

BOOK

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BAD
Princesses

MEET ME AT MIDNIGHT

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Scholastic Inc.

For my nina, Tricia

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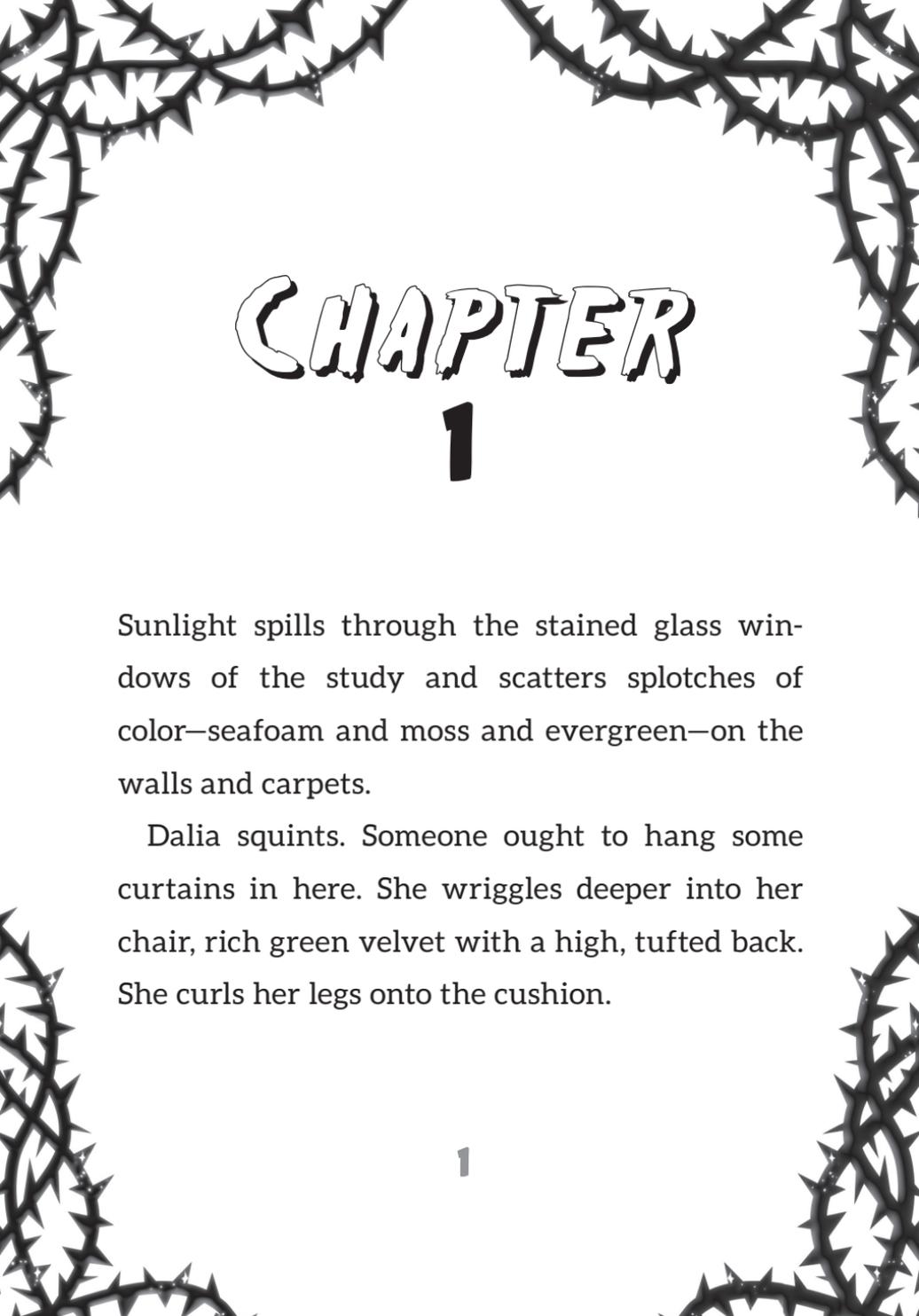
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CHAPTER 1

Sunlight spills through the stained glass windows of the study and scatters splotches of color—seafoam and moss and evergreen—on the walls and carpets.

Dalia squints. Someone ought to hang some curtains in here. She wriggles deeper into her chair, rich green velvet with a high, tufted back. She curls her legs onto the cushion.

“Wouldn’t it be more comfortable if you took your boots off?” Princesa Carmen asks, looking up from the round oak table where the other first-year princesses in Casita Emerald are studying maps. “Not to mention cleaner,” she mutters.

Dalia does not answer. She finds that when people talk, they usually aren’t talking to her. Most of the time, she fades into the background. Most of the time, you can forget she’s even there.

Or at least that was how it used to be. Before she walked through the golden gates of the Fine and Ancient Institute for the Royal, an academy for princesses in training. Here, it is becoming almost impossible to disappear.

“Dalia?” Princesa Eloísa says, lifting her head too. “Your boots?”

Dalia looks down at the scuffed toe of one of her boots. It peeks out from under the hem of her gown, the same deep and dangerous gray of a thundercloud. “No, I think I’ll leave them on.” She pauses. She pushes her dark curls out of her eyes and straightens the tiara she received on her first day. It has silver points like owl talons, a teardrop-shaped emerald atop each one. “A princesa should always be prepared, don’t you agree?”

