

This is dedicated to my family, especially to my daughter, my husband, my parents and my brother. They make up my little universe and I love them all.

I hope whoever reads this will like it as much as I do. Also, as soon as I have time, I will work on its sequel. Won't be for a while, though.

Enjoy!!

P.S.: I want to thank everyone who reads my works. If you like what I write, you can leave a comment on the site and can rate it. Have a nice day. 😊

THE LEGEND OF THE RING

Chapter 1

Angela was hungry. Again. She could feel her stomach grumbling in pain. It was late already and the orphanage doors had long ago been closed and barred. She had to eat something or she was sure she would swoon. She got up from her bed slowly not to wake her room mate, a skinny girl of her age who in her opinion was looking worse than herself and surely needed food just as bad as her.

Rose, her roommate, was sobbing softly in her sleep. Angela had heard her cry herself to bed hours earlier, famished and sick. They had no one in the world to care about them or about any of the other kids in the orphanage. She felt so lonely. And hungry. She would have to sneak out again and steal something to survive. The staff at the orphanage only fed them stale food and leftovers.

She put on her shabby raincoat and stepped on the old rickety wooden floor carefully not to wake Rose. She was determined to steal enough food for both of them. If Rose didn't get food at least, she would probably die. And then she would really be all alone. Maybe she could try to filch some medicine for Rose, too.

Angela headed for the locked door of their room with a hair pin in her shaking hands. She really didn't want to wake Rose, she wasn't in the mood for her scolding. Not tonight, at least. She took the hair pin and put it in the lock, then she started to handle and move it until she heard the familiar sound of the open door. She sneaked outside the room as silent as a shadow.

The orphanage was immersed in darkness. It was almost quiet but she could hear the distant sobs of the other children locked in their rooms. Especially the young ones who usually went to bed hungry and beaten by the older and stronger ones who stole the little food they got from the orphanage staff. She wished she could help every wretched soul but she knew it was too much for her. So she thought she could at least help Rose. It was her way of making up for stealing so God would let her in his kingdom when it would be her time. Helping Rose was her good deed in this cruel world, the key to making it to Heaven when she died.

Angela listened for any sign of the orphanage's headmaster, Miss Eveline, a fat old hag who probably ate everything that

was in fact destined for the children from the government. But nobody seemed to care that the children were getting skinnier and skinnier every day while the respectable Miss Eveline was getting too fat for her clothes with each passing day. She wondered where she stuffed it all. When she made sure no sound was coming from behind her door, she hurried down the corridor towards the only place she could find the pills for Rose. She was having a fever and she was very weak because of the flu and the fact that their room was dank and cold wasn't helping. She really needed the medicine but Miss Eveline, who considered herself a good Christian and who taught them about religion, didn't deem she was worth to try saving and only saw it as a waste of good pills on a lost cause. When she last time asked for pills for Rose, she had slapped her face and told her that Rose was in God's hands now and that if He wanted, he would save her without the pills. But Angela wasn't going to wait for that. So first steal the pills and then go out and steal something to eat. That was the plan.

She descended the creaky stairs like a cat, trying not to make a sound. But the building was so old that it made it impossible for the flimsy stairs not to creak lightly under her weight. Angela knew where Miss Eveline kept all the medicines locked. And now it was the perfect time to take some for Rose. So she headed straight for the locked cabinet. She opened the door that led to the medical cabinet with ease but the cabinet itself was another issue. She tried picking it with her hair pin but it was in vain. And she couldn't just break the lock or she would

wake every soul in the orphanage. She needed to be smart about it. She looked around the tiny room and there it was: a tiny key sitting on the otherwise empty table in far corner of the small room. Could it be? Could she be so lucky? Hope made her cheeks redden. That might be the right key as nobody expected anyone to break the lock to the room to need to hide the cabinet key so... She stumbled over a stool and hoped nobody had heard anything, then she grabbed the key. She put it in the lock and turned it as it had fit right in. Yes!! It opened the cabinet lock! She grabbed some pain killers for Rose and stashed them in her pocket. Then she carefully locked the cabinet door again and placed the key back on the table where she had found it. She then exited the room and locked it back behind her hoping that nobody would notice a few missing pills this way.

Angela climbed the orphanage fence and jumped on the other side. Now to find some food!

The night was cold and a drizzling rain had just started. But her hunger was worse than the rain. So Angela started running through the rain towards the center of the town as the orphanage was at the outskirts of it. She knew there was a bakery downtown and as it was Friday night, the baker had made a few extra loaves of bread to sell in the morning as he usually did. He always baked more on Friday and sold the extra bread on Saturday morning. And after he would sell all the

bread, he left home earlier than during the other days of the week.

She slowed her running to a walk as soon as she passed the first houses of the small town. She sniffed the air as a gust of wind had brought a sweet smell of apple pies from some of the nearby houses. She wondered how it was that she still remembered the taste of it as she hadn't eaten a piece of apple pie in ages. But her mouth was watering at the thought. She tried to focus back on her mission, namely stealing a loaf or two and if she was lucky enough, some other goodies from the bakery without, of course, getting caught. She had done it before so it shouldn't be a problem now. And she was never caught because she wasn't greedy. She never stole more than she needed, and she didn't need much.

Angela took the corner towards the bakery with a lockpick in her hand. She made sure no city guards were on site and advanced carefully under the cover of darkness. The guards were probably drinking in some pub or sleeping with their heads on the table already drunk by now. But it was always better to be careful than to be sorry. She knew what the punishment for stealing was, especially for someone from the orphanage who wouldn't be defended by anyone, namely the judge would have her hands cut off to set her as an example. And she surely didn't want that to happen.

