



HIS ROYAL HOPELESS

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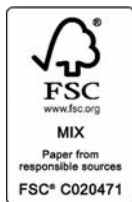
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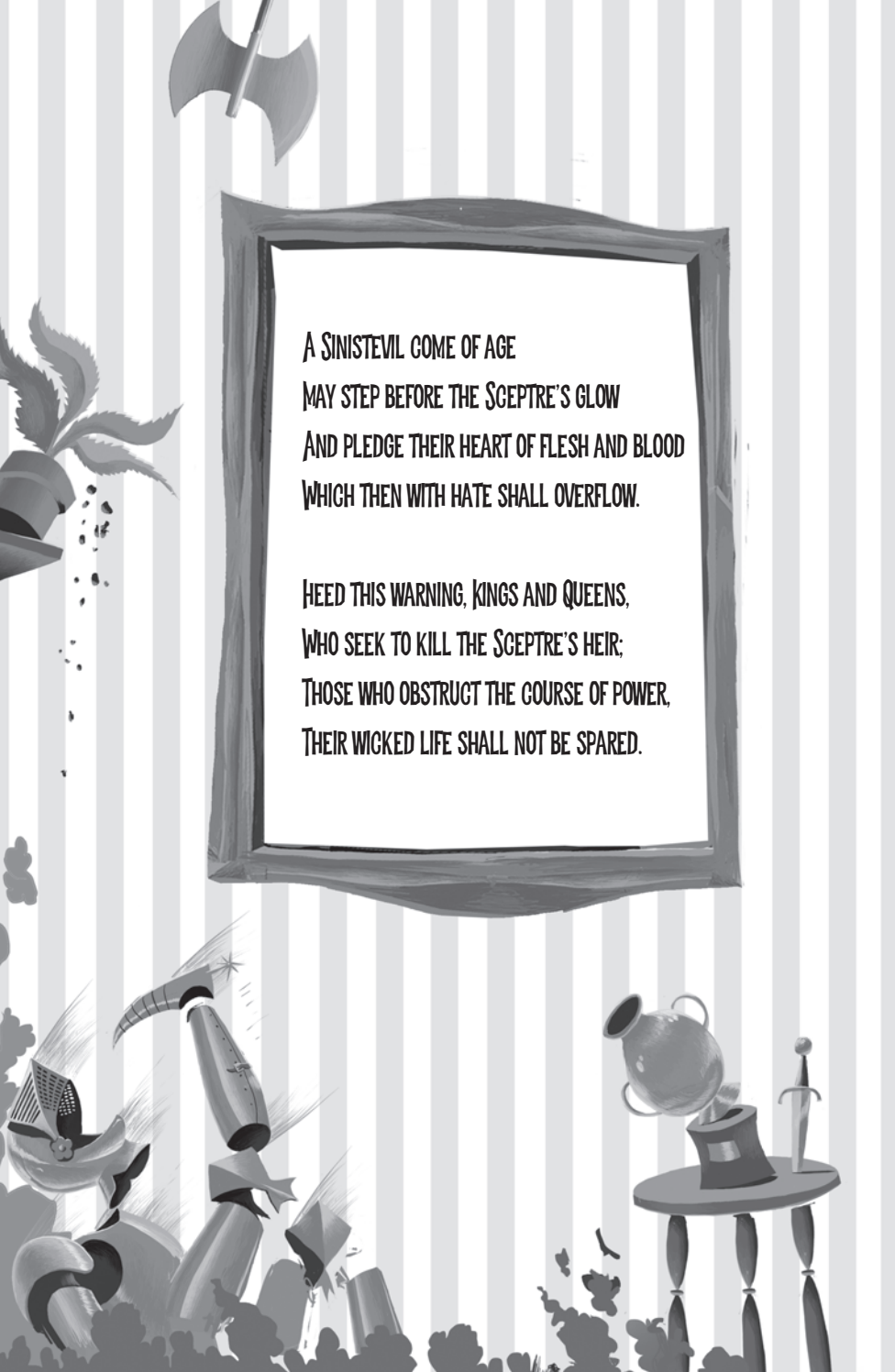
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For FS.

Robbie would be even more lost without you.



A SINISTEVL GOME OF AGE
MAY STEP BEFORE THE SCEPTRE'S GLOW
AND PLEDGE THEIR HEART OF FLESH AND BLOOD
WHICH THEN WITH HATE SHALL OVERFLOW.

HEED THIS WARNING, KINGS AND QUEENS,
WHO SEEK TO KILL THE SCEPTRE'S HEIR;
THOSE WHO OBSTRUCT THE COURSE OF POWER,
THEIR WICKED LIFE SHALL NOT BE SPARED.

name was that of their rulers, of the most despicable, distasteful and downright *evil* royal family in the entire world.

That name was written in bold, spiky silver letters, painted stylishly and with exquisite care at the top of the family tree. The name read:

The Sinistevils

The royal family tree was a gnarled one, a *nasty* one. Sinistevils did not play nice with one another, and most family gatherings ended with a few more branches snapped off. Even so, it was a tree that thrived.

Near the bottom of the tree, in angry violet lettering, was the current ruler and matriarch of the Sinistevil household: Queen Viella Sinistevil, who liked to crush peasants and laugh as their villages burnt. The silver line of the tree wound down to her equally cruel eldest son, the late Prince Brutus, who led the armies and laughed equally hard at the burning of villages.

However, Brutus was not the final name on the tree. Right at the bottom, crammed up against the skirting board, was another name. The people of Waning had not yet seen Viella's surviving son and

heir to the throne, whose name on the tree was obscured by a crowd of lint and dust-bunnies. But they *did* know his name. The boy who could only be as vile and disgusting as the rest of his bloodline, who could only be as evil as evil can be, was called . . .

