

# NO GUTS, NO GLORY NO GELATO!

A PREQUEL TO  
"MONSTERS BEWARE!"

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**"No Guts, No Glory, No Gelato"**  
A Short Story Prequel to "Monsters Beware"

**ONE**

**T**hey were imprisoned in the dungeon three days ago. This would never have happened if it not for the Warrior Games. And like so many things that went wrong, their current predicament was Claudette's fault. But even behind bars, the pint-sized, red-headed warrior was still feeling confident, "Don't worry, guys. I'll think of a plan," she said. "We'll escape." Gaston, Marie, and Valiant the Pug Dog all knew there was no escape from the dungeon of the Great Lakes Kingdom. They also knew that Claudette thought plans were over-rated so she probably didn't have a plan to escape the dungeon. Nonetheless, Claudette pushed the green sleeves of her tunic up past her elbows. She grabbed ahold of the iron bars of their cell. And she tried to pry them apart with brute force. It was her favorite kind of force. Her knuckles turned white as she pulled, "Just.. gotta...bust...the...bars..." Claudette's face turned red and Gaston worried that his big sister might faint. She gasped and collapsed on the stone floor of their cell. "Dumb, stupid, unbreakable iron bars!!!" She turned to the others and asked, "So, who's hungry?" Claudette's friends were hungry too, but at breakfast, Claudette had tried to bash one of their prison guards on the head with a day-old baguette, which Gaston insisted was still perfectly edible. At lunch, she threw a bowl of applesauce in the face of the guard to blind him long enough so she could escape. She didn't escape. And the guard announced that the kids would go without dinner as punishment for Claudette's food fighting. Marie and Gaston sighed. Yes, they were hungry.

"I'm sure once Father realizes we are imprisoned, he will send a diplomatic mission to negotiate our immediate release," said Marie. She wished she had a book to read. She wished she had another dress to wear besides the long-sleeved, long-hemmed, poufy shouldered one she was wearing right now. Though it was her favorite outfit, Marie had already worn it for a few days. She hoped no one noticed. Marie also wished she had brush. It wasn't easy to get her hair to stand like two spiraling towers. Talk about hard work. Marie became tired of wishing for things she didn't have, and so she

stopped wishing for everything except for maybe a stale baguette and some applesauce to eat. She was hungry.

Gaston was hungry too. He was imagining that he was enjoying a chocolate truffle. He could picture its chocolate ganache center coated with bittersweet cocoa powder and sprinkled with chopped coconut. Its curved shape reminded him of its namesake, the truffle mushroom, which obviously was Gaston's favorite fungus, right after portabellas. Usually, he kept extra food in his backpack, but they had eaten through all of it on the journey here. He had even eaten his emergency banana, which he kept hidden under the chef's hat he always wore. Valiant the Pug Dog napped. He dreamt that he was in a butcher shop with no butcher to guard it. It was a glorious dream.

How did Claudette lead her friend, brother, and dog into this awful predicament? Our story begins with the three future criminals back in their homeland, the bustling town of Mont Petit Pierre, in the heart of the Evergreen Country.

"C'mon, Valiant! Keep up! I'm sure Gaston's around here someplace." Claudette called back to her dog. They were running through the Mont Petit Pierre market, which was by the South End of the fortress wall. There were booths selling fresh meats, vegetables, assorted pastries as well as pots and pans and kitchen utensils. Gaston loved to window shop here. Claudette was surprised not to see her little brother here. After a moment, she spotted Marie and jogged over to her with Valiant.

Marie was sitting at the base of a statue reading a book, "Ogres: Monsters or Merely Misunderstood?" It was fascinating. The statue, where she sat, was her favorite reading spot. It was a larger than life depiction of Pierre the First, the founder of the town and one of her ancestors. The statue had once been of Pierre the XXXII, who was Marie's grandfather, but then he turned evil and tried to attack the town and kill everyone in it. After he was defeated and sealed in amber for eternity, Marie started a petition to replace her grandfather's statue with her nobler ancestor Pierre the First. This change was incredibly easy since the both Pierres looked exactly alike except that Pierre the First had a mustache. The town elders added facial hair to the statue, changed the commemorative sign, and voilà, a new Pierre!

"Have you seen Gaston anywhere? Poppa says it's time for him to make lunch," Claudette asked her best friend.

"What a beautiful day, no?" asked Marie.

"I guess so..." said Claudette. Today looked kind of like yesterday and the day before yesterday to her. Warriors did not have time to evaluate weather patterns.

"You know what the perfect thing would be to do today?" asked Marie.

"Bashing monsters? Sure, but I don't have time for that. I gotta find my brother because Poppa is hungry. Gaston's gotta make us lunch." Valiant barked in agreement.

"Wouldn't it be fun if we dressed up and —"

"No, thanks," said Claudette. She hated to dress up.

"We could put on dresses and —"

"Nope." Claudette hated dresses.

"Or maybe if we put on funny slippers and a hat and —"

"No!" Claudette had nothing against slippers, but she hated hats. "Marie, I don't have time to dress up. If I don't find Gaston, Poppa is gonna be so mad..." Claudette's voice faded when she saw white bubbles floating in the air just above the other side of the fortress wall. Weird. "What the heck is that..?" she said to Marie.

Marie turned and saw it too. "It looks like snow, but it can't be. It's too hot today."

"If that's not snow, then what is it?" wondered Claudette.

Marie mulled it over for less than a second before exclaiming, "GASTON!" Valiant barked in agreement. Claudette drew her wooden sword and took off running toward the main gates of the town. She always had her sword at the ready when she went beyond the Fortress Walls. They were safe from magic within the town. The town was magic-proof. But beyond the walls of town... it was all danger. Tons of danger! Claudette loved danger. She didn't care for magic. As for Marie, she did not run, but she walked at an incredibly brisk pace to follow after her friend.

## TWO

**W**hen Claudette reached the woods outside of Mont Petit Pierre, she saw Gaston in the distance with the old spellbook the Apple Hag had given him. The book had a ragged leather cover, which had seen better days and far better magicians. Gaston was a newbie. His favorite thing about the spellbook was it had a compartment in the back for potions, which reminded him of a spice rack. He loved spices, and he was always careful not to over-spice his meals. The Apple Hag didn't like very many people, but for some reason she liked Gaston. The last time she saw him, instead of killing Gaston, which was her preferred manner of dealing with others, she gave him her old spellbook. She was given the book by her evil mother, back when she was a young child living with her other sister hags. Each hag had dominion over different elements. The Apple Hag could control anything that grew in the ground. She loved apples best, and so she mostly controlled all the apple trees in the Forest of Death. The Apple Hag kept to herself with just a few exceptions. She saw magic in Gaston. But if the Apple Hag had seen Gaston at this particular moment, fumbling with the wand and mispronouncing the words of even the simplest of spells, she would have regretted giving him the spellbook.

Gaston waved his wand and tapped it on a bowl of white liquid, "FREZZIUS GELLATARIOUS!" he yelled. The liquid formed bubbles and floated out of the bowl. Gaston sighed. This was not the result he had hoped for. Frustrated, Gaston paged through the book. "Darn it. I just can't get it right. There's gotta be a spell in here that will help me..."

"Gaston! Gaaaston!" yelled Claudette. She startled him so badly, that he dropped the spellbook.

"Wa-wait for me, Claudette. I-I'm coming!" called Marie. She was out of breath. She was great at lots of things but running was not one of them.

"C'mon, little brother, Poppa is so hungry he's super cranky. I mean, more than his regular cranky." Marie finally caught up and leaned against a tree to catch her breath. Claudette noticed the spellbook on the ground at Gaston's feet. She saw a bowl of white liquid Gaston was holding and the wand. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously as she looked at him. "What are you doing?"

Gaston nervously stepped in front of the spellbook to hide it. He ducked the bowl and wand behind his back. He was counting on Claudette's easily distracted nature to be easily distracted and forget her question. "What am *I* doing? I think the question is, what are you doing, Claudette? I mean everyone knows you are Mont Petit Pierre's greatest warrior and yet no one here appreciates your true talents, am I right or am I wrong?" asked Gaston.

"You know it, brother. I was just saying that same thing yesterday. In fact, I was thinking that because I'm our town's greatest warrior, besides Poppa, I should be out warrior-ing." Claudette nodded in absolute agreement.

"Oh, Claudette..." said Marie, "First of all, he's just trying to distract you. And second, 'warrior-ing' is not a real word."

"You don't say? I didn't know about that first thing, but I think you're right..." said Claudette with an annoyed tone. "And we'll just have to agree to disagree on that second thing. My dictionary is different than yours." Then, she got in Gaston's face. "So, what are you *really* doing?" Claudette demanded. She was so close that he could smell her breakfast. It was not healthy or delectable. Claudette should let him make her potato fricassee with a side of mixed fruit for breakfast. It was high in protein and vitamins and enough carbohydrates to keep the typical person full until lunchtime. Gaston was mentally reviewing all the different ways of expanding Claudette's breakfast options when he was knocked out of this by Claudette's screaming voice. "GASTON!" Claudette snapped.