The blinds were shut and there was no light coming from the inside. But the owner and his wife lived on the first floor and

although they were probably sleeping by now, she would have to be quiet not to wake them. It was always better and desirable to avoid confrontation. So she put the lock pick in the lock and turned it slightly to the left, then to the right and then to the left again but a bit harder and then she pushed the door open. She was inside the bakery. The smell of freshly cooked bread was drowning her senses. She took a loaf from the oven and gulped it down in a few bites. Then she took two more to give Rose one and one for herself for later. But she was not content with only bread. Not this time. So she decided to break into the pantry and take some goodies from there too. She was wondering why would the baker and his wife keep the pantry locked too. What could they have in there?? Cakes? Cookies? Expensive salami or what that they felt the need to keep it locked? Well, she would try to lock pick that too this time. It was for a good cause, she told herself, Rose would need more than just bread and a few pills to get better.

So Angela used all her skill to pick the pantry lock. It proved more stubborn than the medical cabinet back at the orphanage. Which only made her more determined to open it. What did they keep in there? The golden goose? But then she finally heard the familiar click of the open lock and the pantry door was standing wide open in front of her. She struck a match and lit a small candle which she found earlier on one of the tables in the kitchen. There were sausages and a few types of jams, some jars of pickles and some other stuff but no cakes, cookies, candies or anything worth keeping a pantry locked.

She stuffed two large sausages in her small bag next to the loaves of bread when she got greedy and thought of taking a jar of plum jam too. She took the jar from the shelf when something caught her eye. She saw a piece of wood behind the other jars. She moved them aside and discovered a tiny engraved box. It looked old and dusty and of course, it was locked. Was there anything without a lock in this world? She figured that nothing worth it was left in the open so if this box was locked and hidden in the pantry behind some jars of jam, there might be something valuable inside. So she grabbed the tiny wooden box and threw it in her bag next to the food thinking to open it later when she would be in the safety of her room at the orphanage. She locked the pantry door behind her, just as she had found it, then the front door of the bakery she had just robbed and then she was off running back towards the orphanage.

Chapter 2

“Hey, Rose, wake up!”, and Angela touched her forehead to check if she still had a fever. Her forehead was burning hot but Rose hadn't heard her so Angela shook her a bit. Finally, Rose opened her weary eyes just a bit and at first she seemed confused.

“Yeah? What is it, Angela?”, Rose asked half asleep and with an obvious effort.

“Wake up, I have some pills for you and something extra. I got bread and sausages. Come, take the pills and let's dine!”

Rose's eyes opened wide at hearing what Angela had just said and she seemed confused even more so Angela didn't say a word when Rose slightly pinched her hand to make sure it was all real and that she wasn't dreaming. Angela helped her get up and gave her the medicine and a glass of water to go with it.

“Now, let's eat! You'll feel a lot better in the morning” and Angela gave her a sweet smile and then she pulled the bread from her bag. When she pulled the sausages too, Rose's pupils dilated once again in wonder and appreciation.

“Where is all this coming from, Angela? Because I don't think Miss Eveline gave them to you...”

“Hah, no, you know well enough that the old witch Miss Eveline wouldn't give us scrap if she didn't get money from the government for us. So she only feeds us enough to keep us alive and get that money allocated for every child and nothing more. We are literally starving here...so I had to improvise.”

Rose took a bite of the fresh bread and a mouthful of sausage and didn't stop until she was full. Then she had another glass of water and Angela could see that she was a lot better already.

“Then who do I have to thank for this meal beside you, Angela?”

“No worries, Rose. Just get better, ok? I don't want all this spacious and luxurious room for myself...” and both girls started laughing at Angela's comment as the room was anything but that. “Anyway, I never steal from the poor, just from those who can afford it and won't suffer if I take a bit you know...so, really, don't worry about it, ok? And it's almost dawn, get some rest again and we can talk more in the morning when you'll be better!”

“Ok, thank you Angela! And one more thing before I go to sleep again...”

“What, Rose?” Angela asked a bit irritated as she wished to be left alone with her wooden box now and try to open it without Rose's prying eyes.

“If I ever had a sister, I imagine she must be like you. What I mean is that you are like a sister to me, nobody has ever been so kind to me besides you in this stinking hole of an orphanage...”

“Hush now and go to sleep. And I am not that good, it's just that I don't want to be left alone, ok? So don't get sentimental on me, just sleep, Rose...”

“Whatever...”, and Rose fell asleep again with a tiny tear in the corner of her eye.

Angela listened for her heartbeat and her breathing to make sure she was sound asleep before she dared to get the box out of her bag. This was more than stealing food, this was far worse. And if she got caught, if there was something valuable inside and she got caught, well, she didn't even want to think about what the city judge would do to her.

She placed the box on the small table by the window so the light from the breaking dawn would help her see better. It was the size of small pocket book, but thicker. It was light so it made her wonder if there really was anything inside or it was just an old empty box. But then again, if it was empty, why was it locked? No, there had to be something inside. But what could

it be that the baker had hidden in the larder behind some jam jars? Or maybe he put it there long ago and forgot about it.

Angela looked at the box again and shook it gently. Indeed, something seemed to be inside. She took her hair pin and tried to unlock the tiny lock, but it was all in vain. The lock wouldn't give in. After numerous failed attempts, she finally managed to break open the lock. She pushed the lid aside andmoney, lots of it. The baker's savings, most probably. A feeling of guilt rushed over her. She didn't want the baker's savings. He had worked for that money. If he saved it, he surely needed the money for something. Yeah, she didn't have a dime but this was wrong. If it had been a piece of jewellery, the baker and his wife could have lived without it, especially as they kept it in the pantry, but not their savings. The more she thought about it, the more determined she got to take it back, to break into his house again and put the box back where she had found it. Maybe the baker wouldn't even notice it was missing if she could put it back tonight.

