

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

KATE FORSYTH

THE IMPOSSIBLE QUEST



ESCAPE FROM
WOLFHAVEN
CASTLE



FOR BINNY AND NICK, IN MEMORY OF
THE MARVELLOUS GAMES WE USED TO
PLAY TOGETHER AS CHILDREN

Scholastic Press
345 Pacific Highway Lindfield NSW 2070
An imprint of Scholastic Australia Pty Limited (ABN 11 000 614 577)
PO Box 579 Gosford NSW 2250
www.scholastic.com.au

Part of the Scholastic Group
Sydney • Auckland • New York • Toronto • London • Mexico City
• New Delhi • Hong Kong • Buenos Aires • Puerto Rico

First published by Scholastic Australia in 2014.
Text copyright © Kate Forsyth, 2014.
Cover illustration by Jeremy Reston.
Logo design by blacksheep-uk.com

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Typeset in Goudy Old Style.

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THE IMPOSSIBLE QUEST

www.theimpossiblequest.com



WILD MAN OF «————» «————» THE WOODS

‘Tell your lord to beware,’ the wild man said, gripping Tom’s arm with a dirty hand. ‘The wolves smell danger in the wind.’

Tom tried to wrest his arm free. ‘What do you mean? What kind of danger?’

The wild man let go of Tom’s arm, but fixed him with an intense stare from under shaggy eyebrows. He was a tall, lean man, with grey hair that hung in matted elflocks over his shoulders, and a long, tangled beard. He wore a wolf-pelt and boots made of hide. His eyes were icy-blue, and over one shoulder he carried a long bow and a quiver of arrows.



Tom's wolfhound Fergus was growling deep in his throat, all the hairs standing up along his spine. The wild man looked down at the huge dog and said, 'Quiet now.'

To Tom's surprise, Fergus stopped growling, his ears pricking forward. He wagged his shaggy tail.

'Tell your lord,' the wild man repeated, urgency in his voice, 'danger comes.' Then he turned and loped away through the forest. As he disappeared into the shadows, he flung back his head and howled like a wolf. An answering howl came from the east.

Fergus whined, straining against Tom's grip, wanting to race after the wild man. 'No, Fergus, stay,' Tom said. He picked up his bucket of mushrooms, dandelion leaves and nettles, which had fallen from his hand when the wild man had appeared. Tom's heart was beating hard. He had heard of the wild man of the woods, of course. People said he lived and hunted with the wolves, even in the deep snows of winter, and scorned those who huddled together behind Wolfhaven Castle's high walls. Yet Tom had never really believed the tales. He spent a lot of time in the forest, searching for rare ingredients for his mother, the castle cook. He had never seen any trace of the wild man before.



But Tom had seen him now, and felt the bruising clutch of his fingers on his arm. Rolling up his sleeve, he could see the marks where the wild man's long nails had dug in. He rubbed them, then ran down the winding path, back towards Wolfhaven Castle, his bucket swinging. Fergus bounded along beside him, ears blown back by the wind.

It took almost an hour to reach the edge of the forest. Tom paused to catch his breath. To his left, a river wound through rolling fields planted with wheat, barley, rye and old pear trees. The river led into a wide harbour protected from the wild seas by a headland and a long stone causeway. High on the cliff was a castle with six round towers, crowned with pointed roofs.

With his dog at his heels, Tom crossed the humped bridge with its five stone arches and walked along the road into the town. As always the narrow, cobbled streets were crowded with people and Tom had to push his way through. He dragged Fergus away from the enticing smells of the marketplace, where fishmongers, butchers and bakers shouted their wares.

It was a steep climb up the main street, and Tom was short of breath by the time he reached the arched castle



gate at the top of the road. Tall and wide enough to let through a band of giants, the iron-barred gate was secured fast. Tom had never seen the gate open, for it was only unlocked in times of war. A much smaller door had been cut into the base of the gate, to let the castle folk in and out. Two men stood guard, leaning on their spears.