"What?" he said defensively. "I know magic is illegal in Mont Petit Pierre. But technically, I'm outside of Mont Petit Pierre because I'm outside of the fortress walls. So, I'm not breaking the law even if I were using magic. Which I'm not. Just try to prove it."

"There are bubbles floating up from the bowl behind your back," said Marie. She was right. They could hear a gurgling sound and white bubbles were flying above Gaston. "And you have a magic wand hidden behind your back. And there's a spellbook on the ground behind you."

"You can speculate all day, but I'm innocent," said Gaston.

Claudette ignored them both and stuck out her tongue. "I love catching snow on my tongue." She caught one of the white bubbles in her mouth. Valiant did the same thing. But as Claudette swallowed, her eyes bugged out, her mouth went wide, and she thought she was going to vomit. Valiant, walked over to the closest tree and went ahead

and threw up. Then he sniffed his vomit. Like a lot of dogs, he was both lovable and revolting.

"Ughhh! The snow tastes like spoiled milk," yelled Claudette.

Marie tugged on one of Gaston's arms bringing it around to his front and revealing the bowl of white liquid. She sniffed its contents. "Oh, dear. That *is* spoiled milk," then she waved a judgmental finger at Gaston, "I hope it's pasteurized!"

"Hmph. Pasteurization is for the weak. And besides, milk does not spoil. It evolves," said Gaston taking his usual culinary umbrage.

"Spill it, Gaston!" Claudette demanded.

"No way! Do you know how long it took me to find highly evolved milk?"

"Not the bowl of spoiled milk. I mean spill the beans. Tell us what you're up to. NOW," demanded his sister in a tone of voice, which he always obeyed.

"Okay, fine," said Gaston. "Well, you know magic doesn't work inside Mont Petit Pierre..."

"And it's illegal," Claudette reminded him.

"Yeah, thanks to that no-good Marquis. No offense, Marie," said Gaston.

"None taken, Gaston. My father is imperfect," Marie shrugged.

"So, I wanted to try out a new spell. That's why I had to go outside of town. But the spell just isn't working. I'm a total failure."

"No guts, no glory, little brother. At least you're trying. Ooh! Is it a spell to kill monsters? Or is it the kind of magic that paralyzes ogres? That'd be awesome. Or are you trying to blast banshees with a spell? That is so cool!" Before he could answer, she continued, "Aw, gee, Gaston. I'm sorry I don't encourage you to make more warrior spells. But don't worry, from now on, when it comes to spell-making, I got your back!"

Gaston mumbled something. "Pardon me?" asked Marie. She turned her head so her ear was directed at him. He mumbled something indecipherable. Again.

"SPEAK UP, KID!" Claudette screamed at him. She was not known for her patience.

"I'm trying to make gelato!!!" Gaston blurted out.

"What?" said Claudette. She was confused. Her brother's words could often do that to her.

"I beg your pardon?" said Marie.

"Arf?" asked Valiant.

"I'm trying to find a spell to freeze milk in order to make gelato," he explained.

Claudette lost it. She paced and waved her sword angrily. "You gotta be joking! The Apple Hag is not gonna be happy to hear that her spellbook is being used to make dessert!"

"Just don't tell Poppa. Please...? He'll be mad," begged Gaston.

"You're right about that. Poppa said you could practice spells, but they had to be practical magic," said Claudette.

"What's more practical than gelato?" asked Gaston.

"He has a point, Claudette," said Marie and Valiant barked in agreement. Claudette was out-numbered. Final vote: Gelato is, practically speaking, practical.

Claudette was about to drag her brother off to make lunch when Valiant barked and pointed a paw toward a clearing. "What's that, boy? Someone's coming?" Claudette peered through the trees and saw the Marquis speaking excitedly to a woman she'd never seen before. She was dressed the way the old-time warriors from the Mountain Citadel kingdom dressed. She even had a sword at her side, armor, and a helmet. The stranger seemed to be losing her patience with the Marquis.

"Please, get to the point, Marquis," snapped the woman.

"This way. We're almost there!" said the Marquis. He was snobby, very round and liked to dress in a fluffy purple tunic, so that people might think he was royalty even though he wasn't. He was just a Marquis, but he still ran the Evergreen Country and its capital, Mont Petit Pierre. He was incredibly vain and stroked his impeccably trimmed goatee because he thought it made him look kingly. All that fine dressing and fine grooming were offset by a constant scowl on his face. But he wasn't scowling right now. It seemed like he was asking the woman from the Mountain Citadel for something. That was weird because usually the Marquis just told people what he wanted and they did it. Except for Claudette and her dad, Augustine. Whatever the Marquis asked them to do, they usually did the opposite.

"Who's the Marquis talking to?" Claudette wondered aloud.

Marie shrugged. "It's quite unusual for Father to be out here beyond the town's walls. I will ask him," Marie raised her voice and waved, "Yoo-hoo, Fathe—"

That's as far as Marie got before Claudette clamped Marie's mouth shut and put an index finger up to her own lips with a whispered, "Shhh. They haven't seen us yet." Claudette removed her hand from Marie's mouth and started to creep silently to the tree closest to the clearing.



"It seems rather rude to eavesdrop," said Marie.

Claudette nodded. "Yep, totally rude. But fun." Gaston and Valiant nodded in agreement and followed Claudette. Marie made an exasperated sigh and quietly joined her friends behind a tree, and they eavesdropped.

"So, what do you think my dear, Madame Eva? Isn't it lovely?" the Marquis asked. He motioned at the large field. "This is the location. We could host the Games right here. Do not concern yourself with that 500-year-old forest over there. We can chop it down to make way for the coliseum. Nothing stops progress!"

"Marquis, the Games Tribunal has already said no," she shook her head sternly.

"But imagine the transformation. From the simple meadow, you see before you here now to the most grand coliseum in the history of the Warrior Games!" The Marquis froze his smile and nodded a few times as if his enthusiasm was contagious and Madame Eva would break out in smiles and agreement. She just frowned.

Claudette tried not to scream out with excitement. Anything with the words "warrior" and "games" had to be the most AMAZING thing in the world. She had heard some of the adults talking about the "Warrior Games" nostalgically. But if they ever saw the Marquis or her father, Augustine, coming, they'd immediately shut-up about the Games. Claudette wondered why.

Madame Eva continued, "The Games Tribunal has addressed this topic numerous times, Marquis. Mont Petit Pierre is banned for life from the Games. You of all people know precisely why."

"Let bygones be bygones I always say. If the Tribunal allows Mont Petit Pierre to once again stand side by side with the other fine kingdoms and participate honorably in the Warrior Games, then I promise to build the Games Tribunal the most majestic, most magnificent arena in the Games' history!" He did that frozen smile thing again, but it still didn't work.

"The Great Lakes Kingdom has already been approved as this year's host," she said.

"Well, then at least lift our town's ban, Madame, and let us compete. Mont Petit Pierre has changed since the days when we violated the rules of the Games. We have matured," said the Marquis. His voice was getting less and less confident and more and more desperate.

"Perhaps, but until the Tribunal sees evidence of your commitment to the integrity of the Games, the ban stays. Good day, Marquis." She turned on her heels and walked

away. Briskly. The Marquis dropped his face into his palms, in the way that he usually did when Claudette gave him a headache. Which was often.

Claudette turned to Marie and whispered, "I thought the Warrior Games was just a made-up thing."

Marie whispered back. "Father says the Games are a centuries-old tradition. Every four years, all Seven Kingdoms would send their finest warriors to compete for a week of Games to prove who was the greatest fighter. The kingdoms took turns hosting. But then, something happened a long time ago. The team from Mont Petit Pierre used magic during the competition. That was a clear violation of the rules and thus we were banned from competing ever again."

"I'm okay with that," said Gaston. "There's no reason to glorify violence in a competitive setting."

Claudette tussled his hair. "I will never get tired of how cute you are, little brother." Then she announced, "We've gotta get our town back into the Warrior Games. And I'm going to lead our team to victory or else my name isn't Claudette the Warrior!"

"Actually, you're name's just Claudette. 'The Warrior' part isn't on your birth certificate as far as I know," Gaston said. "But we could check."

Claudette was already off bursting through the clearing toward the Marquis. He looked around for a place to hide, but there was none. "Hey, Marquis! Make me captain of our Warrior team, okay? I can win this thing for our town. Deal?" She put her hand out to shake on the deal, but the Marquis just looked down at her hand distastefully as if trying to calculate how many days it had been since she had washed that hand and promising himself he would never shake it. Never ever.

"Oh, hello Claudette. What a pleasure..." You could tell from the Marquis' frown that it was not a pleasure. Marie, Gaston, and Valiant emerged from the forest. Gaston had bottled the sour milk and slid the bottle, spellbook, wand, and bowl into his backpack. The Marquis looked at his daughter, full of disappointment. "My dear, Marie, how many times have I asked you not to play with Claudette or Gaston? They are very bad influences."