All this effort for nothing! Angela got upset but not discouraged. At least she would take another plum jar instead. Then she started playing with the little box and running her fingers across the piece of wood. It was such a fine work. Then, she felt a protuberance on the left side of it, like a tiny mechanism or something. She looked closer for a more thorough inspection. It looked like a small button, but it was well hidden in the intricate model of the engravings on the box

that she could have missed it. She held her breath in anticipation and slowly pushed the tiny thing. To her utmost surprise, a secret compartment opened and there was a shining golden ring inside! It was in the shape of a snake. She took it out to have a closer look. It was dazzling! The most beautiful ring she had ever seen, not that she had seen many anyway but it was magnificent! There were two small rubies that stood for the snake's eyes that made it look almost alive. There was something strange about the ring. She wanted to try it on but she heard Rose mumbling in her sleep and she quickly stashed the ring in her pocket and the wooden box back in the bag. She would try the ring some other time and she would return the box and the money tonight. As for the ring, that was hers. That she wouldn't return. Not in a million years. Maybe the baker didn't even know about the ring. The more she thought about it, the more certain she was. So she could keep the beautiful jewel for herself. But she wouldn't be able to wear it out in the open or Miss Eveline would take it away from her as she knew that the orphanage kids were poor and didn't have anything that belonged to them. Least to say such an expensive piece of jewellery....

Chapter 3

Angela put the box and the money back that night and it was just as she suspected, the baker hadn't even noticed it was missing. She took some more bread and jams and she was out. She decided to find a quiet spot, away from prying eyes, and put on the ring. And she knew the perfect place, her favorite hiding spot where she used to go when she wanted to be left alone and just relax: the small abandoned hunting cabin in the woods just outside town.

She had about two more hours before the orphanage doors would be closed for the night and before Miss Eveline would check that all the children were in their beds. So there was enough time to get to the cabin. She went down the same path as always but there was something in the air, it was as if the forest was more alive than usual. Then she remembered: the hunting season was open. Which meant something else, too: the hunting cabin might not be abandoned anymore, the king's hunting party might be using it during the hunting season. So she would have to be careful as she didn't want to give up on going there.

Angela had a small but sharp knife tied to her belt which she always carried for protection. She was seventeen years old and

she was a beautiful girl and she had had to use that in various occasions. Most of the times it had been enough to show that she could use it and that she was ready to use it in case she had to, without having to actually use it. But there had been a few times when she really had to use the knife to protect herself like the time she had met a gang of drunkards who intended to mess with her. And she wasn't to be messed with.

Angela was a skilled lock picker and she was skilled with her knife. She could also use a bow, although she was not very good at it. In her trips to the hunting cabin, she had found the knife and a bow and arrows which she trained in while roaming the forest.

The orphanage provided the children a scrappy breakfast, a poor lunch and an even worse meal for dinner. So after breakfast, all the kids in the orphanage who were older than 12 were free to go to town and work for people for a meal if they wanted more than what the orphanage provided. But not all kids preferred to work, some started to pickpocket people in busy and crowded areas of the town or steal cheap stuff which they later sold for a few dimes.

Angela too had to resort to stealing to survive and to try to improve her life. It wasn't something she was proud of but whenever she had tried to get a job, the men would only see her as a helpless wench from the orphanage whom they could have their way with so she eventually gave up on trying to get a

job and started stealing. Never much though, just enough to keep her going.

On the way to the cabin Angela wished she had her bow with her, too. She was afraid that if the king's hunting party had gone to the cabin they could have taken her bow. It was old, but it was working. Then again, maybe they didn't need that old piece of wood. As she approached the cabin, she could hear the hunters blowing in the horns for their dogs to get the prey. They were hunting deer and boars and blowing their horns and making quite a racket. At least the dogs were quiet, no dog was barking, they had been well trained.

She could see the cabin in the distance and she decided to advance carefully and check if there was anyone inside. She advanced slowly through the tall grass, making as little noise as possible. When she was only a few steps away from the cabin, she stepped right into a boar trap which caught her right foot. It was so unexpected that she let a loud cry of pain escape her throat. This only made her panic even more. As she was trying to escape the iron contraption, a large golden retriever started barking next to her as it had surely been drawn by her earlier yell of pain.

“Shhh, go away! Go back to your owner!” but the dog wouldn't go away, to her utmost distress. The last thing she wanted was for the king's men to find her there. She would have to explain what she was doing there and why she wasn't at the orphanage where she belonged.

But it was too late. Three hunters accompanied by more dogs came to see why the first dog was barking in a frenzy. Her foot was bleeding but she was still trying to escape the mechanism when she finally realized there was no way to get loose, so she waited for the hunters to approach her, while she was already making up excuses in her head for her reason of being there.

The tallest and most handsome of the three approached her while the other two were standing and watching him, dumbfounded with the whole situation. He seemed to be in charge, as far as Angela could tell.

“Princess, leave the girl alone!”, he addressed the golden retriever whose name was obviously Princess. The dog immediately obeyed him and stood by his side, still curious about the girl caught in the trap.

“Don't move”, he then addressed Angela. “You will only worsen things if you keep wiggling, stand still and I will try to release you!”. He was speaking calmly but as someone who knew what he was talking about and had everything under control. For a moment, Angela forgot about the pain.

The hunter jerked the iron boar trap a few times until he could feel it give in.

“Need any help, your...?” one of the other two hunters spoke when the one helping Angela hushed him to be quiet.

“There!” he said smiling victorious as he released Angela's foot from the trap. Then he ripped his sleeve and used it to bandage her foot with it, leaving the other two hunters agape. Angela too wasn't used to kindness so she didn't know how to react either. She was just as speechless as the two hunters standing behind the one who had helped her.

“Can you walk? And who are you, miss? And what are you doing here all alone in the woods? Don't you know it is dangerous?”

“Whoa” Angela said, “so many questions...”, while she was stalling to find a good enough answer to get her out of trouble.

“Ok, let's start with the beginning. Who are you?”

“Angela.” She said simply. “Thank you for your help but now I'll be on my way”, and Angela started limping back the way she came when she felt a hand on her arm grasping her gently.

“Wait!” the man who seemed in charge said. “Where were you going? Where you going to this cabin? Because I don't see anywhere else you could have been going”.

“As I said, thank you for your help, but that's none of your business, is it? I will be going back now, tank you very much and good bye!”