‘Afternoon, Tom,’ the guard named Morgan said, and opened the door to let him through.

‘Do you know anything about the wild man of the woods?’ Tom asked.

‘Why?’ Morgan asked. ‘You seen him?’

Tom nodded. ‘He grabbed me in the forest. Told me to tell my lord that danger comes.’

Morgan frowned. ‘Danger?’ He scanned the landscape, drowsy and serene under the hot summer sun, then shrugged. ‘No danger that I can see.’

‘He said the wolves smelt danger in the wind.’

‘Crazy loon,’ the other guard, Gareth, said.

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ Morgan said. ‘Gareth’s right, the wild man’s as mad as a March hare. Must be, to live out there in the wilderness instead of staying safe inside the castle walls.’

‘I must tell the master-of-arms, just in case,’ Tom said.



Gareth sniggered. 'Good luck with that, son.'

'He'll laugh his socks off,' added Morgan. 'Then give you a clip over the ear for wasting his time.'

Both guards laughed. Tom felt his face grow hot. With Fergus beside him, he went through the door and into the courtyard of the barbican, surrounded by high stone walls set with window slits. Murder holes, they were called. Anyone who managed to break through the war gate would be shot down, or have boiling oil poured on their heads, before they got any deeper into the castle.

Tom went through a long passage into the castle's inner ward. To the left was the long building that housed the kitchen and storerooms that were his mother's domain. To the right was the guard-house, with an archway that led through to the jousting yard. Ahead was the garden, with the great bulk of the castle behind, built of honey-coloured stone that glowed in the afternoon sun.

Tom stood for a moment outside the guard-room, hesitating. Remembering the urgency in the wild man's voice, Tom took a deep breath and went inside.

'Can I see the master-of-arms?' Tom asked, taking off his shabby blue hat.



‘What for?’ the guard said, looking up from polishing his boots.

‘I need to get a message to my lord. The wild man of the woods says to beware, there’s danger coming.’

The guard laughed. ‘Scram, boy,’ he said. ‘Sir Kevyn is busy getting ready for the mob-ball match this afternoon. He has no time for stories.’

‘But what if the wild man knows something we don’t?’

But the soldier just flapped a hand at him to go away, and went back to polishing his boots.

Tom crammed his hat back on his head and stepped outside. He could hear yells and grunts coming from the jousting yard, and headed that way. Rows of brawny squires were charging as fast as they could towards thick leather bolsters held upright by other boys.

Thwack, went their shoulders into the bolsters.

Smack, went the boys, down into the dust.

Ooof, they gasped.

Hooray, shouted those still standing.

Tom watched enviously. He loved mob-ball but he was kept too busy in the kitchen to ever get much of a chance to play.



Sir Kevyn, the master-of-arms, shouted, 'Bring 'em down! You call that running? Come on, run! Run, I say! Knock 'em down!'

He was a burly man in polished chain metal, with a nose that looked as if it had been broken a great many times. His fists were enormous. He shook them as he shouted. 'Run! If you're not prepared to hurt 'em, you shouldn't be in the game!'

At last he noticed Tom.

'What is it, boy? What do you want?' he bellowed.

All the squires stopped and turned to stare at Tom.

Tom stumbled through his message, which sounded more stupid with each re-telling. The master-of-arms stared at him, astounded, then put his fists on his hips and roared with laughter. All the squires copied him, laughing and pointing at Tom.

'Ooooh, the wolves smell danger,' mocked a tall boy with unruly red hair.

'Is this some kind of midsummer foolery?' the master-of-arms asked, when at last he caught his breath.

'No, sir. He told me I had to warn the lord . . .' Tom answered.



‘As if a scrawny little pot-boy like you would ever get to speak to Lord Wolfgang,’ the red-head said.

The master-of-arms scowled at him. ‘Did I give you permission to speak, Lord Sebastian?’

‘No, sir!’

‘Did I say you were allowed to stop running?’

‘No, sir!’

‘Then run, you thickhead!’

