



# Figure This Out

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*E*very two minutes, the Krazee Kastle's Tunnel o' Doom buzzer lets off a dissonant shriek that sounds just like Jenny's alarm clock. It gives her flashbacks to jarring 6 am wake ups after she's been out dancing the night before. Her entire work day is like reliving every night of bad decisions she's ever had, over and over. Every two minutes. Bzzzt. You lose.

The children shriek too, because that's what they do at spring carnivals. Their parents buy them cotton candy and ride tickets and send them off on a mind trip of refined sugar and ludicrous velocity.

Her job is an orchestra of pain with a pulsing backbeat courtesy of the nonstop loop of Top 40 hip hop blaring from the Gravitron ride next door.

Jenny left her Aspirin in the car.

"Hey lady," some kid says, his sticky knuckles leaving marks on the window pane of her control box.

"Lady is your mom, all right? Jesus Christ."

All the concern on the kid's face shifts to poorly concealed glee. "My brother just hurled in the dungeon."

"Of course he did," Jenny says, kicking the aluminum panel at her feet. The kid startles and scurries off like he can feel the murder bubbling up her spine.

Despite being the ride operator, Jenny doesn't really do much on the ride itself. It's just a big, nightmarish castle with airbrushed illustrations of dragons and knights and fair maidens with disproportionate racks. Kids pick their way through a spinning tunnel and a dungeon with a shifting floor and then climb some plastic, smelly tubes to a plastic, smelly slide. Then they're off to some far more technologically advanced ride, probably nursing a mild case of butthurt on the way, having wasted an entire two dollars on the shitty fun house.

"That's right," Jenny calls out. "Life is pain."

The guy who runs the Gravitron just happens to be in between songs. His name is Bill. Or Sam. He has huge earphones on like he's a legitimate DJ, and slings them around his neck to yell, "Lay off the Daria shtick, J."

"Don't you have some Party Rock Anthem to play? It's been a whole thirteen seconds since the last time," she yells back.

Bill-or-Sam smiles manically and cranes his microphone over to announce, "This one goes out to J at the Krazee Kastle. You are my sunshine, baby."

Party Rock Anthem starts up. Again.

As the Gravitron whirls into a blur beside her, Jenny drags a plastic bucket full of sawdust into the fun house and throws piles of it onto the neon puddle of vomit. Kids pass by her doing some kind of shuffling dance that makes her want to scream something about the Cabbage Patch ceasing to be cool like a decade ago.

Something about Bill-or-Sam's Daria comment chews on Jenny's brain stem. Is she a cartoonish hipster? Is her life some pastiche of Ellen Page performances? Is she having an existential crisis while sweeping crumbled bits of dust and puke out of the Krazee Kastle?

"Fuck," Jenny says.

"Fuck yeah," a child chirps as she dashes by. "Fuck!"

Just before midnight, the rent-a-cops have finally managed to herd most of the unruly teenagers and their unrulier drunk parents out of the fairgrounds. The rides are silent, like spray-painted corpses. Before Jenny can continue on to a metaphor about grease bleeding from the creaking limbs of the rides in rigor mortis, she hears shuffling from inside the Kastle.

"Sam?" A pause. "Bill?"

Nobody replies. So it's either a marauding raccoon or some asshat trying to stay inside the fairgrounds after closing, probably to go down the Super Slide for free a hundred times. (Which, to be fair, Jenny can't exactly judge someone for. She considers that one of the perks of her illustrious position as a ride operator.)

She grabs the silver Maglite from her backpack and creeps into the dark fun house.

"Hey, I've got a laser... shooter thing. Electrical thing, from Cops. Stun gun. Whatever," she says as she starts climbing down into the dungeon. "Pew pew, all that jazz. Get the hell out of my castle so I can go home."

Jenny doesn't have any sort of typical weaponry, but she has the Maglite. It's a flashlight and a blunt weapon all at once. It was the first gift her mom gave her after she reached the nebulous age of Young Womanhood.

"Keep it in your car," her mom had said. "You know what for."

Jenny had hefted the long, heavy flashlight and admired it, saying, "I get the picture. But I might have to work up to something this size."

Her mom had just given her a darling, clueless expression. This was about a year before her mom finally accepted that Jenny knew where her vagina was and intended to never involve any penises in her vagina's extracurricular activities.

The flashlight's narrow beam makes all the airbrushed manacles and cobwebs and bats on the walls legitimately creepy. Creepy enough that when Jenny bumps into another person, she full on screams and drops the light.

"God. Shit," she says, doing wild karate moves with one hand, as she palms at the gross floor with the other to try to pick up the light. "I'll kill you!"

"Sir Knight?" the other person asks.

Jenny's fingers close around the flashlight. She scuffles back and aims it at the intruder's face. "Freeze!"

The intruder is a girl. She shields her eyes with her arm. "Please, don't use your magic on me. I cannot bear to be imprisoned again."