“Not so fast!”, he said and grabbed her arm again. Now this really got her mad and she was afraid that maybe the three hunters wanted to have their way with her as there was nobody else there to save her. So she took out her knife with a

swift move and in the next second she was holding it against his throat, to the other two hunters' sheer fright. Sweat was running down their necks as they witnessed what happened, they were obviously concerned for the first hunter's well-being.

“Don't try anything funny, or his life will be on your hands!” Angela said just as scared as they were. The dogs started barking and snarling at her as they realized their master was in danger. Princess was running around her and sniffing, trying to guess her intentions and see if her master was really in danger or the girl was just bluffing.

“Call your dogs” Angela ordered the two hunters.

“ Let him go” one of the two hunters started to babble out the words, “or you are in big trouble”, he went on, sweat trickling down his spine.

“Yeah”, the other suddenly got a bit of courage and managed to utter a few words, too. “ He is the...”, but he couldn't finish his sentence as Angela's prisoner gave him a deadly look meaning that he should keep quiet. Next thing she knew, he twisted her arm and unarmed her, grabbed her rusty knife and put it against her throat, switching roles completely, to the other two hunters' relief.

“As I was saying” he said mocking her, “what were you doing here?”

“Nothing, I was just going to spend an hour or so in the cabin away from the rustle of town. It is too noisy during this period as the spring festival is approaching”, she quickly answered.

“Were you going to hunt the king's deer? You know the penalty for that!”, he said checking her out.

“No, no, I swear!” she said and it technically wasn't a lie as she wasn't going to hunt that day. She didn't say about the deer she hunted last week, though.

“You are brave and as far as I can see, you can take care of yourself”, he said and he set her free. “We are not going to harm you, we are the king's men, we don't harm helpless girls!”

“First of all”, she said with fire in her eyes because she had just been unarmed by him and this hadn't happened before, “I am not a girl, I am almost 18, so I am a woman, and second, if my foot wasn't bleeding and the sunlight hadn't gotten in my eyes, you could have never taken the knife from me!” and she made a funny pout at him which only managed to make him laugh, infuriating her even more.

“Ok, enough hunting for today, gather the things and let's get back to the castle!” he ordered the other two. Then he addressed Angela: “Need a ride downtown? You won't be able to walk or if you will, it will take you forever.”

“I don't need your help, thank you very much!” she replied proudly.

“Ok, I see you are as stubborn as a mule, suit yourself!”, the handsome one said and then he addressed the other two: “Let’s go!” but he winked at them as he was sure she would change her mind as soon as she realized he was right.

When Angela saw that they were really going to leave her there, she jumped up to her feet and pleaded annoyed that she was defeated: “Wait, ok, you are right, could you take me to town?”

The tall man stopped his horse and waved for the other two to also stop. Then he looked at her, she was standing proud but there was something in her large beautiful eyes and he guessed she was afraid although he was sure she would never admit it.

“Didn’t you forget something, Angela?” he asked.

“What?” and she looked around to see if she had dropped something or lost something in the grass.

“George, Adrian, let's go if this ungrateful wench can't realize what she forgot!”. The two hunters, George and Adrian, were looking at him confused but started to gallop at his words. No sooner had they done that when they heard her scream behind them.

“Wait, please!”

“See? Was it that hard?” the tall handsome guy said, stopping his horse in his tracks and waiting for her to limp to him.

“Won’t you help me get to your horse? Please?” she added this time and as he was looking at her it was as if the words literally hurt her more than the wound to her foot.

“Nah, you don't need our help. When I tried to help you, you put your knife to my throat”. His words made George and Adrian shiver at the thought. They would have paid with their lives if anything happened to him.

Angela managed to get to his horse and he eventually helped her up. She wrapped her arms around his waist and the four of them started galloping back to town.

“What’s your name?” she asked after a few miles during which they rode in complete silence.

“Daniel”, he answered simply without adding anything more.

“Ok, thank you Daniel for your help. But I can manage from here.”

“What are you talking about? You can't walk, you need medical attention, I'll take you to the hospital.”

“No, you don't understand, I have to get back...”

“Where do you live? I'll let your parents know...”

“I have no parents”, Angela couldn’t hide it anymore. “I live at the orphanage. But I have a roommate and she is probably worried already. And the principal of the orphanage, Miss Eveline, she can't know of my little adventure or she'll throwme

out in the streets... Which she will anyway next year, when I turn eighteen...”, she said, sadness in her voice and in her eyes.

She saw that there was some sort of struggle in him concerning her but he eventually agreed to take her to the orphanage after making sure that her foot wasn't hurt that bad. He reckoned that with proper hygiene and some medication, she should be all right.

So Daniel left her at the orphanage gates and then he left towards the castle accompanied by his squires George and Adrian and Princess, his golden retriever.

Chapter 4

On the way back to the castle, George and Adrian were too embarrassed for not having been able to protect Daniel earlier when Angela had managed to put her knife to his throat, to start a conversation. Daniel, on the other hand, was thinking of the beautiful and wild girl....

Finally, George, who was ten years older than Adrian and who was also Adrian's uncle, decided to break the silence.

“Uh..., George cleared his throat, about earlier, we are sorry for what happened, your Highness. But it was so unpredictable, I mean I’ve been working in your service for as long as I remember but I would have never expected...”

“Enough with the excuses, relax, George. Do you see me mad?”

“No....”, George answered quickly hoping that maybe he wouldn’t be punished for his carelessness.

“Am I hurt?” Daniel went on, more to tease him and Adrian as he knew that both his men were expecting some sort of punishment.

“No....”

“Then let's not make a big deal out of it. As you could see, I can take care of myself.”

“Yes, your Highness”, George hurriedly agreed, “you are a very skilled warrior yourself but it was our duty to protect you!”

“If you insist and want me to totally forgive you two, I want you to do something for me.”

“Anything, your Highness”, this time Adrian butted in after he saw that the prince was in a good mood and that they wouldn't be punished.

