

THE PRINCESS WHO KICKED BUTT

By Will Shetterly

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ONCE UPON A time, there was a land ruled by the King Who Saw Both Sides of Every Question and the Queen Who Cared for Everyone. When their first child was born, the Fairy Who Was Good with Names arrived at the castle in a cloud of smoke and said, “Your daughter shall be known as the Princess Who Kicked Butt.”

Before anyone could say another word, the fairy sneezed twice and disappeared.

When the smoke cleared, the king said, “What did the fairy say?”

The queen frowned. “She said, our daughter shall be called, ah, the Princess Who Read Books. I think.”

“H’m,” said the king. “I’d rather hoped for the Princess Who Slew Dragons. But reading books is a sign of wisdom, isn’t it? It’s a fine title.”

“I think she’ll be happy with it,” said the queen.

So the Princess Who Kicked Butt was surrounded with books from her earliest days. She seemed happy to spend her time reading, when she wasn’t riding or dancing or running around the kingdom talking with everyone about what they were doing and why.

One day when the princess was older than a girl but younger than a woman, a page hurried into the throne room where the king and queen were playing cards while they waited for some royal duties to do. The princess sat on a nearby window seat, reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

“Your Majesties!” the page cried. “The Evil Enchanter of the Eastern Marshes demands to be admitted into your presence!”

“Well, then!” the king said. “Admit him immediately, lest he be angered by the delay.”

“At once,” said the page.

“Or perhaps,” said the king (and the page turned back to face him so quickly that he almost fell over), “we should make the enchanter wait a few minutes, lest he think he can easily sway us to his whims.”

“As you wish,” said the page.

“Wait, wait,” said the king. “Go at once to admit the enchanter. We would not have him think us rude.”

“I go,” said the page, turning to do so.

“But,” said the king (and here the page did trip on the carpet as he turned), “if the enchanter is demanding to be admitted, that’s rather rude, isn’t it?”

The queen said, “For an evil enchanter, being rude might be the best manners.” Then she asked the page, “Have you had enough to eat? if you’re dizzy from hunger, we should give you a raise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” said the page. “But I had a raise just last week and I ate an excellent lunch.”

The queen nodded. “Be sure you have milk with every meal. Milk builds strong bones.”

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with his bones, Mama,” said the princess, who secretly liked the page.

The king smiled. “If the enchanter’s being polite, we should be polite, too, and if he’s being rude, we’ll look better by answering rudeness with civility. Don’t dawdle, page. Admit him at once.”

“At once,” said the page, sprinting for the throne-room doors.

“Unless ...” The king barely had time to open his mouth before the doors opened and the page returned. “Your Majesties, I give you the Evil Enchanter of the Eastern Marshes!”

The king smiled at the Evil Enchanter. “Welcome to our castle. Unless you’d rather not be.”

“Oh, I’d rather be,” said the Evil Enchanter. “Indeed, I feel most welcome to your lands, your people, and your treasure.”

“Oh, good,” said the king.

“I don’t think so, dear,” said the queen. “I think he means that he feels welcome to keep our lands, people, and treasure.”

“I do,” said the Evil Enchanter. “And I shall. My immediate marriage to your daughter followed by Your Majesties’ abdication in my favor would be the simplest

solution. Oh, and triple the taxes on the people. That would make a fine wedding present.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said the king.

“Dear!” said the queen.

“—if I intended to permit that,” said the king.

“I won’t marry him,” said the princess, thinking it best to give her position on the matter as soon as possible.

The queen turned to her. “Oh, my poor darling, people will suffer no matter how you choose!”

“It’s kind of you to notice,” said the Evil Enchanter.

“You’re right, my dear,” the king told the queen. “We shall decide, not she.” He nodded at the princess. “And I say you shall marry this evil enchanter, lest he be provoked to further mischief.”

“What?” said the princess, the Evil Enchanter, and the page simultaneously.

“But,” said the king (and in different ways, the princess, the Evil Enchanter, and the page relaxed), “if we permit this, the enchanter’s next demand will surely be even more unforgivable. Therefore, I say you shall not marry him.”

“That’s your last word?” said the Evil Enchanter.

“It is,” said the king.

“Very well.” The Evil Enchanter waved his arms once in a broad pass, and he, the king, and the queen disappeared in a cloud of smoke, just as the king said, “Unless—”

The princess and the page stared at the places where the three people had been. “What shall we do, Your Highness?” asked the page.

“Why, I’ll rescue them, of course,” said the princess.

“I’ll accompany you!” cried the page.

“Don’t be silly. Someone has to run the country while I’m gone,” said the princess. Before the page could reply, the princess strode from the throne room out to the royal stables.

The royal hostler bowed as she said, “I need a horse.”

“Of course.” He gestured toward a lean, midnight-black mare. “This is Arrives Yesterday, the fastest horse in the land.”

“Won’t do,” said the princess.

“Of course not,” said the royal hostler, stepping to the next stall, which held a broad-shouldered golden stallion. “This is Carries All, the sturdiest horse in the land.”

“Won’t do,” said the princess. She stepped to the next stall, which held a wiry horse with black and white splotches on its gray hide. “And this?”

The hostler swallowed and said, “This is Hates Everything, the angriest horse in the land.”

“Perfect,” said the princess. And before the hostler could say another word, she saddled Hates Everything and rode out.