Marie chuckled. "Oh, you have told me that so many times, father."

The Marquis wondered if there was a way to ship his daughter off to a finishing school, someplace far, far away. Someplace where Claudette and Gaston could never find her. Somewhere -

"MARQUIS! HELLO? Where'd you go?" shouted Claudette.

The Marquis snapped out of his daydream and turned his attention back to the dreadful girl. "Oh, Claudette, the only way Mont Petit Pierre will ever be allowed to participate in the Warrior Games is if we host the Games. The town, which hosts is guaranteed a spot in the competition. But that honor has been awarded to the Great Lakes Kingdom. My spies tell me that they have already built a coliseum and filled it with monsters for the warriors to battle during Games. Sadly, my attempt to sway the Tribunal has failed."

The gears in Claudette's head were spinning at double time, "So, are you saying that if the Great Lakes Kingdom drops out of hosting, then Mont Petit Pierre will get to host, which means we'd be allowed to have a warrior team, and I'd be the captain of our team?"

"I said everything but that last thing," replied the Marquis.

"It's okay. I don't mind being *co*-captain. I'm just a humble monster-bashing warrior. Call me Claudette the Warrior. It's my name even if it's not on my birth certificate."

"I will call you, 'Claudette the Annoying.'" He turned to walk back to town.

"Don't worry, Marquis. I got this!" Claudette called after him. "No guts, no glory, no games!"

Once the Marquis was out of earshot, Claudette turned to her friend and brother. "Guys, we're going to the Great Lakes Kingdom! All we've gotta do is convince Prince Victor and his brother Prince Stephane to let us host the Games. I'll talk to them warrior-to-warrior." Victor and Stephane made all the decisions for the Great Lakes Kingdom. Their parents, the King and Queen were obsessed with fishing and so they were always out on a boat, in the middle of one of their great lakes too busy to run the affairs of the state. Claudette knew that if she wanted to get the kingdom to give up hosting duties, she'd have to talk directly to the twin Princes.

Marie looked excited too. "Oohh, this could be an opportunity for me to perfect my skills of negotiation. I will help you convince the Princes of the Great Lakes Kingdom to give the Warrior Games hosting duties to Mont Petit Pierre."

"That's a hard pass for me," said Gaston. He was already taking his gear out of his backpack. "I want to keep working on my gelato magic spell," said Gaston. He poured the spoiled milk back in the bowl. He flipped through the spellbook and settled on a page. Gaston tapped the bowl with his wand three times. "FREZZIUS GLORIUS

GELLATORIOUS!" Bubbles of sour milk floated up from the bowl. But this time... they started to form an icy ball in the air. "It's working! It's working!" But all of a sudden, the frozen ball shot toward Claudette's wooden sword like metal to a magnet. It exploded on impact covering her sword with milky ice. Claudette looked furious.

"Darn it, Gaston! Now my sword smells like sour milk!" Claudette tried wiping her sword on the grass but every time she sniffed it, she nearly threw-up from its sour smell.

"Why can't I get this spell to work?!" Gaston wondered. "I won't give up!" He tapped the bowl three more times and yelled, "FREZZIUS MAXIMUS!" Claudette and Marie ducked behind a tree for cover as the milk shot out of the bowl and flew straight at Valiant's tail freezing it in sour milk. The dog yelped in surprise.

"You froze Valiant's tail, Gaston!" Claudette shouted. Valiant started barking angrily at Gaston.

Gaston looked repentant. "I'm sorry boy." He closed the spellbook. "Aw, who am I kidding? I'll never get my gelato spell to work. I might as well go with you guys," said Gaston. He was defeated.

"That's the spirit, kid. Give up before everyone in Mont Petit Pierre smells like frozen sour milk," Claudette reassured him.

"So, what's the plan, Claudette?" asked Marie.

"Phht! Plans are over-rated. We're gonna improvise this one. C'mon!" yelled Claudette as she ran off.

### THREE

The Royal guards were not happy when Claudette, Marie, Gaston, and Valiant the Pug showed up unannounced at the Great Lakes Castle. "Follow me!" growled the taller of the two guards as he led them past the high-ceiling entrance of the castle. Their footsteps echoed as they struggled to keep up with the guard down a windowless hallway lit by torches. "Keep up!" growled the guard. From that point on, Claudette and her friends called him Growler.

The other guard mumbled to herself the whole way to the throne room. "The very idea of disturbing the Princes... So rude..." They called this guard, Mumbler.

The trip to the Great Lakes Kingdom had taken a couple of days. Claudette told her father Augustine that she and Gaston were going on a trip with Marie. Since Marie usually kept Claudette and Gaston out of trouble, Augustine said yes. Marie asked her mother, Lady Lucy, if she could visit the Great Lakes Kingdom for a research trip to study the royal customs of other kingdoms. This was true because Marie considered any visit abroad research. Since Claudette and Gaston usually got Marie into trouble, Marie omitted the fact that they were coming on the trip with her. Marie's mother, Lady Lucy, arranged for a couple of local farmers to take them in a horse-drawn carriage to the Great Lakes Kingdom. The kingdom was an archipelago of islands spread out within four enormous lakes. After a day and a half on land, the kids, Valiant, and the Farmers took a canoe to the Princes' castle, which was on the largest of the islands. Claudette didn't want any babysitters and so as soon as they arrived, she told the farmers about the Trout Races on another of the Kingdom's islands. The Farmers loved to bet on anything from whether it would rain that day to how high the corn would grow, so they couldn't resist the opportunity to bet on racing fish. The farmers left the kids on their own at the castle. That's how Claudette liked to operate. On her own.

As the kids and Valiant hurried past decorative suits of armor, family crests on the wall, and bejeweled chairs, Claudette whispered, "This place is kind of a dump if you ask me." But the castle was not a dump. It was in fact, majestic. There were ornate tapestries covering most of the walls. The tapestries had images of lake animals like beavers, trout, and turtles.

The trio and dog turned down another hallway. This one was wider than the last one and had huge windows. The walls on one side were covered with portraits of the handsome Prince Victor. There was even a heroic statue of Prince Victor rising from the ocean in a seashell. It was called, "Victor de Milo."

"Geeze, Prince Victor is everywhere," whispered Gaston.

"I suppose that's why they call him Prince Victor the Vain," said Marie.

On the other side of the hallway was a single painting of Victor's twin brother: Prince Stephane. The Princes were twins and they looked nearly alike except that Stephane was always bandaged and Victor always combed his hair. They were the same ages as Claudette and Marie. The portrait in this hall featured Stephane smiling, but with a bandaged broken nose, and giving a cheerful thumbs-up. Even Stephane's thumb was bandaged. "Boy, Prince Stephane the Stumbler is kinda clumsy, huh?" said Gaston. "He's always getting hurt." Claudette and Marie nodded agreeing with him.

Valiant started barking urgently at Claudette. "Aw, Valiant, you should have gone before we went inside the castle," she said. Valiant whined. "Okay, okay. Just find a corner when no one's looking," said Claudette. Valiant nodded.

The hallway ended at two huge wooden doors. Mumbler mumbled something that sounded like, "dumb, disturbing kids..." and then she pulled the ornate handles, and the doors swung open.

The group walked into the throne room. At the front of the room, were twin bejeweled thrones on a platform. They were empty. There was a red velvet curtain behind the thrones. This room had more paintings of Victor and Stephane. In every portrait, Victor was always smiling and his brother, Stephane, was always bandaged. Claudette and her friends stood around and waited. Claudette tapped her foot. Loudly. "We don't have all day!" said Claudette.

"Shhh!" Marie and Gaston begged. They were often begging Claudette not to speak and get them into trouble. Most of the time, Claudette got them into trouble anyway.

Just then, a man in a uniform marched into the throne room with a trumpet. He blew a horn playing the royal fanfare so loud that the kids covered their ears and winced. "Hear ye, hear ye. Subjects of the Seven Kingdoms. Behold the grandeur of Prince Victor and his benevolent but graceless brother, Prince Stephane!" Prince Stephane stepped out from behind the curtain first. He was wearing a sling on his left arms because he had fallen out of his bed that morning. The royal sling got tangled on

the royal curtain. He tripped and went airborne off the royal platform, but Mumbler caught him and carried his majesty back to his royal throne.

Claudette rolled her eyes and said, "They don't call him Stephane the Stumbler for nothing, eh?" Gaston and Marie shot her a look. If only Claudette could keep her mouth closed. Next, Prince Victor emerged from behind the curtain and strutted confidentially to his throne. He paused and turned in a circle before sitting so that everyone could behold him. Claudette tapped her foot impatiently. She didn't feel like beholding him or anybody else for that matter. She wanted to get down to business.