“First of all, don't you say a word to anyone about the girl, especially to the King, and second, I want you to go tomorrow morning and buy her medicine and take it to her. And two bars of chocolate, one for her, one for her roommate. Wrap everything nicely and give it to Miss Eveline, tell her to make sure the stuff gets to Angela, or she'll answer to me. Also don't tell Angela who I am and tell good Miss Eveline to keep quiet as well if she wants to keep her tongue in her mouth. That's all.”

Both men bowed and left him alone as they were already entering the castle halls. They were both happy that they got away that easy.

“Where were you, Ange? I've been worried about you.”, Rose said glad that Angela was finally back from who knows where. She hurried to her and hugged her. Then she saw her foot.

“What happened? Are you hurt? What’s wrong with your foot?”

“I’ll be fine, Rose, don't worry. What about you? Did the medicine help? Because as far as I can tell, you are a lot better today.”, Angela said, trying to change the subject and turn Rose's attention towards herself.

“Yes, a lot better. Thank you, Ange. You are my best friend...If I think about it, you are my only friend”, Rose said with sadness in her voice.

“So what? Am I not enough?” and Angela pretended to be hurt, then they both burst into laughter.

On the following morning, there was a gentle knock on their door. Angela stretched her arms and as she was about to fall back to sleep, the knock on the door was heard once again, this time a bit harder. Now she was sure she wasn't dreaming, there was somebody knocking on their door. She got up and as she didn’t hear anything from behind the door that could help her guess who it could have been, she opened it. Miss Eveline was standing in the doorway with a nicely wrapped packet of something. This only made her scratch her head in wonder.

“This is for you, Angela! I don’t know what you did to deserve such attention... Anyway, it's for you!” and Miss Eveline, with her eyes like a hawk's, handed Angela the packet.

“Huh!?” Angela was still sleepy and very confused. What was Miss Eveline talking about? A packet for her? Who could it be from? She had no relatives, no one who cared about her besides Rose, and she was sure it wasn't from Rose. Was this a mistake? She didn’t care, by the looks of it, there might be something nice inside, so why not take it?

“Thank you”, but Miss Eveline was still holding it as if she didn’t really want to hand it to her. And by the way it looked, it was sealed and Miss Eveline was surely dying to find out what was inside. Angela had to snatch it from her hands which seemed to have glued themselves to it. Miss Eveline recomposed herself but was still standing in the doorway, hoping that Angela would open it right there and she could see what Daniel, the Prince of Green Valley had given her.

To her disappointment, Angela got back to her room and closed the door behind her, leaving Miss Eveline to only guess what in the world that mysterious packet might have contained.

Once back in the room, she put the packet on the bed and stared at it. Rose woke up, too, and seeing the beautifully wrapped packet, poked Angela in surprise.

“Oh, looks like you have a secret admirer”, Rose said and started giggling.

“Oh, shut up, will you?” Angela retorted as she didn’t know what to make of it.

“Open it, open it!” Rose kept telling her, just as curious about its content as Miss Eveline.

Angela took her knife and cut its margins. Inside, there was medicine for her foot and two bars of chocolate with a note which read *“One for you and one for your roommate.”*

“Chocolate!”, and Rose took one chocolate out. “Thank you, Ange!” and she took a bite which she kept in her mouth for as long as she could, tasting it till it all melted down her throat. That was a real treat, they only got chocolate on Christmas Eve, and it was the cheapest one. But this was delicious. And it wasn't even Christmas!

Angela took her medicine and then she too took a bite of chocolate. Indeed, it was tasty. She bet that not even good Miss Eveline had ever tasted such delicious chocolate. She knew who it was from but what she didn’t know was the fact that he was the Prince of the land, King Richard's only heir, so next in line to the throne of Green Valley.

Chapter 5

Ever since Angela received that packet, Miss Eveline's behavior towards her changed. She got better meals since that day, less or almost no scolding and suspicious looks from the old spinster from time to time. And Angela could have sworn it was jealousy what she saw in Miss Eveline's eyes. But she couldn't explain to herself why all these sudden changes. The food was better, the atmosphere was more relaxed, but it was as if Miss Eveline was spying on her to find out ..., well, Angela herself didn't know what Miss Eveline was trying to find out.

Rose too, benefited from this as she got the same treatment as Angela, to the other children's surprise. This change of things didn't go unnoticed by the other children at the orphanage, especially Clark and his gang of brawlers. Clark was a lean boy, not very muscular, but not weak. But he was more than clever and he ruled his small gang of thugs with an iron fist right under Miss Eveline's nose, who seemed oblivious to everything. These few children stole for him. And in return, he offered them protection and better food than what they got from the orphanage. But they needed the orphanage for shelter at least until they turned 18 and then they would just have to find another place and go on with their criminal activities. They were dangerous, especially Clark, their leader. These kids did everything from shoplifting to pickpocketing and even burglary. Then they, the four of them, would bring all the loot

to Clark and he would sell what he could and make a profit which he used to buy food for the five of them: himself, Christian, a tall and skinny boy of 16 who was skilled with picking locks, Dave, a very good runner who could outrun the guards after drawing their attention to him so the others could escape with the plunder, Greg, their bait, a plump boy who proved very useful, and Nick, the most decent of them who was a good fist fighter and who had often been their way out of trouble with the city guards.

Upon seeing that Angela and Rose got more food again, he decided to find out what it was all about. So Clark and his gang sat down at Angela and Rose's table, although the girls hadn't invited them or anyone else. They always ate alone at their table in the corner of the canteen, far from the other kids. Everybody knew they were loners and that they didn't talk much, except to one another. So when Clark and his gang of troublemakers took a seat at their table, all the other children stopped and watched, aware that this didn't smell right. One of the kids ran out of the canteen in a hurry.

Clark sat next to Rose while Greg took a seat opposite them, next to Angela. Christian stood right next to Clark while Nick and Dave sat down next to Angela, too. The girls didn't know what it was all about, but neither was stupid. They knew they were in trouble. Angela could see Rose trying to keep calm and ignore Clark while her hands betrayed her. Her hands were shaking so bad that all the soup from her spoon fell on the table. Clark,

well aware of the effect he produced wherever he went with his gang, sneered. Angela wished they would just go away, but she knew they weren't there to just leave. They were there looking for trouble.