‘Ahhh-*choo!*’

Robbie Sinistevil woke with a sneeze and sat up in bed, drawing a long pyjama sleeve across his nose. ‘Good morning!’ he said to the silvery tree snaking across his bedroom wall, as he hopped from under the covers.

As Robbie threw open the curtains on what was promising to be an absolutely glorious morning he assumed, like the rest of the kingdom did, that he was as evil as evil could possibly be. Why would he ever think otherwise? Robbie was a Sinistevil, and Sinistevils were evil. Evil was his legacy. It was in his blood. It was in his – he looked at his sleeve and grimaced.

Time to get dressed.

Robbie pulled his robes out of the wardrobe. They were black, of course – the only acceptable colour for a Sinistevil to wear – and suited him perfectly.

Well, maybe *perfectly* wasn't quite the right word: they didn't actually *fit*. The sleeves of the cloak fell past Robbie's hands and further still, while the bottom of his trouser legs pooled around the soles of his shoes. But that didn't matter to Robbie. Sleeves could be rolled up, trousers could be hemmed (or stapled; Robbie was not skilled at sewing). What mattered was not how the clothes *looked*, but what they *represented*; they'd been his brother's.

Robbie turned back to his family tree and dropped to his knees, smiling at the emerald name *Brutus*. 'See you in a bit!' he said with a wave. He then rose without realizing he was standing on the corner of his cloak, tripped forwards and hit his head against the bed post, where it gave a resounding *bonk*. Robbie rubbed his pointy nose and smiled bashfully at Brutus' name. 'I'm sure you did that all the time,' he said brightly.

You see, there was a pitfall in the assumption that the youngest Sinistevil was the evillest being known to man. This was the fact that when it came to being pure evil, Robbie Sinistevil . . .

Well, *wasn't*.

*

Robbie skipped out of the door and began the journey down the winding corridors of Sinistevil Castle which would eventually, with any luck, end in breakfast. The sound of his oversized boots pounding the flagstones of the castle floor echoed down the empty corridors, softening as they hit the deep red carpet of the portrait wing. He passed painting after painting of green-skinned ancestors, some glowering down from glorious battle scenes, others simply glowering down.

Robbie stopped at the fifteenth portrait to the left, stepping on to the worn patch of carpet in front of it. He looked up and sighed, taking in his favourite painting.

It was the goriest painting in the castle and, quite possibly – although Robbie could not know this – the goriest painting in the world. Vivid reds and purples depicted limbs scattered across a battlefield, some still attached to people. Sinistevil warriors shook nasty-looking weapons at weeping villagers, weapons that seemed cruel, unusual and altogether quite frightening.

Robbie liked the picture. He was *sure* he liked it. If he tried hard enough, he could even look at it for

more than a few seconds before his stomach protested. It was definitely creative; Robbie hadn't known blood could come in so many different shades of red, and the expression of the man looking for his right arm was exceedingly emotive. Yes, it didn't matter if Robbie felt queasy in its presence; if this was indeed the goriest picture in the castle, then Robbie decided that he must like it, because he was evil and evil people like gory things.

However, this was not the reason Robbie considered this painting his *favourite* painting in the castle. The reason it was his favourite was because it had his brother in it. There he was, in the upper left corner, grinning with childlike glee as he set a nearby peasant alight.

Now *that* was a Sinistevil.

There were lots of paintings of Brutus Sinistevil in the castle, he even had his own gallery in the south wing, but in Robbie's opinion none of those paintings depicted Brutus nearly as dynamically as this one. Robbie puffed up his skinny chest with pride as he gazed up at his big brother, who held a burning torch in one hand and the green jewelled Sceptre glowing in the other. So strong, so villainous, so

powerful. And Robbie thought it only fitting that the best painting of Brutus in the whole castle showed him doing what he loved: levelling innocent villages.

Brutus represented a benchmark for all young Sinistevil heirs, heirs such as Robbie himself. If he stared hard enough at pictures of Brutus, Robbie could even convince himself that he shared a lot of his brother's features. It wasn't that Robbie considered himself attractive (he knew he wasn't – Mother had told him so); it was that, genetically speaking, he was made up of all the things every other Sinistevil was made up of. His skin was the green of congealed algae, his warm yellow eyes ringed with deep grey. Like his brother's, his hair was thick and black as an oil spill on a reef. Unlike his brother's, it stuck out rather more than it should.

The only things missing were the muscles, which Brutus seemed to have an excess of. Some days, Robbie secretly wished Brutus had left some for him; by the time *he* was eleven, Brutus' arms had looked like overfilled potato sacks, while Robbie's currently looked like damp noodles. He'd only been one year old when Brutus had died, but Mother

assured him Brutus had always come home from battle looking like the dead returned to wreak revenge, whereas Mother had once described Robbie's short, wiry frame as that of a bemused scarecrow.

Robbie wasn't worried. He was optimistic – a trait he had inherited from no one, but seemed to have developed all on his own. It was due to this inexplicable optimism that Robbie was certain he would fill out his late brother's clothes by the time he turned twelve. He would *have* to, or else he wouldn't have the strength to wield the Sceptre when he pledged his heart. He looked back to the Sceptre painted in Brutus' hand, the glow it emitted bathing the surrounding gore in a soft green. Every Sinistevil had been bathed in that mesmerizing glow, and some day soon it would be Robbie's turn . . .

The thought of the Sceptre made Robbie's stomach gurgle, and he decided that now was the time for breakfast.

After all, it was irresponsible to be evil on an empty stomach.