The trumpet guy announced, "May I present to his Majesties: Marie, the honorable daughter of the Marquis of Mont Petit Pierre; Gaston, the reasonably honorable son of Augustine the Blacksmith, and the barely honorable but most assuredly ill-mannered, Claudette."

It was common knowledge that all the Princes of all the Seven Kingdoms had crushes on Marie. Princes Victor and Stephane were no exceptions. Victor smiled down at Marie and ignored everyone else. "Why, hello, Marie. So nice to see you again." Marie did a curtsy. Gaston thought he was supposed to curtsy too and so he awkwardly attempted one. Claudette just stood there, scowling through the chitchat. She wanted to wrap this up and begin her training for the Warrior Games. In fact, Claudette was so impatiently distracted, that she didn't notice Valiant sniffing the tapestries in a nearby corner.

"It's a pleasure and an honor to see you once again, Prince Victor and Prince Stephane," Marie said politely. "May I commend you on your fine tastes in decorations in Lake Castle?"

"Yes. Yes, you may compliment us," said Prince Victor. "Ours is the loveliest castle of the Seven Kingdoms if I may say so myself. With all modesty of course," said Prince Victor, not very modestly.

"My brother is so humble, is he not?" said Stephane. "He decorated the castle all by himself. That is why there are numerous paintings of my handsome brother and very few of me." Stephane smiled.

"Good to see ya, Prince Pretty Boy and His Royal Klutziness. It's been a while..." said Claudette putting her hand out to shake Prince Victor's hand. Victor looked suddenly terrified. The guards drew their swords. Prince Stephane screamed, "Brother, I will

protect you!" Prince Stephane stumbled forward and put his body between Claudette and Prince Victor.

"Hey, what's the big idea?!" asked Claudette, confused.

Prince Victor held his hands up to either side of his flawless face as if he were framing himself. "Do you not see this face of mine?" he asked. Prince Victor turned his head in to catch the best light on his face.

"It's just a face. Everybody's got a face. Except for those faceless monsters that live in Butcher's Ravine..." said Claudette. Gaston shuddered at the thought of faceless monsters. He shuddered at the thought of monsters with faces too. He shuddered a lot.

Prince Stephane gasped. "Brother, do not listen to her. Oh, Claudette, is my brother's face not the cleanest face ever? Do you not admire how every pore on his nose is spotless and radiant? Admire him, for my brother's blemish-free face sets an example to all in our kingdom. We can all shine like he does, with proper and rigorous skin care."

"Um, what does Prince Victor's face have to do with Claudette's hand?" wondered Gaston.

Prince Victor looked at the trio as if they were the simplest creatures in the universe. He spoke slowly as he explained, "If I were to shake Claudette's hand, I might accidentally touch my face before washing my hand. Do you know how much grease Claudette's clammy, dirty hands contain...?"

Claudette shrugged. "I'm gonna guess the answer is ... 'a lot.'"

"Precisely. And if I shake your oily, disgusting hand, and then I touch my face, that would be the same thing as plunging my face in a vat of pig's grease."

Prince Stephane fanned himself for air. Mumbler and Growler fanned him too. He looked like he was going to faint. "Claudette's piggy hands! Perish the thought! No, no, nooooo!"

Claudette just rolled her eyes, and Prince Victor continued, "Greasy handshakes lead to a greasy face and that leads to —"

Prince Stephane screamed with fear, "Do not say it, brother!"

But Prince Victor said it anyway. "PIMPLES!"

Prince Stephane sobbed and beat his chest. "No, no, nooooo! Not on my brother's blemish free face. No, not that!"

"Okay, okay. I can see you've given this a lot of thought," said Claudette. "I'm just gonna wave. See. I'm waving." She waved and then she waved some more.



"I shall wave back," said Prince Victor and he waved once. Just once.

"What a tremendous wave, brother. He is a good waver, is he not?" asked Prince Stephane. Gaston and Marie weren't sure what constituted a good or bad or tremendous wave so they just shrugged. Claudette tried to stay patient, which was not her strength. She wandered over to the window and looked outside. On the street below, horse drawn milk carts passed by carrying large opened barrels of milk. There was a long line of these milk carts headed up a hill. It seemed weird to Claudette, why would anyone need so much milk? But Claudette didn't have time to ask. She was in a rush to get to the point of their visit. She wasn't one to beat around the bush. In fact, if there was a bush in her way, she would beat it down (not around) with her sword. So, she turned back to the Princes and said, "We want Mont Petit Pierre to host the Warrior Games. But that's only gonna happen if your kingdom decides not to host. So, I'm gonna need you to back out, got it? We're done here, right?" She turned to walk out. "I'm waving goodbye now." Claudette waved.

"WAIT!" said the two Princes.

Claudette didn't want to wait but she thought she should. She waited. She didn't notice that Valiant had moved from sniffing tapestry to sniffing a woven rug with the royal crest, which was on the floor next to the throne platform.

Victor frowned at Claudette. "We have already constructed a fine coliseum for Warrior Week. And we have already populated it with the most fearsome creatures from Monster Island."

"Have you been to Monster Island? It's in the middle of the Lake of Death. It's nicer than it sounds," said Prince Stephane. "Especially in the summer. As long as you don't get eaten by any of the monsters."

"We have planned truly challenging Games for all our visiting Warrior teams. Truly," added Prince Victor.

"Baloney," said Claudette. "I could defeat your monsters with one arm tied behind my back. Why don't you leave the Games to some actual warriors and let the Evergreen Country host, okay? We've got *real* monsters," said Claudette.

"No, the Great Lakes Kingdom will host the Warrior Games as planned," said Victor. He was clearly offended and Claudette was the only one who couldn't see that. "Good day, Claudette. Marie, you can stay for lunch. Gaston, you may prepare lunch," he added.

"What if I can prove that your monsters are weak and lousy and don't deserve to even be called monsters?" said Claudette, eyeing the two Princes.

The Princes exchanged looks, then burst out laughing. Prince Stephane spoke first. "If you can prove our monsters are not worthy of the Games, then, of course, we would have no other choice then to..." He couldn't stop laughing. "...surrender the Games to another kingdom." This was followed by more laughing.

"What's so funny? I don't get it," said Claudette.

Before they could answer, both Princes suddenly sniffed the air. Horrified, they looked at each other, then back at Claudette. They sniffed the air once more. "What is that appalling smell?" asked Prince Victor.

Gaston was the first one to see it. "Valiant!" he gasped. Everyone in the room turned at once to see Valiant crouched over the rug with the royal crest.

"What on earth is your dog doing!?" cried Prince Stephane.

"That is a three-hundred-year-old rug!" said Prince Victor, anguished.

Marie buried her head in her hands. "This is sooo embarrassing."

Gaston rolled his sleeves up and snapped his fingers at the guards. "I'm going to need a bag and some rug cleaner, quickly, guards! Posthaste!" He shouted. The guards took off to fetch supplies.

Prince Stephane was fanning his brother, Victor who was on the verge of fainting. "Breathe, brother. Breathe." He said.

"Take me to your monsters, Princes," said Claudette as she clapped her hands. As far as Claudette was concerned, it was time to stop talking and time to start warrior-ing. Even if Marie didn't think that "warrior-ing" was a real word.

## FOUR

"Behold, the Great Lakes Coliseum. Built especially for the Warrior Games," said Prince Victor.

"It is beautiful, is it not?" asked Prince Stephane.

"Hmph. I've seen better," Claudette snorted, but this wasn't true. She'd never seen a bigger or more beautiful coliseum in her life. They were standing at a giant stone archway in front of the coliseum. It was the grand entrance. On either side of the archway were two enormous statues. One was of Prince Victor standing in a power pose -- feet spread out, hands on hips. The other statue depicted Prince Stephane, in a similar pose, except that one of his legs was in a cast and his head was bandaged. The bandage was made to look like it was flowing majestically in a breeze.

The guards, Growler and Mumbler, set down the litter, which they had used to carry the Princes and Marie up the steep hill to the coliseum. The litter was basically a couch with a couple of rods in it, which the guards lifted. Prince Victor had said there was no room in their ride for Claudette, Gaston, and especially Valiant. Even if Gaston had done a spectacular clean up job on the royal rug, the Princes did not care for the pug. As Marie stepped out of the litter she remarked, "It is quite nice, Princes. Your pride in its beauty is certainly justified."

Claudette could hear the sound of something clanging from inside the coliseum. "That sort of sounds like —" she started to say.

"Cowbells. Yes. Follow me," said Prince Victor. Prince Victor led the group through the archway entrance. He waved to the statue of himself as he passed it and even blew it a kiss.

The inside was just as grand as the outside. The coliseum was circular. There was a circular battlefield at ground level. About a dozen cows wearing cowbells were grazing on the grassy battlefield. The field was separated from the seats above it by a six-foot-tall wall encircling it. There was room for thousands of spectators in the stands. Above the seats were fancy columns which went all around the top of the coliseum, and above that, open sky.