Greg, the plump kid, helped himself from Angela's loaf of bread and took her two only meatballs, leaving her with just the mashed potatoes. Angela felt her blood boil in her and gave him a deadly look but Greg couldn't care less. He wasn't alone, he had the gang for protection. So he took a bite of one of the meatballs, then he started to lick his fingers, mocking Angela and Rose, to the other's delight and amusement. They all started laughing and then Dave, the athlete, took Rose's food and gave the bread to Nick.

Angela couldn't take it anymore. There were five of them and they were only two. Or better said, it was as if she was alone as she couldn't count on Rose in a fight. She was a fragile girl. Decent and good hearted, but useless in a fight. And it would have been better if she had been alone as at least then she would only have had to care for herself, but this was worse. She also had to protect Rose. Although she never admitted it to her, she cared about her. Of all the other kids in the orphanage, this feeble girl was a nice company.

"Enough!" Angela roared from the bottom of her lungs, while she got up from the table and felt for her hidden knife. She prayed she wouldn't have to use it inside the orphanage.

“Oh, did I hear something?” Clark asked mocking and imitating her. The rest of his gang rose to their feet, too. They didn’t know much about Angela but they had heard rumors that she was a pretty good fighter if she needed to fight. Clark never believed those rumors, he could never imagine that a girl could fight.

“You can have my food, I'm not that hungry...”, Rose's choked voice had hardly been audible while she muttered the words. “Take it and leave us alone, please!”, she went on this time with a little more power in her voice.

“No!”, Angela said while she punched Greg in his face, stuffing his other meatball in his mouth. Christian quickly took a knife from the table and plunged at her, aiming it at her. Rose fainted and fell under the table, to Angela's relief as she was safe there. She took out her knife too and managed to parry Christian’s strike. Then with a strong blow, she thrust his knife from his hands. It fell on Nick's right foot, pinning him to the ground. Dave, the one with the athletic build, punched her in her stomach and Clark too started to hit her. She fell under a storm of blows when something caught Clark's eyes. Something shiny had fallen from Angela's pocket. He stopped hitting her and made a sign for Dave to also stop. He picked up Angela's ring. She had kept it in her pocket all this while meaning to try it on but she never had the chance and then she just forgot about it. When she saw it, she felt something strange, like a huge urge to

have it and put it on. Clark was faster and took it but Angela got up and snatched it from his hands.

“This is mine, you brute!” and as Angela was saying the words, she put the snake shaped ring on her index finger so he couldn’t take it anymore. Then it all happened: the moment she put it around her finger she felt a sudden rush, adrenaline was pumping in her whole being, time itself seemed to stop. She wasn't in pain anymore from the bruises caused by Clark and his boys, on the contrary, she felt very strong. She looked at the ring and the two red rubies were shining so bright as if they were on fire or as if the snake had somehow turned to life and those really were his devilish eyes. Everything seemed so unreal, it was like a dream. But it was true. What was happening to her? Clark was moving as if in slow motion, coming towards her, Dave was reaching for some hidden weapon in his pocket, Greg was knocked out with his head on the empty plate of food and Nick was still trying to get the knife out of his shoe and foot. Christian was somewhere behind her and she could hear his footsteps coming towards her, too.

Angela reached for Dave's pocket and took his weapon with a very swift move. It was a small sharp dagger. She stashed it on her belt as she didn’t want to harm the stupid greedy boys. Then she heard Christian's fist through the air but she dodged him so fast that she could still see him trying to punch her. She was already behind him and kicked him hard behind his right knee, making him kneel in pain.

Clark wasn't sure what was going on. He saw his gang defeated by this girl and he saw her suddenly moving and kicking right and left with such speed that he could barely keep track of her. So he decided to back away for now. He helped his cronies get up and muttered a swear through his gritted teeth at Angela and then just as they were about to leave, Miss Eveline came accompanied by the little boy who had left out of the canteen earlier to get her. She was also accompanied by a few nurses who were also in charge of the children in the orphanage.

After a quick glance, Miss Eveline, who also feared Clark and his gang although she would have never admitted that to anyone, tried to figure out what had happened. But it made no sense. John, the boy who had called for her, said that Angela and Rose were in trouble. But as far as she could see, Angela was ok standing straight up with a defying look in her eyes, Rose was at the table, not under it as she would have seen her had she come a few minutes earlier, and Clark and his cronies were...not looking good. All the boys looked as if they were in pain while Angela and Rose were ok. Now Miss Eveline was intrigued.

“What happened here? Rose, would you mind telling me what happened?”. Miss Eveline decided to get her answers from Rose as she knew she was a shy girl and she would probably tell her the truth.

“Uh, nothing, Miss Eveline! We were just enjoying lunch when you came....” And Rose blushed to the tip of her nose. Truth is she wasn't sure herself what had just taken place. Last thing she remembered was Greg taking her food and things got heated and then she swooned and fell under the table. She had just come back to her senses and got back at her table when Miss Eveline barged in. So she hadn't lied to her, she really had no idea what had really happened.

“Angela!”, Miss Eveline then tried to approach Angela as Rose couldn't give her any information on what had happened and none of the other children having their lunch was going to speak by the look on their faces. They were all minding their business, having their lunch with a smug look on their faces but not one was going to talk about it.

Meanwhile, Angela had calmed down and as the danger had gone, her senses relaxed and time was passing in the usual manner, not in slow-mo. She remembered about the ring on her finger and she was sure it had something to do with what had just happened. She was a good fighter, but she knew she was not THAT good, though, as to single handed stop five brutes. It had to be the ring. So she tried to take it off and hide it before Miss Eveline would notice it. But it was all in vain. She just couldn't take it off, it was as if the darn thing had become a part of her and wouldn't come off anymore. She started fidgeting and she hid her hands behind her back while trying to look humble before Miss Eveline and trying to make her think

that was why she put her hands behind her, while in fact she was trying to hide the ring.