Jenny immediately runs through a short laundry list of the types of hallucinogenic drugs her idiotic coworkers offer her. Probably any number of them could cause confusion about magic and knights and distract one from exiting the goddamned fair properly. But this girl doesn't seem to fit the fair-rat druggy profile. For one thing:

"Why are you wearing a dress?" Jenny asks, lowering the beam all the way to the floor, where the girl's pale, poofy dress skims the dust and sticky pools of spilled soda on the grated aluminum.

The girl takes a deep, loud breath. "You may threaten me with your magic, but I will not remove my clothing! I thought you were a knight, not a... not a fiend."

"Oh crap, an actor," Jenny says, scowling at the girl's over the top English accent. "Come on, go find your friends. The fair is closed. Drugs are bad, mmkay?"

The girl balls her small hands into fists and backs into the corner, glaring like some rabid version of Princess Peach. "Explain yourself, Sir Knight. What were your intentions when you freed me?"

"Uh?"

"Is it not midnight on the spring equinox?"

Jenny looks up, as if the glow in the dark paint on the ceiling is going to give her some indication about the position of the moon or stars or whatever this girl is going on about. "Um."

The girl sighs and goes on as if reciting times tables. "At midnight on the spring equinox, a gallant knight shall release me from my prison."

"You mean the Krazee Kastle?" Jenny asks, because if anything makes sense at all it's definitely this fun house being the equivalent of a prison.

"I don't recall seeing this castle's dungeon before," the girl says, glancing around. "Nevertheless, declare yourself!"

"Why don't you declare your damn self?"

"I am Princess Elryn."

"Elryn. Okay... Your parents must hate you."

"You're very rude for a knight."

"I'm not a knight," Jenny says, figuring she should humor this poor chick while she comes down from her bad trip.

"A ruffian then? Or a serving boy seeking glory?"

"For God's sake. I'm a girl!" Normally Jenny doesn't mind being confused for a boy, but for some inexplicable reason it wounds her already limping pride that crazy drug-addled Elryn can't figure that out.

Elryn approaches her, appearing wary of the flashlight's beam. She steps around it and reaches for Jenny's chest.

"Oh. You are," Elryn says, her hand coming to rest against Jenny's tit.

"Are you groping me?" Jenny sputters, dodging away. She tingles where Elryn's fingers were.

"Where is your hair? Have you been banished? Are you in mourning?"

"What?" Jenny touches her short, spiked hair and scowls. "Listen chica, I don't know what you're on, but now you're just pissing me off. Do you have a cell phone? You need to call someone who cares, right the eff now."

"I've been calling for an eternity," Elryn says, "Surely you're here because you heard me."

"Not over the booming bass system next door, dude."

"What tongue is this you speak?"

"Um. English?" Jenny sighs. "Should I call the cops?"

"Who is the cops? Will they free me?"

"Probably the opposite of that," Jenny says, fidgeting with the pendant around her neck. "I guess they'll take you to the hospital, I don't know. I've never actually been arrested for public... costumed intoxication."

Before Jenny can formulate a Plan B that hopefully doesn't include bringing The Man down on this poor girl, Elryn starts crying. And that is just the worst.

"Oh, shit. Please don't do that," Jenny says, approaching Elryn slowly.

"I don't understand!" Elryn viciously wipes away each falling tear, but her narrow shoulders shake and her cleavage heaves a little and she looks completely devastated and Jenny has always had a thing for crying girls, in a weird inappropriate way that made her feel really shitty for crushing on people in their times of need or whatever.

"Hey, me neither," Jenny says, placing one hand on Elryn's shoulder. Up close, she can see that Elryn's long, curly hair isn't a wig. Elryn doesn't smell like weed or booze or greasy food. She smells like Febreze, without the part where Febreze smells like flowers grown in a bed of rank petroleum.

It's nice. Slightly intoxicating. Pretty.

Jenny clears her throat, but before she can decide what else to say, Elryn snuffles and says, "You're not very tall."

"Neither are you. Are you done crying?"

"Yes."

Swallowing the urge to find a handkerchief or at least a tissue for Elryn, Jenny aims the Maglite at the red exit sign that doesn't light up anymore. "Okay, so. The way out is easy. See? Exit. Then, um. Maybe we can find your friends and they can give you a ride home?"

"But... a gallant knight is meant to take me... home. As you say. I was even imprisoned in a gown fit for a wedding," Elryn says, giving her skirts an awkward swish.

"You don't sound too psyched about it," Jenny says, taking Elryn's hand since Elryn is clearly going to stand there all night saying shit that doesn't make any sense.

"Of course I am... psyched. It is my destiny."

"That's a load of crap."

Elryn tries to yank her hand away, but Jenny holds on, dragging her out of the dungeon and into the next dark hallway of the Krazee Kastle. The dress makes Elryn heavy, or she's just surprisingly strong, so it's slow going. It doesn't help that Elryn starts batting her free hand at Jenny's shoulders and head and shouting shit about needing help and how she's in danger.