"Why are there cows in your coliseum?" asked Marie. Every animal was wearing a cowbell, which clanked as the bovines grazed lazily across the short grass.

"Oh, these cows won't be here long. We have to keep replacing them," explained Prince Stephane.

Gaston looked perplexed. "Replace them? Why?"

"We will show you. But walk with great care. Great care. The battlefield is full of cow droppings," said Prince Victor. This was very true. The group had to step side to side and hop across a minefield of cow patties to reach the end of the playing field. "Oh dear! Oh, my! Oh, drat!" cried Prince Stephane as he accidentally stepped into or tripped over every single dropping. At the end of the field was a twelve-foot-high black curtain. Prince Victor stopped at the curtains. Growler the guard disappeared through an exit carved into the playing field's wall. Mumbler ran up to a rope which was attached to the curtains.

"What you are about to witness are some of the most terrifying animals from our kingdom. These creatures are deadly. Please take care as I reveal them. Step back, everyone! Step baaaack!" warned Prince Victor.

Gaston's teeth began to chatter. "M-m-m— mind if I stand be-be-behind you, Claudette?" he asked.

Claudette nodded. She wasn't the least bit scared. "Sure, thing little brother. Don't worry. I've got my sword and Valiant." She drew her sword. Valiant stood at her side and barked. They could hear something moving and making high-pitched chittering sounds behind the curtain. What was it?

"Now, Guard!" ordered Prince Victor. Mumbler pulled the rope, which caused the curtain to drop revealing: three giant-sized cages. Inside each cage were small, furry —

"Beavers???" Claudette, Gaston, and Marie said. The beavers were adorable. One of them was chewing on a small branch with its cute little buck teeth. They were each in their own cage. Oddly, their cages were many times bigger than the creatures. The beavers chattered away. This was adorable. The beavers clapped their beaver tails in time with each other. This was incredibly adorable too. Claudette was baffled and unusually quiet as she tried to process this sight. Claudette didn't trust "adorable."

Marie leaned into a cage and waved at the beaver in the middle. "Well, aren't you the cutest thing ever?"

"Careful, Marie. Do not get too close to the cage. They are ferocious," warned Prince Stephane.

"Ferociously cute is more like it!" said Gaston. He was delighted with the creatures. "Did you get them from the Island of Cute Lake Animals? That would be next to the Valley of Playful Puppies, am I right or what?" he joked.

Gaston and Marie both chuckled. Claudette eyed the beasts with suspicion. "Hmm. Why such a big cage for such little critters?" she asked.

"Ah, Claudette. You are just as observant as you are offensive. Guards, feed one of the monsters!"

"Coming, my sire," grunted Growler from behind them. When they turned, they saw he was pulling a cart stacked high with fish. He pulled it up to the middle cage and dumped all the fish through a metallic door. The stack was much taller than the little beaver inside the cage.

"That little guy can't eat all that fish," said Claudette.

"That's not just any fish," said Gaston. "That's the beluga sturgeon. Beluga caviar is exquisitely delicious," said Gaston. He was right about the fish being sturgeon. It was the largest fish found in the kingdom's lake. He was wrong about the second thing. Caviar is gross.

"I am confused," said Marie. "Beavers are vegetarians. They don't eat fish."

"Guards, fetch us some activator!" ordered Prince Stephane. "I would fetch some myself except that Princes do not fetch," he told Marie.

Mumbler the Guard took out a collapsible cup from the inside of her jacket. She ran over to the closest cow. She milked the cow, quickly filling the cup, and then she ran back the Princes. "Your royal Highnesses, as requested, here is one cup of fresh unpasteurized milk," she said.

"It's just milk! What's the big deal?" Wondered Claudette.

"Unpasteurized milk, very dangerous," said Prince Victor.

"I like living on the edge too, Prince Victor," said Gaston. He started to high-five him, then remember the Prince's No Hand Contact Policy. Prince Victor took the glass of milk to the middle cage with the smallest and cutest of the three beavers. He reached through the bars and poured the milk into a small metal bowl. The little beaver scampered over to the bowl and started drinking. As it drank, the beaver looked up occasionally and its eyes began to glow red. It made grunting sounds like a wild boar. Gaston and Marie were starting to get nervous. Claudette and Valiant - not so much.

"Your monsters bore me," said Claudette.

"Wait! Something strange is happening to that beaver," said Marie.

"Maybe it's lactose intolerant?" wondered Gaston.

The beaver began breathing heavily. Marie and Gaston unconsciously took steps back from the cage.

"These are no ordinary beavers. They are *Castoroides Ohioensis*, also known as giant beavers," said Prince Victor.

"They are indigenous to Monster Island. We lost many guards capturing them. But our guards don't mind." said Prince Stephane. Growler and Mumbler didn't look like they didn't mind. Claudette was suddenly thrilled when she saw the beaver was starting to grow larger and larger. It let out fearsome cries either in anger or pain. It was transforming. It gnashed its buck teeth. The beaver grew until it completely filled its cage, to about the size of an elephant. It growled ferociously. Gaston and Marie screamed and jumped back. The creature turned its attention to the large pile of fish which now looked puny next to the large monster. It ate the whole pile in one big bite.

"Amazing! Did you see how the monster beaver ate all that fish?" remarked Marie.

"I was unimpressed," said Gaston disapprovingly. "It didn't chew or savor any part of its meal. It simply swallowed the fish whole. That's so vulgar and an insult to fine dining," said Gaston.

The giant beaver suddenly bit at the bars of its cage with its enormous buck tooth fangs. It clapped its enormous tail so hard that the ground shook.

"Uh... has it ever escaped?" asked Gaston, nervously.

"Only occasionally," said Prince Stephane. "It is so funny because they like to escape and eat all our cows. And sometimes a guard or two. But the cows and guards don't seem to mind." Growler and Mumbler made faces. They seemed to mind. "Luckily we can always get more cows... and guards," Prince Stephane added cheerfully.

Claudette waved her sword as she eyed the giant beaver with distrust. "We're ready for it!" Valiant barked affirmatively. But before the giant beaver could chew through the metal bars of its cage, it started shrinking back to its regular size again. It chirped happily again, transformed. Once more, small, cute, and lovable.

"Amazing the *Castoroides Ohioensis* has reverted back to its typical beaver form," observed Marie.

Claudette was utterly disappointed. "Hmph. Not a very monstrous monster if you ask me."

"Well, we gave it very little of the activator," explained Prince Victor just a little defensively. "We are milking all of the kingdom's cows in order to have enough activator to make these creatures the most formidable monsters the Warriors have ever fought at the Games!"

"Yes, we dare not give the monsters too much activator. It's far too dangerous," said Stephane.

Marie saw a chance to practice her developing diplomatic skills. "I beg your Highnesses' pardon, but isn't it far too much trouble for very busy Princes like yourselves to be hosting the Warrior Games? You must consider activator, cages, monsters, fish. It's all too much, no?"

"Well... it *is* a bit cumbersome," considered Prince Victor. "However, we've already built a coliseum. And we already have the monsters for the Warriors to battle."

"Of course. But you also have all these cows you must milk. And one cannot walk three feet in this coliseum without stepping into one of their, ahem, 'gifts.'" Added Marie.

"That is no problem. Our guards keep our coliseum clean. Guards, clean the cow dung at once," said Prince Stephane. "My brother and I would do it, except that Princes don't clean dung," and then he added, "But our guards don't mind. They love helping." The guards ran around the field with rakes piling up all the bovine waste into one big pile. Truth be told, they did not appear to be enjoying themselves.

Marie tried another tactic. "But consider all the visitors who will arrive from all Seven Kingdoms. As hosts, etiquette dictates that you must greet each and every one with a handshake. Think of all those oily hands," said Marie.

"And think about all the finger food you will serve at the Games..." added Gaston. "All that greasy, oily food, stuck to everyone's fingers. I've heard the Warriors from the Ice Floes kingdom don't even shake hands. They hug! There will be so much hugging for the hosts of the Warrior Games," said Gaston.

Prince Victor suddenly looked shaken to his core. He stammered. "I, um, hadn't considered that. Um... uh... well... I must go!" Prince Victor shouted and he went running for the exit. He needed to be alone right now.

Prince Stephane snapped at Claudette and her friends. "You have upset my brother! Did you see how my brother's forehead wrinkled when you made him worry? How

could you do that his perfect forehead? Now it wrinkles. That is not perfect. That is wrinkled." He ran after Victor. "Come back. Come back, brother!"

Prince Victor stopped. He was just on the other side of the large pile of cow manure the guards had raked up. "Stephane, do not run! You may stumble!" cried Victor. Naturally, Prince Stephane tripped on a small pebble. He landed in the giant cow patty pile, and manure went flying in every direction. Claudette, Marie, and Gaston ducked, but Victor didn't have their reflexes and he took a direct dung hit.