“Well!?” Miss Eveline went on as Angela hadn't answered her. She was getting irritated and started to stomp her feet. Her high heels resounded on the canteen floor, slicing the silence that surrounded them.

“Nothing happened, Miss. We were just leaving as we already finished our lunch, ain't that right, boys?”, said Clark as he figured this was the best answer. He wasn't going to admit that he and his gang had just taken a beating from a girl. And he was hoping Angela would also be quiet about it if she knew what was good for her and her little friend. He would have plenty of time to settle the score later. But for now, they didn't need Miss Eveline to butt in. They didn't want to be expelled from the orphanage as they had nowhere else to go for now.

“Then what's with Greg's bruise on his cheek?”, Miss Eveline went on as she was sure Clark was lying. “And why is Nick limping? Somebody had better tell me what happened or you will all be grounded! No food for any of you for the next two days!”. Now Miss Eveline was yelling at them, her eyes out of their pockets making her look like an owl.

Seeing that nobody was saying anything, she made a last try. “Greg, why is your cheek bruised? And what's with all that food on your face?”, she asked Greg, the dumbest of them.

“Uh..., I tripped and fell on Rose's plate...”, Greg said blushing.

“And I suppose Nick also fell and hurt his foot, right?”

“You are starting to get the picture, Miss Eveline. As I was saying, nothing happened here, we are all friends, right girls?” Clark muttered menacingly while looking at Angela. But she didn't seem to care.

“Yeah, right, whatever. I'm out of here!” and she left the canteen, Rose quickly following her.

Chapter 6:

Angela could hardly wait to be finally in the safety of her small orphanage room, the one she was sharing with Rose. Rose was following her like a small puppy without making a sound. When they were finally in their room, Rose asked her what had happened in the canteen earlier.

“Ange, how did you defeat those brutes?”

“I’m not sure...It has something to do with this ring. The moment I put it on my finger I felt weird, but in a good sense. I felt immeasurably strong. It was as if I was invincible. I felt no pain or fear. It was freaky but I loved it. Too bad you fainted, Rose. You should have seen me kick their asses....”

“What ring? What are you talking about?”, Rose asked her while examining her for any evident concussion which may have led to her being delirious.

“This one, Rose! Look how the two rubies shine!”

“Wow! Where did you get that from? It looks expensive!”, said Rose relieved that Angela wasn't delirious but wondering where she could have filched it from and fearing repercussions.

“It doesn’t matter. And if you think we are going to get into trouble for it, don't worry! As long as you don't tell anyone about it.”

“I won't!”, Rose promised her in a hurry. She didn’t care where the ring had come from and she wasn't a snitch.

Before falling asleep that night, Angela examined the snake shaped ring until she drifted away in the land of dreams...

Next morning she decided to go to the cabin in the forest once again and hunt some deer. She wondered if wearing the ring would improve her shooting and her aim. There was only one way to find out, right? So after the measly breakfast she left for the woods again. She was almost running to get there faster, take her bow from the cabin and go hunting a bit.

The hunting bow was where she had left it. The king's men hadn't taken it as it was worthless to them, they had far better bows than that crappy one. But for her, it was good enough. She took it from the wall and took the quiver she had hidden under an old desk filled with the arrows she had made herself. She left the cabin and decided to put the bow to the test, or rather herself to the test. If she wasn't mistaken, her combat skills had been improved due to the ring she was wearing.

She quietly examined the ground and listened for any sign of movement through the bushes. She advanced slowly through the grass, examining every twig and every track on the soft ground. She found deer tracks and decided to follow. She crept

through the bushes just like a snake, ready to jump on its prey. Then she saw it, a magnificent stag a few feet in front of her, peacefully grazing, totally unaware of the danger lurking from the grass.

She raised the bow as adrenaline was pumping once again. Now it was the thrill of the hunt. Hunter and prey. It felt so unreal, she was well aware that all her senses were heightened to the maximum and she was sure it had everything to do with the snake ring she was wearing. She swiftly put an arrow and aimed. She pulled the string of the bow and then released the arrow. It flew through the air with the speed of lightning and hit the stag right between its eyes, offering it a swift death. She couldn't believe it. A perfect headshot! She and Rose would eat deer meat tonight!

She took out her knife and approached the stag when a large golden retriever started wagging its tail next to her. What the...? But she quickly remembered: she knew this dog!

“Princess! Ssh, be quiet! I am not allowed to hunt the king's game! Go away!”

“Too late for that, Miss! We meet again”

“Oh, Daniel, right?” Angela asked puzzled as she knew he was one of the king's hunters. Then the other two also appeared next to him, Adrian and George.

“Do you know the penalty for hunting the king's deer?”, Daniel addressed her, trying to look mad when he was in fact thrilled that he saw this wild angel again.

“Well, maybe the king should take better care of his people so they don't starve! Then they wouldn't need to hunt his game!”

“My people are starving?”, Daniel said losing his temper and revealing the truth about his identity. He was red with anger.

“Your people? What do you mean, your people!?”, Angela asked starting to have a hunch of what he meant as things started to make sense. “Do you mean you are the king?”

“Well, not yet, but I'm his son if that counts, I'm the Prince and his only heir. Now that you know, you can bow before me.”

“Ha-ha-ha”, and Angela started laughing but she was not going to bow before him.

“I could have you whipped for your audacity! How dare you?”. Now Daniel was really mad at her especially as Adrian and George were giggling silently behind him and he could hear them although they were trying to hide it.

“I'd like to see you try!”, Angela said while feeling the power coming from the snake shaped ring and enveloping her in a pleasant rush of adrenaline at the possibility of imminent danger.

“Men, seize her! Let's teach this young lady a lesson!”, Daniel addressed Adrian and George more to try to preserve his self esteem before them rather than really meaning what he said. Then, fearing that they might hurt her and not wanting that to happen, he added in a whisper “But be gentle with her!”.

Adrian and George drew their swords but Angela was faster. She drew her bow and arrows and she hit their swords from their hands, making them drop their blades without hurting them, though. It all happened so fast that all three were looking at her puzzled and not sure of what had just happened.