The moment they passed through the palace gates, Hates Everything tried every trick that every horse has ever tried to escape from its rider, and then he invented seventeen new tricks, each cleverer than the one before. But the princess held on to Hates Everything’s back when he bucked, and she lifted her right leg out of the way when he scraped one side against a wall, and she lifted her left leg out of the way when he scraped the other against a tree. She ducked when he ran under a low branch. She jumped off when he flipped head over heels onto his back, and then she jumped right back into the saddle when he stood up again. Finally Hates Everything stood perfectly still in the middle of the road, snorting steam and glaring angrily from side to side.

Two palace guards stood by the gate, watching helplessly. One whispered to the other, “Did the fairy really call her the Princess Who Read Books?”

“Maybe she read a book about riding,” said the other guard.

“You’re just wasting time,” the princess told Hates Everything. “You’re not going to get rid of me.”

Hates Everything jumped straight up in the air, did a triple somersault, and landed on his feet with the princess still on his back. “You see?” said the princess. “When you carry me to the palace of the Evil Enchanter of the Eastern Marshes, I will set you free.”

Hates Everything turned his head to look back at her.

The princess said, “Don’t you hate wasting time?”

Hates Everything raced eastward toward the marshes and the palace of the Evil Enchanter.

When they arrived in the Eastern Marshes, a goblin the color of granite stood in front of the Evil Enchanter's gates. It called, "Have you come to marry my master?"

"No," said the princess.

"Then I cannot let you pass," said the goblin. A long sword appeared in its hands.

"Your fly's open," said the princess.

"Oh!" said the goblin, dropping the sword and turning away to button up its trousers. Then it turned back. "Wait a minute! I'm a goblin! I don't wear clothes!"

But the princess and Hates Everything had already ridden past the goblin and into the courtyard. "Mama! Papa!" called the princess. "I've come to rescue you!"

The Evil Enchanter appeared in a cloud of smoke. He waved his arms to fan away the fumes, and when he quit coughing, he said, "You've come to rescue no one. Now that you're here, you shall marry me." He waved his arms once, and a priest appeared in a cloud of smoke. After everyone quit coughing, he turned to the priest and said, "Marry me!"

The priest said, "But I don't know you."

"No, no, no!" said the Evil Enchanter. "Marry me to the princess!"

"Oh," said the priest. "That's different."

The princess whispered to Hates Everything, "When we've defeated the enchanter, you'll be free. Don't you hate —"

But Hates Everything had already lunged forward and begun to chase the Evil Enchanter around the courtyard.

"Wait! Stop!" cried the Evil Enchanter. "I can't make a spell if I can't stop to think!"

"That's the idea," said the princess.

"Stop this crazy horse, please!"

"Then free my parents and quit trying to marry me and promise not to bother anyone ever again."

"What!" said the Evil Enchanter in outrage, and then "Ow!" as Hates Everything nipped his buttocks. "It's a deal!"

"On your word of honor as an evil enchanter!"

"Yes! Yes!"

“Very well.” The princess leaped down from the saddle. “Hates Everything, you’re free to go.”

Hates Everything seemed as if he hated having to stop chasing the Evil Enchanter (and he probably did), but he came to the princess and looked at her as if maybe he didn’t hate her as much as he hated everything else. The princess removed his saddle and gave him a hug, and he let her do that, even though he clearly hated it. Then he charged away from the enchanter’s palace as if he didn’t hate anything at all.

The Evil Enchanter said, “You didn’t really beat me. The horse beat me.”

“Goblin!” the princess yelled. “I’ll double your salary if you’ll cut off the enchanter’s head.”

“Good deal!” said the goblin, appearing in the courtyard with its long sword in its hands.

“Wait!” said the Evil Enchanter. “O.K., you beat me fair and square.”

“Don’t cut off his head,” said the princess.

“Darn,” said the goblin.

“You can still come and work at our palace,” said the princess.

“Good deal,” said the goblin.

The Formerly Evil Enchanter waved his arms, and the king, the queen, the goblin, the enchanter, the priest, and the princess all appeared in the throne room where the page was assembling the country’s generals to go rescue their missing royal family.

“Papa?” the princess said. “See how well the page managed things while we were gone? Don’t you think you should make him a prince and engage him to your daughter?”

“I hadn’t—” said the king, but the queen nudged him with her elbow. “Oh, right. That’s exactly what I was planning to do. If that’s all right with you, young man.”

The page smiled shyly, then said, “Yes, Your Majesty, that’s very much all right with me.”

The Formerly Evil Enchanter said, “What about me?”

The king said, “You can’t be engaged to my daughter, too.”

The princess said, “That’s not what he meant. He meant it gets awfully lonely on the Eastern Marshes.” She cupped her hands and yelled, “Fairy Who’s Good with Names! Am I really the Princess Who Read Books?”

The fairy appeared in a cloud of smoke When everyone had quit coughing, she said, “Indeed not! You’re the Princess Who Kicked Butt.”

“That’s more like it,” said the princess.

“Oh, my,” said the queen.

“Hey,” said the Formerly Evil Enchanter to the Fairy Who Was Good with Names. "Nice smoke!"

And then the priest, who still didn’t know what was going on but who knew a good opportunity when it presented itself, gave everyone a business card that said, in large print, MARRIAGES ARE OUR FAVORITE BUSINESS.

And they all lived happily ever after.