"Noooooooooooo!" cried Victor as he was suddenly covered in cow excrement. "It's all over me!" said Victor. This was true. He was covered in muck from his royal hair to his once spotless royal shoes. Prince Stephane was mortified. "Forgive me, brother! Forgive me! Do not fear. We will get through this together." The Guards mobilized and ran over with rags to clean- up the Princes.

"See!" said Claudette. "If you host the Warrior Games just think about how many times you'll end up covered in cow turd."

"Please stop talking," Prince Victor said as he took the rags from the guards and started wiping his face clean.

"Hey, Princey, you got some right there on your nose —" said Claudette as she reached up to knock a piece of cow patty off of Prince Victor's nose. Marie, Gaston, and Prince Stephane tried to stop her but it was too late. Claudette flicked the errant excrement off Prince Victor's nose with the tip of her index finger.

"Claudette, noooooo!" cried Marie and Gaston.

Prince Victor erupted in fury. "How dare you!?"

"What's the big deal? I was just helping," said Claudette.

"Guard, fetch my mirror at once!" Victor demanded.

Growler pulled a handheld mirror out of his inside jacket pocket. He was the official mirror-carrier for Prince Victor. "Your royal mirror, your majesty," he said.

Prince Victor studied the tip of his nose in his reflection. He gasped. "Oh, no, no, no. It's happened to me. I have a..." Prince Victor was sobbing now, "...pimple!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Um, it's not so bad," said Marie, trying to make him feel better. "It's barely noticeable." That was a white lie. The pimple was in fact, HUGE.

Claudette had a way of always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, and why would today be any different? It didn't matter that Marie and Gaston glanced over giving her one of their silent, "please be quiet" pleading looks.



"Personally, I think you're over-reacting," she said.

Victor clenched his teeth. His face - the part that was not covered in cow dung- was turning red with anger. His forehead wrinkled. He was boiling and getting hotter and hotter.

"Breathe, brother. Breathe!" cried Stephane.

Marie whispered to Claudette, "He may be over-reacting Claudette, but he is over-reacting in our general direction. I believe we should excuse ourselves."

The Guards closed in on the three kids and Valiant. "Tell ya' what Prince boys," said Claudette as she started to back away. "You can keep the Warrior Games. See ya. Bye." She waved and then screamed to her friends, "RUUUUUUNN!"

But they did not run because the guards grabbed them first. And Prince Victor finally spoke, "Throw them in the dungeon! Let them rot."

## FIVE

"On the bright side, at least we have had accommodations during our trip to the Great Lakes Kingdom. In fact, I would say that if we were not staying in the dungeon, we would be having a delightful visit!" Marie said, forcing herself to be cheerful. But even Marie strained to remain optimistic. It had been three days since the Princes had banished them to their dungeon. Their cell was deep in the bowels of Lake Castle. It was dark, damp, and musty. There were no windows. Outside their cell was a single torch on the wall of the hallway. They could hear the constant sound of dripping water. Marie and Gaston jumped every time a rat scurried past their bars. Valiant growled. Claudette didn't notice all the rats because she was too busy trying to break out of their cell.

"Let me out! I'm innocent!" Claudette shouted. She was still trying to pull the metal bars apart.

"Well, that's not completely accurate. I mean, if you really analyze the moment, you are indeed guilty of giving Prince Victor a pimple. However, it is debatable whether that offense warrants banishing us to the dungeon for eternity," said Marie.

"Okay, so I'm *mostly* innocent," said Claudette. Then she screamed, "Let me out! Let! Me! Ouuuuut!"

When Mumbler brought them dinner - yet another meal of stale baguettes and water Gaston lost it. "Guard, man cannot live on carbohydrates alone. Where's the protein? Where's the colorful assortment of vegetables?"

The guard mumbled something about the kids being, "brats," and she left.

"I think the bars are finally starting to bend," said Claudette. The bars were not bending. Not even close.

Hunger made Marie snap and she actually raised her voice just a little, which for her was a lot. "Claudette, you cannot bend metal! Accept it, we are trapped here until the Princes set us free us or someone rescues us."

"I am Claudette! No one rescues me. I rescue myself!"

Marie sighed. They heard footsteps echo in the dungeon area and saw Prince Stephane accompanied by Growler the guard. "Hello, criminals. I come with a generous offer," said Stephane. Marie and Gaston brightened. Claudette looked suspicious. They listened, as the Prince paced outside their prison cell. "My brother is recovering from his

pimple. Thank you for asking about his condition even though you didn't actually ask, but I am sure you were about to. He is still understandably upset."

"He's upset? He's not the one sitting in a dungeon!" said Claudette.

Prince Stephane continued, "My brother, who is as benevolent as he is handsome, has told me that he will free you immediately if you promise never to set foot in the Great Lakes Kingdom ever again..."

"Believe, me, I'm never coming back to your dumpy kingdom ever again. No problem," said Claudette.

"...And Claudette must apologize," added Prince Stephane.

"That sounds quite reasonable," said Marie.

"Me apologize?" said Claudette, incredulously. "I barely ever apologize even when I *have* done something wrong. It's not my fault Prince Pretty boy has such sensitive skin. Sheesh. So, he's got a pimple, it's not like that's a national emergency—"

Prince Stephane gasped and covered his own mouth as if that would shut-up Claudette. "How can you speak so? I do not know how you do things in the barbaric Evergreen Country, but here in civilized Great Lakes, we do not joke about inflammations of the skin!"

"Well if you think I'm gonna say sorry then you've got another thing coming!" said Claudette turning away from the bars.

"Please, excuse us for just a moment, Prince Stephane," Marie said calmly.

Claudette, Marie, and Gaston huddled. Marie's tone and demeanor changed uncharacteristically. She grabbed Claudette and shook her. "Claudette you must say you're sorry. YOU MUST!"

Marie let go of Claudette, but Gaston grabbed his sister by the tunic and also shook her, yelling, "Marie's right! You gotta do it or he'll never let us out of this dungeon! I cannot continue to eat sub-standard food!!! My palate is in pain!"

Before Claudette could defend herself, Marie continued, "Claudette, generally I do not like to impose my own opinions upon others. I believe in fostering an open and free exchange of ideas and everyone should feel empowered to act as he or she sees fit. However, we have been in this dungeon for three days. I have not brushed or washed my hair this whole time, and this dungeon humidity is not helping. You *will* apologize to Prince Victor. YOU WILL!" screamed Marie. It took a lot to get Marie mad, but Claudette had succeeded.

Claudette didn't want to apologize. Why should she? But as she took in the enraged, desperate looks from her little brother and best friend, she knew what she had to do.

"Cleanse! Dry! Moisturize! Aerate!" Prince Victor was on his throne surrounded by four servants. They were taking turns trying to clean the pores of his face and defeat the pimple. One servant had a wet towelette she'd wipe on the Prince's face; the second servant would pat the Prince's face dry with a towel; the third sprayed distilled water on the Prince's face; the fourth one fanned the Prince's face. And repeat. "Cleanse! Dry! Moisturize! Aerate!"

Claudette, Marie, Gaston, and Valiant stepped into the throne room with Stephane and Growler the guard. Prince Stephane looked nervous and whispered to Claudette. "Just tell my brother how sorry you are, and we shall dispatch you on the next boat to the mainland."

The trumpeter played the royal fanfare. "Hear ye, hear ye. The court presents, three rude guests and a dirty dog who wish an audience with His Royal Highness, the iron-jawed, incredibly handsome Prince Victor."

Prince Victor looked in Claudette's direction with a deep frown. "Ah, Claudette. What fresh mess do you wish to cause today?"

Marie and Gaston gave Claudette a look which told her she could not back out now. "Okay, look. I'm, um, you know. Sorry for whatever it is you think is my fault which kind of isn't, but I guess if you look at it in a certain way, it might be my fault. But whatever. I guess I'm sorry but—"

Marie cut her off and applauded. "Wonderful! Apology done. We'll just be going now. So nice to see your kingdom. Goodbye!" Marie tried to usher Claudette out before she could say...

"BUT!" said Claudette.

Gaston ran over to Claudette and shook his head at her. "If you add a 'but' to an apology that's the same thing as not apologizing. Like, 'Sorry I ate all of your lemon custard tart before you could have any, BUT it was quite delicious.'"

"Or, 'Sorry I let Valiant eat the cover of your book, BUT I think that book is boring,'" said Marie.

"Or, how about, 'Sorry I woke you up, BUT now that you're awake can you make me scrambled eggs?'" said Gaston.

Prince Stephane had one too. "Sorry, I laughed when you tripped on that fog, BUT it was kind of funny."

"Or—" started Marie.

"I got it! I got it! BUT I do have a 'but!'" said Claudette.

Marie, Gaston, and Prince Stephane sighed "Brother, I am afraid that Claudette's apology contains a 'but'" said Stephane.

"But an apology with a 'but' isn't really an apology," said Prince Victor.

"We know," said Gaston, Marie, and Stephane.