‘Yes, sir!’ Sebastian at once charged down the field, giving Tom a furious glance as he did so.

The master-of-arms looked back at Tom, arms crossed. ‘Go on, get out of here. You think I’ve time for such hogwash?’

‘No, sir,’ Tom said, and trudged away, Fergus at his heels. As he passed the squires, he heard Sebastian call out, ‘Back to the kitchen where you belong, pot-boy!’



MISTRESS PIPPIN

‘Stir the soup!’ the castle cook shouted. ‘Grease the goose! Peel the eels! Pummel the pastry! Are those blackbirds ready for the pie?’

She was a small, plump woman, with rosy cheeks and fair hair pinned up under a white cap. The pockets of her long white apron bristled with wooden spoons, soup ladles and basting brushes, and a huge key-ring jangled at her belt.

As she called out commands, people rushed to do her bidding.

A woman carrying a tall, wobbling jelly in the shape of the castle, almost collided with a man with a barrel of eels on his shoulder. Another man hurried in with a stick hung



with pheasants, while girls in white aprons and caps stood in a row at the long table, knives flashing as they chopped leeks at high speed.

It was boiling hot. Everyone's faces were red and damp. Fires blazed at either hearth, and as the bakers opened the bread-ovens and slid the bread tins in and out, hot air lifted in clouds of wavering heat. Beside each fire, a small dog ran round and round in a wheel, turning the great haunches of wild boar on their spits, fat sputtering as it splashed onto the coals. One woman was plucking blackbirds in a storm of dark feathers. Another was breaking eggs into a bowl and whisking them into a yellow froth. Yet another was grinding herbs and oil in a granite mortar.

The cook now stood at a huge cauldron hung above one of the fires. A thin man hurried to bring her a stool. She hopped up onto it nimbly, and bent to sniff the soup. The thin man—who was twice as tall as the cook—twisted his hands together. The cook frowned and drew out a long-handled spoon from her apron. She scooped up a tiny spoonful of broth and sipped it. Her frown deepened. The thin man gnawed his fingernails, while everyone nearby turned to watch, holding their breath in anticipation.



‘Perhaps some thyme,’ the cook said, and the thin man rushed to get her a sprig of the sweet-scented herb. She stripped off the leaves and dropped them one by one into the soup, sniffing the steam that roiled out of the cauldron. ‘Mmmm. Maybe a smidgen of salt.’

‘Yes, Mistress Pippin, of course. More salt,’ he said. He grabbed a bowl of sea salt crystals, and the cook took a tiny pinch and sprinkled it into the soup. She stirred it once, twice, thrice, then plucked a fresh spoon from her apron and took another tiny sip. Slowly she nodded her head. ‘Perfect.’

The thin man beamed in delight, and everyone around him shook his hand and congratulated him. The cook jumped down from her stool, and smoothed her apron. Then Tom’s stomach rumbled loudly. It had been a long time since breakfast, and the steam from the soup smelt delicious.

The cook turned around, hands on hips. ‘Tom, at last! Where have you been all this time? Did you find my mushrooms?’

‘Yes . . .’ Tom began. He badly wanted to tell his mother about the wild man’s warning, but she did not give him a chance.



'My nettles?'

'Yes.'

'My dandelion leaves?'

'Yes, Mam.'

'Well, what are you waiting for?' Tom's mother seized the bucket from him and emptied it on the table. 'Maude, begin the mushroom and quail pasties!' She scooped up all the mushrooms into a bowl and threw it across the table to another white-capped woman, who squeaked and just managed to catch it. 'Nancy, get to work on the nettle soup.' Tom's mother tossed the bunch of stinging nettles across the room to a girl who caught it, then cried 'ow!' and promptly dropped the bunch on the floor. 'Sorry, Mistress Pippin.' She scooped up the nettles, tossed them from hand to hand, then threw them into the nearby sink to wash.