Carmen and Eloísa shrug and bend their heads over the maps again.

“What we *should* be preparing for is the Geography exam,” Carmen says.

“We can get through the Realms of Moonlit Snow before the dinner bells,” Princesa Marisol, sitting at the head of the table, suggests.

“And save the Lands of Whispering Wind for tomorrow,” Eloísa agrees.

When she is sure the princesses are focused on their studies again, Dalia taps her fingernail softly against her boot. “Don’t worry, Don Ignacio,” the gentle rhythm tells the lizard hiding inside. “I’ll never let them find you.” Don Ignacio flicks his tongue on her ankle in ticklish reply, and Dalia has to swallow a giggle.

The lizard isn’t the only thing Dalia is hiding. She picks up the heavy geography book on her lap and opens it. Concealed in its pages, where the princesses can’t see them, are her letters from the Bewitched Academy for the Dreadful. The infamous school for villains. The place where Dalia truly belongs.

That is, she’s sure she *would* belong there, if only she could get in.

Blurry through the stained glass window, she can just make out the B.A.D.'s mysterious towers rising over the clouds, no more than a day's walk away. Yet reading over these letters, the academy seems farther from her than ever.

Your plot was perfectly unpleasant, but only fairly dreadful.

The scheme was somewhat surprising, yet not nearly dreadful enough.

Creative, but still not particularly dreadful.

Rejection after rejection. The B.A.D. is notoriously selective. Only the most terrifyingly talented young villains are admitted. By now, Dalia has read the letters so many times she knows them by heart. Yet she studies them still, hoping to find some clue inside, something she

hasn't noticed before, that will show her how she can prove she is dreadful enough to be welcomed there. Welcomed home.

She touches the locket, encrusted with black opals, that her abuelos gave her before sending her off to the F.A.I.R., insisting it was the best place for her. That she would grow to love it. The warm stones shimmer with threads of gold and violet and blue.

"I've never seen black opals before," Eloísa says. "Where did the necklace come from?"

Dalia startles. These princesses have turned out to be far more observant than she imagined they'd be.

"Nowhere," Dalia says, dropping the locket under the beaded neckline of her gown, where she usually keeps it.

"*Nowhere?*" Eloísa wrinkles her freckled nose

and tilts her head so that her own tiara—five slender gold bands, dotted with round emeralds like musical notes—slips.

“I mean, from home,” Dalia replies.

“It’s too bad you didn’t get an *emerald* locket instead,” Carmen says, scribbling on a scroll. “Or that you weren’t placed in Casita Opal.”

On the day they arrived, Profesora Colibrí, the F.A.I.R.’s head teacher, assigned each of the first-year princesses to a Casita: Emerald, Sapphire, Ruby, or Opal.

“*Carmen!*” Eloísa objects. “Dalia belongs in Casita Emerald. With us.”

Dalia pulls the book closer. She lets her curls fall over her eyes and hopes the princesses will go back to ignoring her again.

Instead, to her horror, Eloísa stands. She smooths the wrinkles on her green satin pants,

gold embroidery shimmering on each leg. She steps toward Dalia's chair.

"What are you working on anyway?" Eloísa asks. She wears a matching vest and jacket and a floppy bow tie made of ivory silk. She peers over Dalia's book. "Don't you want to come over and study with us? Everything's more fun with other people. Even geography."

Dalia slams the book shut. Don Ignacio squirms inside her boot. "Sorry about that," she whispers.

"Huh?" Eloísa tilts her head again.

"Nothing," Dalia says. She blows the hair out of her eyes and swings her feet to the ground, carefully, so as not to disturb Don Ignacio. "And anyway, I was just leaving." She tucks the geography book, letters stashed inside, under her arm. She doubts that anything is really more fun with other people. Most of the time, the fun wears off

quickly. As soon as those other people think they know her.

There has only been one exception. Dominga.

Dominga was assigned to Casita Opal, but really, she's a villain too and just as desperate as Dalia is to break free from the palace. Together, they hope to hatch a scheme horrible enough to gain admission to the B.A.D. In fact, they are planning one this very evening.

"Leaving?" Eloísa asks. "Did you forget something in the suite? I'll go with you. I need to change for dinner anyway." She touches the silk bow. "I always end up spilling chocolate sauce on my moño."

Dalia did not expect the princesses to be so very . . . persistent. This is not going to be as easy as she thought. But then, nothing has been.

"I'm on my way to the bakery," Dalia replies.

“Chef Luís-Esteban said I could have the stale palmeras to feed the crows.”

Eloísa shudders. “Chef Luís-Esteban scares me. He’s always so grumpy.”

It is exactly what Dalia hoped she’d say. And exactly why she likes Chef Luís-Esteban.

“Ask him to make more of those jalapeño empanadas,” Carmen calls out from the table.

Dalia grinds her teeth. She and Dominga were the ones who stirred the jalapeños into the apple empanada filling. They were supposed to have been a secret—and *wicked*—addition to the chef’s recipe. But in the end, the princesas loved them. Instead of begging for water to soothe their burning tongues, they lined up for second helpings.

Dalia and Dominga cannot fail again.

“Don’t worry,” Dalia says. “I’ll make sure there’s something *extra* special on the menu for dinner.”

She slips out the door and manages to hold in her cackle until it closes behind her.