"Very well. Go on, oily one," Victor said to Claudette.

Claudette pulled out her wooden sword and paced before Victor on his throne. "I'm sorry about your dumb pimple, BUT if this whole situation has taught us one thing, it's taught us this: the Great Lakes kingdom should not host the Warrior Games. You are going to get dirty fighting monsters. It happens."

"Don't say it," said Stephane covering his ears. Victor looked worried.

"Warrior-ing is dirty business," continued Claudette. "And you, Prince Victor, can't handle all the dirt."

"But that's why we chose the killer giant beavers. They are both formidable and somewhat clean," said Victor.

"Any warrior worth their salt can defeat your cute, but incredibly evil beavers. I'll prove it..."

It was at this point that Gaston and Marie realized that Claudette kept glancing out the window and down at the street below. They knew Claudette well enough that they were not surprised when she suddenly jumped onto the ledge of the opened window. "Don't do it, Claudette. Whatever you're planning on doing, just don't do it!" Marie pleaded.

"I'm gonna show you all how a real warrior does it," declared Claudette. And with that, she leaped out of the window yelling, "Banzaiiii!" She landed with a splash in a giant barrel of milk which was on the back of a passing horse-drawn cart. Claudette scrambled out of the milk, shoved the cart driver off his seat, and took the reins of the horse. "Hee-ya!" yelled Claudette, and she drove the cart straight for the path that went up the hill to the coliseum.

Back in the throne room, Gaston looked hopefully to Prince Victor. "Apology accepted?" he asked.

The angry Princes solemnly shook their heads.

## SIX

The milk cart went bumping up the rocky path to the coliseum. Claudette looked behind and saw that the Princes, their guards, Gaston, Marie, and Valiant were catching up to her. "Faster, horse, faster!" She drove the cart right through the main archway entrance and into the middle of the coliseum. She had to dodge a few cows but she parked at the end of the battlefield right by the cute little beaver cages. "Alright, furry fiends. Let's see if you're real monsters." Claudette climbed onto the back of the cart and tried to push over the giant barrel of milk. The Princes and others darted into the coliseum and saw what Claudette was about to do.

"Halt at once!" Yelled Prince Victor. But it was too late. Claudette managed to tip over the barrel. Gallons of milk spilled into all three of the beaver cages. Claudette drew her sword. She thought she was ready for anything. But she wasn't ready for what was about to happen next.

"The beavers cannot handle that much milk!" Yelled Prince Stephane.

"Claudette, what have you done?" asked Marie.

"I'm gonna show you all that these monsters aren't fit to fight warriors," said Claudette. As the milk seeped into the cages, the beavers licked it up. Their chirps turned to deep monster growls. They grew so quickly and so large that all three creatures shattered their metal cages. Their beaver eyes turned red, angry, and evil. They kept growing until they reach the size of Woolly Mammoths, but instead of tusks, they had gigantic buck teeth. Their teeth were larger than the horse tied to the milk cart. Speaking of horses, one of the giant beavers ate it in one fierce gulp. But no one had time to feel bad for the poor horse except for Gaston. He felt a tinge of sadness, which was completely erased by sheer terror as the *Castoroides Ohioensis* charged. "Run, Claudette, run!" cried Gaston. One of the giant beavers slammed its tail down on the cart shattering it to splinters. It would have smashed Claudette and Valiant too but they dived away at the last second.

"Oh my gosh, the giant beaver almost pulverized you with its tail!" said Marie.

"Now we're talking!" said Claudette, happily. She loved a good battle. She waved her wooden sword at the beavers, "Ready to fight a real warrior?" she demanded. The beaver looked at Claudette for a moment, considering the tiny thing. Then it swatted her with its tail like a child's bouncy ball. Except that Claudette did not bounce when

she landed on the other side of the field. Valiant barked angrily at another giant beaver and it batted him away with its tail too. The dog yelped, but luckily Valiant landed on Claudette knocking the breath out of her.

The monsters went on a rampage. They ran around the field eating every one of the dozen cows on the coliseum's grassy battlefield. Cowbells and all. Some of the cows were smashed like pancakes by giant beaver tails and then eaten. Other poor cows were tossed in the air by giant beaver tails then caught in their monster mouths like someone might throw popcorn and eat it. A couple of the cows were smashed with beaver claws and then slurped up like spaghetti. So gross! The remaining cows were eaten, classic style - in one big gulp. The Princes were trying to make it to the coliseum's exit and to safety. Marie and Gaston were also looking for a safe spot but everyone's path was riddled with flying cows, giant slamming beaver tails, giant beaver teeth, and giant beaver claws. The guards tried to defend the Princes, but the beavers merely batted them away like flies. The guards screamed as they went airborne and flew out of the coliseum. Claudette could hear the distant splash of them landing in the lake. The Princes were now unprotected and terrified. Prince Stephane pulled Victor close to him. "Brother, I have never seen the *Castoroides Ohioensis* so monstrous before!"

Claudette was still a little dizzy from being thrown across the coliseum when she steadied herself in front of one of the rampaging giant beavers. Valiant was at her side and barked in misguided solidarity as Claudette waved her sword at the monster. But the beaver ignored her. In fact, none of the beavers seemed like they were looking to fight. The monsters all looked like they were searching for something. They were sniffing around the coliseum. They were digging in the ground with their claws and teeth. What were they looking for? Claudette didn't care. "C'mon and fight me like real monsters!" she shouted. One of the giant beavers smacked Claudette and Valiant aside with a swipe of its claw. It continued digging in the dirt of the battlefield. Claudette and Valiant flew across the stadium like before, but this time they landed safely in a pile of cow manure. Claudette moaned. "The hard part of fighting monsters is not supposed to be getting them to fight you! What's wrong with these guys?"

Suddenly, all three beavers spotted a puddle of leftover milk, which had spilled from the barrel Claudette tipped over earlier. The three monsters leaped for the puddle at the same time and bumped their heads together. It sounded loud and painful. They roared angrily at each other and tried to push one another away with their enormous



tails. Each time a monster beaver went in for a drink at the milk puddle, the other two would pounce on it. The three beavers were rolling over each other fighting. They rolled into a support wall and all the bleachers and columns in the East section of the coliseum collapsed into a pile of rocks. Dust was everywhere.

"Oh, no, our lovely coliseum! It is being damaged," sobbed Stephane.

"And my face is getting dusty!" sobbed Victor.

"Do not worry, brother, we will get you facial cleanser as soon as possible. And we can still repair our beloved coliseum. The damage is relatively minor," said Stephane. One of the beavers dove for the puddle of milk and the other two blocked it with a two-tail slam. The giant beaver rolled into the West section and obliterated it to dust and rocks. All three beavers turned on each other, fighting, and they rolled over two more sections of the coliseum, knocking it down.

The Princes had been headed for the main entrance to make their escape when one of the beavers dove for the milk puddle again. The other two battle-rammed it sending it falling back into the main archway, which it knocked over. The archway crumpled into a pile of debris. The Princes realized they were trapped inside their beloved coliseum. Every way out was a pile of rocky wreckage. They hugged each other and squeezed their eyes closed as tight as they could. They could not bear to watch all the destruction. They also closed their eyes because they were scared too.

Claudette was not about to give up trying to get the monsters to heed her. "C'mon, fight me!" she yelled. Valiant was at her side and barking at the creatures. Claudette was whacking one giant beaver with her sword and Valiant was biting another monster's tail. But both creatures merely spun their bodies sending Claudette and Valiant rolling across the ground. The three beasts went back to jockeying for a position by the milk puddle.

"Gaston, do you see how they keep going for that puddle?" asked Marie. She was hiding with Gaston behind a pile of rocks, which used to be the spectator seats.

"Yeah, it's spilled milk. I promise I won't cry," he said holding in some tears.

"Do you have a cup?" asked Marie.

"Of course. And cutlery. And cloth napkins. Some assorted condiments and —"

"Just a cup, please," said Marie.

Gaston pulled a cup out of his backpack and handed it to Marie. As the three monster beavers fought each other, Marie scurried past them, dipped the cup into the

puddle, and filled it with milk. She raised the cup and called out, "Yoo-hoo, monster beavers! Look what I have. This is what you want, right?" The three beavers turned and saw the cup of milk in her hand. They charged.

"See, that worked quite well. Now we just need to lead the monsters away so we can escape the coliseum," said Marie.

"But where are you going to lead them to?" wondered Gaston. And Marie realized a problem with her plan. They were trapped on the coliseum battlefield, because it was surrounded by piles of rubble. She and Gaston took off running in circles around the field. There was no place to go. Just in circles. The three beavers followed them. The Princes hid behind a broken stone column.