Tom's mother seized a knife and began to chop up the dandelion leaves so fast her knife was a mere blur. At once all the other women began to chop faster too. The thunk of metal against wood echoed among the beams.

'Right, Tom, I need you to get started on all those pots,' said Mistress Pippin as she chopped, 'and then you can help

the footmen polish the silver. We have unexpected guests for the midsummer feast tonight, and need to lay another two dozen places . . . and get that dog out of my butter barrel!’

Tom dragged Fergus’s nose away from the butter, wondering how his mother had known what the wolfhound was doing. ‘Mam,’ he said, but she was too busy chopping to hear him. He called her again, more loudly this time, and his mother paused and looked at him in surprise. ‘What is it, Tomkin?’

‘I . . . I met the wild man in the woods today.’

Mistress Pippin’s knife fell with a clatter to the floor. She stared at Tom, eyes round. ‘The wild man?’

When Tom nodded, she looked around her, as if making sure nobody was watching or listening, then caught Tom’s shoulder and drew him down the kitchen and into the chill of the buttery. Once she had shut the door behind them, she said urgently, ‘What did he say, Tom?’

He told her, and somehow, the words no longer seemed stupid, but as charged with danger and meaning as when the wild man had spoken them in the shadowy tangle of the forest.



‘He said I have to tell the lord, but . . . Mam, no-one will listen to me.’

‘Of course you must tell the lord,’ she said. She took Tom’s hand and marched him out of the buttery, through the kitchen, and up the stairs to the butler’s pantry, Fergus trotting behind.

‘Tom has important news,’ she told the butler. ‘I tell you, he must see the lord.’

‘See the lord? Young Tom? Not likely,’ the butler answered.

‘You make sure he sees the lord, or there’ll be no more spiced pear and butterscotch pudding for you,’ Mistress Pippin warned.

The butler sat up at once, almost popping all his buttons in his haste. ‘No need for that, Mistress Pippin, I’ll do what I can!’

She left Tom there, and raced back to her kitchen so fast the ribbons of her cap streamed behind her.

Tom told his tale again. The butler hummed and hawed, but took Tom to the castle steward.

Tom told his tale yet again. The steward rasped his chin and frowned, but took Tom to see the chamberlain.

Tom told the tale one more time, feeling like an absolute fool. The chamberlain yawned and stretched, then mumbled that he would pass the message on, if he could just find the time. He waved Tom away, then lay back in his chair, spread his handkerchief over his face, and promptly began to snore.

By that time, Tom was so frustrated that he felt as if steam was about to burst out of his ears. He stood for a moment, wondering if he dared go up the stairs to the great hall and accost Lord Wolfgang himself. Tom was fairly sure the lord's bodyguards would simply kick him back down again. So, scowling, he went down the stairs, wondering what else he could do.

A girl, dressed in white with bare feet and a wild mass of curly, black hair, was sitting in a window archway, studying an enormous book. She looked up as he slouched by, and raised her eyebrows. 'You know that there are only three words that end in "gree"? You look like two of them, at least.'

'I'm not in the mood for riddles, Quinn,' Tom snapped.

'Of course not, since riddles are for the wise,' she answered, her turquoise-green eyes gleaming. 'Still, I'm

