on his knees as well, he looked at the scene before him. He demanded, "What is going on? How dare you do such a thing to us and then beam as though all was well!"

"We are sorry for showing such harshness to you," they heard the mayor's voice. He stepped out from behind the crowd and approached them. He continued, "Most people do not like the idea of joining us at first. We had to find a way to show them that it is a good idea...even if it meant using force at first."

"What do you mean joining you?" Mary asked, becoming increasingly frightened.

"Indeed!" Grenville added aggressively.

"You have seen our town today," the mayor said. "You have seen how beautiful it, how PERFECT it is..."

"Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?" Mary inquired.

"The houses are perfect, the cars are perfect, the botany is perfect," the mayor continued as though Mary had never said a word, "and the PEOPLE are PERFECT. However, while houses and cars and such can be altered pretty well...people cannot be altered so well as much. They have a mind and a free will. They cannot be changed like something manufactured can."

"Are you trying to say that you intend to alter us?" Mary said, very frightened now. "But...but HOW? WHY?"

"I am getting to that," the mayor said. "If you had not so rudely interrupted...which will also no longer be a problem. See, we have found a way to alter people just like one would a house or an automobile! And you know what? It is all actually very simple! Why, so simple, that it is painless even! Not something you would expect from something that would alter an entire individual, yes?"

"Not something I would expect in the least," Mary had to agree, "but why would you want to alter someone? Why would you want to take away their free will? Simple and painless or not, that sounds perfectly horrible!"

"Perfectly indeed," the mayor said, "but not horrible by any means! Why, when you become perfect, you will no longer miss your free will! Come, let me show you..."

And then he snapped his fingers. Two men then came through carrying a pillow with some object on it covered by a cloth of some sort. Handing it to the mayor, he lifted the cloth to reveal some kind of decanter similar to the kind of bottle you would expect a genie to be in. A glowing pink substance was in, and the crowd gazed at it with awe. It were as though they absolutely worshipped the liquid. That's when the mayor snapped his fingers again. A woman came out this time, carrying a silver tray with two goblets on it. Smiling, she stood before the mayor who took the decanter, opened it, and poured a small amount of the pink liquid inside each goblet.

Turning back to Mary and Grenville and smiling widely, he said, "Why, all you have to do is drink the liquid from these goblets! Then...THEN you will be perfect! Just...like...us..."

As he said those last words slowly, he picked up a goblet and held it before Mary. She looked up at miserably and said, "But...I don't want to drink it!"

"Nonsense, girl," the mayor insisted, gesturing the goblet closer to her face. "Now...DRINK."

Mary hesitated. Looking around the room, she saw all the smiling faces staring her in the face, looking hopeful that she would accept the drink and become one of them. They began to chant, "Join us! Join us! Perfection! Perfection! Join us!"

Mary began to tear up now. She had no idea what to do. She was sure that they would not release her and Grenville until they agreed to drinking the liquid. Slowly she reached for the goblet...

"I will drink it first!" Grenville cried out. "I want to be perfect first! Why, if ANYONE needs help to be perfect, it is ME!"

"Goodness, yes!" the mayor said, looking around in confusion. The crowd seemed pleased by the idea as well. Grenville was, in fact, the most imperfect of the two. They all muttered in agreement, nodding their heads and looking at the mayor. The mayor announced, "You! You will be made perfect first!"

Grenville then got up off his knees and took the goblet from the mayor's hand with much enthusiasm. Mary looked at him with much confusion, and a hint of Grenville was not buying into all this? However, Grenville could not see her. He was walking to the center of the crowd. They all followed him with equal the enthusiasm he was showing, waiting for him to take the first sip. He said unapologetically, "Why, had I known my problems could be fixed just by drinking some magic liquid, I would have come here a long

time ago!"

Mary still gazed at him in confusion, until a dress brushed her face. Looking around she soon found herself buried in the crowd as they all totally forgot about her and began to focus all attention on Grenville. In fact, it was as though she could get up and walk right out, and no one would even notice her. She then realized what Grenville was doing. Why, Grenville could not have drunk that potion even he wanted to! He had no mouth! Not that these people had known that. Slowly, Mary began to back out of the crowd, looking cautiously for the nearest door as she did so. She found one at the back. Unfortunately, it was a fire exit. If she was to even touch it the wrong way, the fire alarm would go off. Quickly, she began to look around for an alternate escape route.

Meanwhile, Grenville held his goblet high for the crowd a bit longer as he decided for the opportune moment to reveal that he could not, in fact, drink the beverage in the first place. The mayor was impatient though. He did not want to wait for an opportune moment, even though he was unaware of one even being planned. He insisted, somewhat forcefully, "Enough show! You must drink now! You cannot become perfect until you do!"

"Oh, goodness! Pardon me!" Grenville said, eyeing the little man with fake apology. "I will get right to that..."

Since his visor had been pushed back down when they had thrown the sack over his head, he lifted it up as though to drink the liquid through his very helmet. The mayor found this very unorthodox, however, and insisted, "Why do you not just take the helmet off? After all, when you become perfect, you will not want to wear such a silly thing!"