Claudette was frustrated. What kind of monsters wouldn't fight a warrior? The bad kind. Then, she suddenly had an idea. Also, the bad kind. Just as Marie and Gaston ran past her, she grabbed the cup of milk out of Marie's hands. The monster beavers stopped chasing Marie and went after Claudette instead. "Got your attention now, huh, you buck-toothed beasts!" said Claudette. She needed to find a good spot to fight the lousy monsters into submission. With her sword in one hand and a cup of milk in the other, she hopped up some piles of rocks which used to be the South section of the coliseum. The beavers ran after her.

Marie saw that Claudette was headed toward the collapsed archway wreckage, which used to be the main entrance of the coliseum. It was a dead-end. "Claudette! Not that way!" cried Marie. The monsters climbed over rocky debris closing in on Claudette. Claudette suddenly realized she was stuck between the archway rubble and the monsters. No big deal. She was ready for a fight.

"If you want this milk, you're gonna have to fight me for it, she said setting the cup down behind her. Claudette drew her sword and faced the three gnashing, giant beavers. "It's monster bashing time," she said.

Marie and Gaston ran toward Claudette. "She can't beat three monsters at once! They'll eat her!" Marie cried to Gaston. Gaston felt momentarily helpless. He wanted to help, but he wasn't strong. He wasn't brave. Gaston was just an aspiring chef. He was great at making sweets. If only sweets could save his big sister right now. Suddenly, he got an idea. The good kind. "No guts. No glory," he said to himself.

Claudette could feel the hot breath of the monsters. They were so close. They roared at the same time and Claudette's wooden sword shook in her hand. She suddenly

realized, a little too late, something really obvious. The monsters were way bigger than she was, and there were three of them and one of her. Oh, boy. She had miscalculated so badly. Was retreat possible? Every direction was blocked by rubble or monsters. The only way out was fighting. Okay, deep breath. Maybe she could do this. She steadied herself for battle when all of sudden she heard:

"Frezzius gellatorious!" She looked up and saw Gaston standing on a pile of rocks right behind the monster beavers. He had his spellbook out and he was waving his wand. The milk in Claudette's cup turned into bubbles. The milk bubbles floated up in the air above Claudette. The three monsters leaped over Claudette and landed outside what used to be the coliseum. They chased the floating milk bubbles through the island's town. Claudette could hear townspeople screaming in fear as the monsters ran past them. She heard a distant splash of the giant beavers leaping into the lake, still going after the floating milk. And then things went quiet. Very quiet.

Gaston beamed with pride. "That's some practical magic right there."

"Nice work, Gaston," said Marie. She patted him on the back.

"I could have taken them," Claudette said to Gaston. "But thanks anyway. Lucky for me you're better at making milk turn into bubbles than gelato." She noticed the comment made Gaston wince. "Um, I mean, you'll get that spell right, little brother. You just gotta practice. I wasn't born a warrior. I had to practice. It's the same thing. Except my warrior thing is very important and your dessert thing is not."

Marie stepped in before Claudette could do more emotional damage to her little brother. "The important thing is that we're all safe and sound." She hugged Claudette and Gaston.

The Princes emerged from their hiding spots. "Our lake monsters are gone!" cried Stephane.

"Our beautiful coliseum is gone too!" cried Prince Victor. This was true. There were just piles of debris where the majestic stone building once stood. The only thing left standing were the two statues of the Princes which used to adorn the entrance of the coliseum.

"At least your lovely statues are still intact. I think that's cause for celebration..." said Marie. But her voice trailed off as the two statues tumbled over and crashed into each other, shattering. "Perhaps it's too early to celebrate." Marie quickly added.

Claudette smiled warmly to the Princes. "Look, fellas, I know you've been through a lot, so if you really us to, Mont Petit Pierre would be happy to host the Warrior Games. Deal?" She grabbed Prince Victor's hand and shook it vigorously. Claudette immediately realized she'd made a big mistake.

"YOU TOUCHED MY HAND!" Screamed Prince Victor.

"I think we should leave post haste," said Marie.

"Gobs of haste," said Gaston. "Like the most haste possible! Last one to the docks is a poached egg!" he added. There's was a little opening between what was left of the Princes' broken statues. Claudette, Gaston, Marie, and Valiant ran out through that opening, and down the path to the docks faster than a Castoroides Ohioensis chasing milk.

A few days later, the Marquis was in an incredibly happy mood as he showed Lady Eva, Don Diego, and other members of the Games Tribunal the meadow and woods outside of town where Mont Petit Pierre proposed to host the Warrior Games. "Of course, all of us in the Evergreen Country are terribly disappointed that our friends in the Great Lakes Kingdom have unexpectedly withdrawn from their hosting duties. But Mont Petit Pierre is prepared to step up and do our duty to serve the Seven Kingdoms. We will host the Games right here. I will build the greatest and grandest coliseum ever constructed for the Warrior Games. I will ensure there will be no magic at the Games. The Games will be safe and secure. If you lift our lifetime ban for our warriors, you will not regret it."

Lady Eva was somber, but she nodded. "No other kingdom will host. They all refuse. They fear what they're referring to as the, 'Curse of Claudette.' Do you have any idea who they are talking about?" she asked.

"None whatsoever," said the Marquis, lying.

"Very well, Marquis. Since we have no other choice, consider the ban lifted and you will host. Do not disappoint us. We will see you at Warrior Week," she said. The members of the Games Tribunal headed back to town, leaving the Marquis alone for a moment.

"Splendid! Splendid!" said the Marquis rubbing his hands together with glee.

Naturally, Claudette had been eavesdropping on the whole exchange from behind a tree. She ran up to the Marquis. "Hey, Marquis!"

"What is it, Claudette? I'm quite busy. So much to do in order to prepare for the Games."

"When do I pick my team? When do we start training?" asked Claudette.

"Child, what are you referring to?"

"I helped you get the hosting gig. Now you put me on our town's team. Co-Captain is fine."

"You? Represent our town? Ba-hah! Never!" he said.

"What? But you said - "

"I promised nothing. So, you get nothing."

"But-but-but-" Claudette was tongue-tied. That didn't happen very often to her.

"I must begin designing my coliseum. It will be splendid, I tell you. Splendid!" The Marquis walked back toward town just as Marie came out join Claudette.

"Yoo-hoo, Claudette! Claudette! Oh, what's the matter? Why do you look sad?" asked Marie.

Claudette sniffed and rubbed her sleeve across her face. "Not sad. Just allergies," she said. "I think there's a high pollen count today."

"You want to go do something fun?" asked Marie.

"I don't feel much like talking or doing anything."

"We can sit here and do nothing, Claudette. That's what friends are for," said Marie.

Gaston ran toward them, screaming excitedly, "Claudette, Marie! I gotta show you something incredible!"

Marie saw he had a cup in his hand. And three spoons. Claudette just stared at the ground somberly.

"Don't judge me, but I went with pasteurized milk. I know, I know. You think I'm a sellout. But I think that was the missing ingredient," said Gaston.

Claudette wasn't listening. "Guys, I'm going home to sleep until the end of year. I mean, what's the point of everything we did if I don't get to be a warrior in the Games? I'm a warrior. I should be out warrior-ing," lamented Claudette.

"I know exactly what will make you feel better: gelato," said Gaston.

"Warriors don't eat gelato," Claudette said somberly. She started to get up.

"Hang on." Gaston tapped the cup with his old wand. "Frezzius gellatorious yumilicious!" There was the sound of freezing and cold steam rose from the cup. Gaston waved it away and revealed its contents.

"Is that..?" started Marie.

"Aztec chocolate gelato compliments of Gaston's Sweet Shop! And of course, three spoons!" Gaston handed out the spoons. Claudette reluctantly took one. Marie was the first to try.

"Mmm, Gaston. This is delightful!"

Claudette took a spoonful, and she couldn't help but smile. "Whoa. So good, little brother. So good."

"See, gelato *is* magic. It makes everything seem... possible. And delicious," said the young philosopher chef.

Claudette lit up and her old confidence started to return. "By gosh, you're right, Gaston. I mean you messed up your gelato spell like over and over and over and —"

"Yes, I know," he said nodding somberly.

"And over again."

"It is true that Gaston failed quite a bit," said Marie cheerfully.

"Okay, guys, I think I got it," said Gaston, getting annoyed.

"However, he did not give up," said Marie.

"Nope, and I won't either," declared Claudette. "If the Warrior Games are coming to Mont Petit Pierre then I, Claudette, daughter of Augustine the Warrior-Blacksmith will keep trying until I am on the team. Monsters Beware, here comes Claudette!"

Gaston and Marie cheered for her.

"Hey, Gaston..?" said Claudette.

"Yeah, Claudette?"

"I'm gonna need more gelato."

*To be Continued in*  
"Monsters Beware!"



Cover of, "No Guts, No Glory, No Gelato," by Rafael Rosado.

¡Gracias, Rafael!

Thank, you Diego, Pablo, Beckett, Eliza, and Kristin for your copyedits and suggestions!

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Check out our other books in the series, "The Chronicles of Claudette."

Book 1: Giants Beware

Book 2: Dragons Beware