“See you, gentlemen!”, Angela mocked them as she started running back to town the way she had come, leaving them standing there dumbfounded.

Chapter 7

Meanwhile in the darkest part of the kingdom, Daniel's uncle, the King's step brother, was building an army to conquer the King's lands and take what wasn't his in right. Igor, the king's step brother, was living on the outskirts of the kingdom in a fortified citadel which took him ten years to complete. Well, he didn't built it himself, but his small group of trusted men who joined him after he was banned by the king to live on the outskirts of the kingdom. King John, Daniel's father, had exiled Igor after he tried to assassinate him one night after a party. It's true that they were all drunk but Igor showed his real feelings then and his wish to take over the kingdom. So John instead of locking him up in the dungeons decided to exile him and never let him come back. But this didn't stop Igor from getting news of his brother and building himself a small but loyal army.

Igor's henchman, his most trusted advisor, was an old crone, a witch as old as time itself but who knew lots of stuff and who could do more than his entire little army could. The old witch, Margo, was a solitary character who lived in a tower of the citadel where she brewed potions of all sorts and tried old and new spells. Igor was the only one who dared approach her. He was the only one who wasn't afraid of the old witch. He

had nothing more to lose but he could gain everything with her help. She could be his ticket back to the kingdom as the ruler of it. She kept promising him she would find a way to put him on the throne but as the years went by, he was losing his patience. Everything he had tried had been a total failure. Until one day when Margo sent her magic raven to him which meant that she wanted to talk to him. Igor saw the black raven circling him and with hope and curiosity he climbed the steps two at a time to get to Margo faster. The old witch hadn't summoned him in ages, it was always him who went to her and asked her if she had any new plan in mind. But this time she had called him. Which could mean only one thing: she had a plan!!

Igor barged in her chamber without even knocking, which angered her a little.

“What is it, witch? Do you have a plan!?” Igor asked anxiously.

“Yesss, I might have...”, the old witch hissed between her teeth.

“Well, spit it out already, you know I hate it when you keep me waiting!”

“Patience, young Prince... it may not be that easy...”

“Patience is a virtue I don't have!” and Igor felt his blood boiling in him. He went to Margo and grabbed her by her old wrinkled neck with a single hand and raised her in the air menacingly. But instead of scaring her, he only made her laugh

at him. Her laugh was so high-pitched that he couldn't take it anymore and let her down while trying to recompose himself.

“Asss far as I can see, intelligence isn't one of your strong points, eitherrr...”, she hissed between her teeth, mocking him. His eyes almost turned red with anger, but he managed to calm himself. Then, trying to fix things, he addressed her again.

“I'm sorry, Margo! But you know I hate it when you play games with me. Could you please tell me what you had in mind?”

“Surrre”, Margo said while examining him from head to foot, as if trying to decide if he was up to the task or not. After what seemed ages, she finally went on as he managed to refrain himself from interrupting her again.

“There is a legend...of a magic ring. The legend says that whoever wears it becomes invincible. All his sssenses are taken to another level... The wearer of the ring receives the ssskills of all the wearers before him. He becomes a warrior machine, a master of all the weapons known to man. That is what you need to defeat king John...”

“How come you never mentioned this ring before? Are you making all these up? If you are, I'll hang you myself...”

“Do you want to rule overrr the kingdom or not?”

“You know I do!”, Igor answered without a moment's hesitation.

“Then listen carefully... the ring was hidden, protected by a magic spell. But now someone has found it and taken it outside its box. Now I can finally trace it...”

“Who has it? Tell me, witch!”

“A girl....an orphan girrrl....”

Chapter 8

Angela returned to her small dank room where Rose was waiting, as always. She felt different since the day she first put on the snake-shaped ring on her finger. She couldn't exactly explain it, she just knew it. She never wanted to take the ring off, she felt certain it gave her power and skill and she didn't want any of that to go away, not even for a minute. She loved the way she felt.

“Hey, are you daydreaming?”, Rose interrupted her thoughts.

“Nah, I don't know, maybe....”, Angela answered not sure what else to say. She was thinking of a lot of things at once and to her surprise, all her thoughts ended with Daniel's image and with the fact that she still couldn't believe he was the Prince.

“Where have you been, Angela? You look...different in a way. Are you ok?”

“Sure, I was in the forest again.”

“And did you catch anything? Or are we just going to starve tonight again...”, said Rose seeing that Angela seemed to have her bag empty. She knew that Angela used to hunt in the King's forests and that it was strictly forbidden, but Angela had never been caught so far so Rose didn't worry too much.

“I shot a deer, a perfect headshot.”

“Well, where is it?”, Rose asked as she didn't see anything and still hoping that maybe Angela had somehow managed to cut a piece of it and fry it in the woods as she couldn't have taken the raw meat at the orphanage. That would have only meant trouble as Miss Eveline was no fool and would have realized what sort of meat it was and where from. So Angela always fried the meat in the woods close to an abandoned hunting cabin and brought it back here and shared it with her.

“Well, the deer is where it belongs, in the forest. Just that it is dead.”

“What happened?”

“Believe it or not, I got caught red-handed. I had to leave it there. I'm sorry, Rose.”

“Who saw you, Ange? Will he turn you in to the King? Gosh, you know the penalty for stealing from the king...”

“I don't know if he'll turn me in...anyway, the Prince himself caught me hunting his father's game, so really, I don't know...”

“The Prince!?? Are you serious!?? And you are here free instead of in one of the king's cells?”

“Ha-ha, maybe he likes me!” and Angela burst out laughing as she didn't believe her own words. But Rose was dead serious.

“What's with the look on your face? Don't worry, I don't think he will arrest me or anything, let's just get some sleep at least if we can't get food...”

As Rose and Angela went to sleep, a black raven sat at their window, gazing inside from the darkness. Its eyes shone like two embers. Miles away, Margo could see everything her raven saw and she could instruct Igor on finding Angela and the magic ring.