"Why, yes!" Grenville said, fake laughter in his voice. "Silly me..."

Mary knew something had to happen now. Once Grenville took off his helmet, the jig was up. She began to look around for the door they entered through in the first place. However, try as she might, she was blocked at every turn by the crowd. She looked up cringing as Grenville handed the goblet back to the mayor and placed a hand on either side of his helmet. The enthusiastic crowd gazed on, excited for the great unveiling of Grenville's nonexistent face. Slowly, he pulled it upward, more and more of his neck stub being revealed. Soon, he ran out of neck stub, and then there was nothing. Mary knew it was all over now. As Grenville lifted the helmet entirely off, the smiling crowd was soon greatly changing their expressions as Grenville stood before them all as headless as the horseman of Sleep Hollow. The woman who had been holding the silver tray dropped in shock and placed both hands on her face. She screamed, "Oh, my God! He has NO HEAD!"

the crowd was soon in a frenzy. The mayor himself was backing away from Grenville now. Mary ran for the fire exit, as it could not cause much more of a disruption at this point. Grenville spotted her and began heading that way. To help him get through the frantic crowd further, he yelled, "That is right! I am an unholy person sent here to disrupt your perfection! Run! Run! If I touch you, you shall go back to your old being!"

Everyone began screaming horrifically and running as far as way from Grenville as possible to avoid his "unholy" touch. It was as though he had a magnet repelling them all from him. Quietly, he thought to himself, "This must have been what it was like to be Moses parting the Red Sea!"

Once he and Mary were at the fire exit, she burst it open, causing the alarm to go off. Everyone began ducking for cover as the sprinklers overhead went off. Screams claiming for this to be the Apocalypse were now uttered. Mary and Grenville did not hear them, though, as they were long gone now, heading for the other end of the town as fast as they could go.

They soon found themselves running out of paved road and returning to a beaten trail. It was not too long after that that they found themselves in a forest. They panted as they decided to take a break. Mary finally said, "That was awful! I certainly do not wish to encounter anymore places like that again!"

"And hopefully we will not," Grenville agreed. "Goodness. One decides to seclude himself in a field for a couple centuries, and when he returns to civilization it has turned all topsy turvy!"

"Oh, Grenville, you confuse me so," said Mary giggling.

"I am sorry," said Grenville.

"No, it is a good thing," Mary said smiling. "I will never get an experience like this again. Even if it has had its bad parts, this had been a wondrous experience."

"In that case," Grenville said in a confused voice. "You are...welcome, I suppose."

Mary could tell that if he had had a mouth, he would have been smiling. She then looked around and realized their setting once again. They were in a forest, with no food or shelter or anything. There were also wild animals...or so she thought. Sokolatopia had been very surprising so far.

"Grenville, are there wild animals in these woods?" she asked cautiously.

"Unfortunately, yes," Grenville said. "There are all sorts..."

"Are there any that are dangerous?" she asked further.

"Well...there are a few," he said. "but they probably won't be this close to civilization. They're all deep in the forest where no has dared to tread."

"That is good at least," Mary said. "I would hate to run into a bear or something."

"Bear?" Grenville said. "Bears are nothing. I am worried about the lokscors or the vorsnash."

"Lokscors and vorsnash?" Mary asked. "I have never heard of such creatures!"

"Oh, then you are very lucky!" Grenville told her. "They are perfectly terrible creatures, especially the vorsnash!"

"What is a vorsnash like?" she asked further.

"It is a really large and ugly creature, partially covered in feathers and partially covered in scales,"

Grenville said. "It's got a long neck and three separate rows of sharp teeth, and a tongue that can shoot out nearly five feet and snatch you!"

"My goodness!" Mary gasped. "Are you sure it will not venture here? I really do not wish to meet such a beast!"

"Me either!" Grenville said. "I have only seen them in books, and once on a television set. Either way, that was quite enough for me! As I said, though, it will not venture here..."

Mary nodded, but still looked uneasy. Grenville tried to think of a way to comfort her. Finally he suggested, "How about we keep shifts then? We shall take turns keeping guard, in case something should happen."

"That's a lovely idea, Grenville!" Mary said. "That will work perfectly. In fact, I will take first shift if you want."

"No, it is alright. I was once a great knight, after all!" Grenville told her. "I will start off, and wake you when I cannot stay alert any longer."

"Very well, if you insist," Mary said.

"And I do," Grenville replied. "Now sleep. We will have only a little further to travel tomorrow so long as we do not find anymore interruptions."

"Thank you," she said. "I will lay down now."

Mary then found herself a tree trunk in which she could curl up to and sleep fairly decent on and went to sleep. After all, she was very worn out from their previous caper. Grenville stood as though he were guarding the king that he once worked for until he was sure that Mary was fully asleep. Knowing that there was no real danger in the woods, he found a tree for himself. However, he climbed up inside of the tree instead and fashioned himself between some branches as somewhat of a makeshift hammock. If anything did decide to creep up on them (though not so much a vorsnash), he would be able to spring down on it. He then soon fell asleep himself...