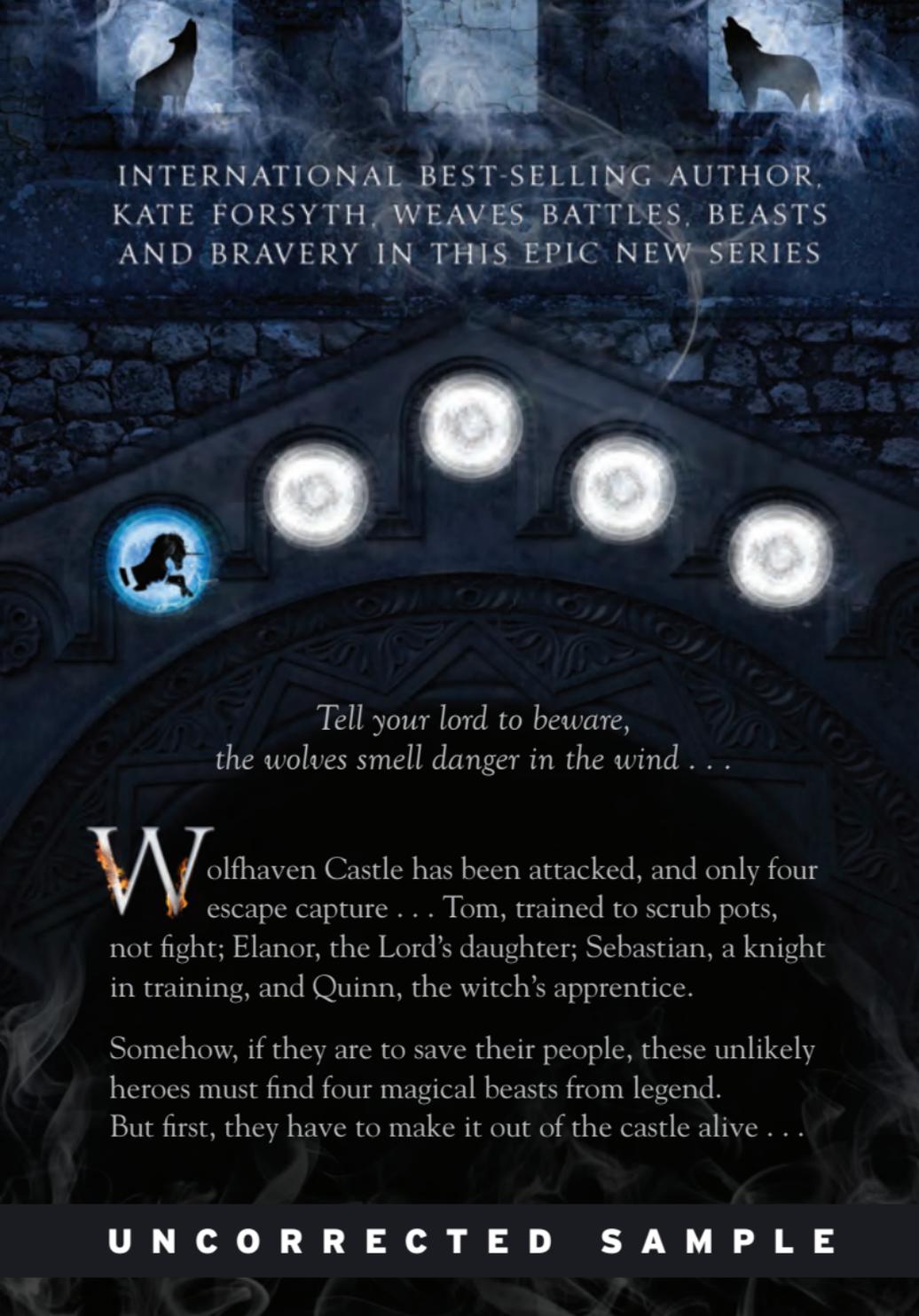


sure you'll agree you're angry and hungry, so riddle me ree, can you tell me all three?"

'Go boil your head,' Tom replied and jumped down two steps at once to get past her. Quinn had become a lot more annoying since she had been apprenticed to the castle witch, he thought.

'You go boil yours,' she answered and stuck out her tongue at him.





INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLING AUTHOR,
KATE FORSYTH, WEAVES BATTLES, BEASTS
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*Tell your lord to beware,
the wolves smell danger in the wind . . .*

Wolfhaven Castle has been attacked, and only four escape capture . . . Tom, trained to scrub pots, not fight; Elanor, the Lord's daughter; Sebastian, a knight in training, and Quinn, the witch's apprentice.

Somehow, if they are to save their people, these unlikely heroes must find four magical beasts from legend. But first, they have to make it out of the castle alive . . .

U N C O R R E C T E D S A M P L E