"Christ, listen up," Jenny snaps, stopping in the Tunnel o' Doom. She lets go of Elryn's hand and crowds her back against the curve in a huge tactical error. Elryn slips and falls on her ass in a billow of skirts and sweet floral smells and surprisingly unladylike curse words that Jenny's never heard before in her life.

She makes a mental note to use 'vile hedgepie' in a sentence, and yells at Elryn while she has her sitting and hopefully listening. "You don't need help! But it bears pointing out that I actually am helping you out of the Krazee Kastle, and the exit is like, five feet away and then you're free. Yay! Free! Okay? Stop yelling at me and being all damsel in distress. It's grating. My nerves were already shot like seventeen hours ago. Go it?"

"You sound rather... in distress," Elryn mutters, shouldering Jenny's legs out of the way as she stands up without any help. It takes her a while with that big ridiculous heavy skirt, but she does it, and shoots Jenny a look that plainly says, 'See, I stood up on my own, you insufferable cow.' More or less.

Elryn takes her hand again, and Jenny suppresses a faint, annoying shiver and raises her Maglite to lead the way to the rickety-ass stairs that take them out of the castle.

Elryn's fingers are thin and warm and strong.

When they step out of the fun house, it's quiet and dark. The rides sprawl across the midway, and the game booths and food trucks lie dormant, like garish gravestones. It's spooky, but not spooky enough to explain why Elryn plasters herself to Jenny's side and trembles.

"What is this place?" Elryn asks.

Jenny turns to tell her to lay off the acting shtick, but the words catch in her throat. "Weren't you... what? Where's your dress?"

Elryn scoots away and looks down. She's wearing a silky sort of hippie-ish blouse now and a pair of jeans and sneakers. Her hair is half the length it was and that is definitely, completely not normal.

"Breeches?" Elryn nearly squeaks, covering her crotch with her hands. "What is this sorcery?"

"Dude, you tell me!" Jenny is kind of shouting, but seriously, the situation warrants it. "Did you just transform? What the hell!"

Elryn looks over her shoulder and tries to cover her butt with one hand. It's like she's making a crotch sandwich, and it'd be super hilarious if this wasn't terrifying. "Anyone can see my arse!"

"I'm really not worried about that right now." Jenny rubs her face. "You can't be real."

"I assure you, I'm quite real."

"You're telling me you were actually trapped in a fair ride by... what, a spell? Come on."

"A sorcerer trapped me in an enchanted dungeon." Elryn gives up on trying to cover herself and heaves a noisy sigh. "If you weren't so sharp-tongued I'd fear you dim-witted."

"Well, I'm not sure you noticed, but that wasn't actually a dungeon. It was a janky fun house that was probably built in the 60's. And not the 1460's or wherever you think you come from."

Elryn looks around and says quietly, "Yes, this land is very strange."

"Not gonna argue that one."

"Where will I go?"

It goes against everything she's ever been taught about strangers and safety and being vaguely reasonable, but Jenny takes a deep breath and says, "You could stay with me I guess. Tonight. Or whatever. Until you figure this out."

Elryn watches her. "What are your intentions with me, sir... lady."

"It's just Jenny. Jenny Wilson."

"Jenny, son of Will. I ask again... what are your intentions? If you bring me to your keep, will you make me your bride?"

Jenny snorts. "Not in this state."

Elryn watches her, clearly waiting for an actual answer.

"What is with you and marriage anyway?" Jenny asks.

"It is expected of me. It is my duty."

"Well, I'm sorry to shatter your romantic hopes and dreams, but I'm not going to marry you. All I can offer is a futon and some cold pizza."

"I don't have to marry you?"

That gives Jenny's pride a painful little twist, but she laughs it off weakly. "Nope."

"Then I really am free," Elryn says, grasping Jenny's hands like they're in some Jane Austen movie about to have a bosom talk. She lowers her voice to an absurd whisper, as if they're not the only people left on the fairgrounds. "I never wanted it. The thought of... being... with a man, of being his wife. I couldn't bear it, and I wished so desperately to be free. It was a selfish, terrible wish, I know. But I want to choose love."

Jenny starts to tell Elryn to stop babbling before she thinks better about taking her probably-hallucinated new friend home, but she remembers being a kid and looking at her older sister's wedding catalogue and loving the crisp satiny lines of the tuxes and how she wanted to wear a top hat and marry a pretty girl. So instead of saying something snarky, she just kisses Elryn's forehead gently.

Elryn blushes.

"Maybe the sorcerer did you a favor," Jenny says, untangling her fingers from Elryn's and disregarding how insane it is to go along with the whole fairytale thing. "I mean, now you can do whatever you want."

"Perhaps."

They walk side by side to the parking lot. Every few steps, Elryn laughs happily, and Jenny smiles.