

# The Unenchanted Princess

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For Alexandra

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# **BOOK 1**

## **The Unenchanted Princess**

# Chapter 1

## Prologue

The christening party was a disaster. Her parents had done everything right, and yet...

The Princess was delightful; she smiled and burred at all the visitors. Everybody who was anybody crowded into the ballroom. The Amfibs of Poond were there, as was the Princess Sopo. Even Charmant and his Queen were dancing a glittering path through the guests.

A tiny fountain flowed with wine, and tables groaned under the weight of the food. The gifts were many and diverse, quite suitable for the honor of a first born princess. There were the usual gems and gold, as well as some more unusual gifts. A ring that was clearly magical, though, no one knew quite what it did, and a pouch which could hold all the new princess's needs and yet only need one nurse to carry it.

The problem was in the small stack of pleasantly worded cards from the fairy community. They all extended best wishes etc. and some even granted gifts like grace and beauty, but none of the fairies came. Not even the one the proud parents had carefully not invited. Her parents looked at each other with dismay. The poor princess! She was not going to be enchanted. How could they possibly make a proper match for her if she had no enchantment to be broken by prospective suitors?

The King put his arm around the Queen, and tried to comfort her.

"We will think of something. After all, she is only a baby," the King said, but the Queen was inconsolable.

"My poor baby, what's going to happen to her? She is a princess without an enchantment. We will be the laughing stock of the kingdoms." The Queen peeked out over her King's shoulder. "Look at that Princess Sopo, she looks so smug. I'll never be able to go out in public again." Yet, she was a Queen, so she pulled herself together and was gracious and confident as she said her farewells, even to the Princess Sopo.

When the castle was empty again, the princess was taken up to her nursery, where her nurses had their own little celebration, and made a huge fuss over the bright little girl. They didn't care about enchantments or spells; all they knew was that the Princess Alexandra was a beautiful baby. She smiled and laughed at them, then went quietly to sleep. The King and Queen called an emergency meeting of their Council. They discussed options until the early hours of the morning, yet in the end they could only wait and see what developed.

As the weeks passed everybody could see that the princess was a perfectly normal baby; which of course was the whole problem. Finally the royal couple decreed that nobody was to raise the princess's lack with the little girl herself on pain of exile, then set themselves to come up with some way of solving the dilemma. After all, they had sixteen years.

Alexandra learned to crawl and then to walk, she got into mischief, and had all her nurses wrapped around her tiny finger. She began talking and never stopped. She asked questions which had the royal scholars scurrying for answers, and by the time they had their answer she had moved on to new questions. As she grew no one even hinted that there was something as terribly wrong with her as lacking an enchantment.

## Chapter 2

Alexandra

When Alexandra was five she was sent to school. They pulled up in front of the Governor's Mansion, which was the biggest brick building she had ever seen. Her mom had told her that this school was a very special one.

"All royal children go to this school. It will make you into a proper princess."

Alexandra thought she was a princess because her mom and dad were King and Queen, but she knew better than to ask questions.

She loved school. She was at the top of the class in reading and writing. The stories that they read were about brave princes and beautiful princesses. What made it better was that these stories were the history of their lands.

The princess didn't like the classes on hunting and survival as much. But if they were going to survive their adventures as enchanted royalty the children would need these skills.

Alexandra was very happy, except for one thing – her lack of an enchantment. She learned that from the other children.

While Alexandra loved the learning, not all her classmates shared her enthusiasm. She soon discovered that royal blood did not automatically confer the ability to rule upon them. Indeed some with the most unimpeachable noble lines had the least ability. The daughter of the Queen of Sopo was the prime example.

Her name was Anaeth; she was beautiful and the center of all the princes' attention. Yet her idea of majestic command was to throw a tantrum. It was only the absolute rule forbidding the beheading of peasants or other destruction of school property that kept the population safe from her rages.

It was Anaeth who told that Alexandra was unenchanted. Alexandra had just turned nine, and there had been a party at the school for the children and their parents. Once all the adults had gone home the children gathered secretly in their common room, up past their bedtime discussing their enchantments. An-



aeth, of course, began by telling about how she had been enchanted to prick her finger and sleep until wakened by her true love's kiss. She had the utter assurance of knowing her place in the world. So she was infuriated when Alexandra asked if having the whole kingdom sleep for a hundred years, just so she could find a husband, wasn't an inconvenience for everybody else.

"Nonsense!" whispered Anaeth fiercely. "It is supposed to be inconvenient. Besides, they are just commoners, what do they know?" She fixed Alexandra with her enraged gaze. "I suppose your enchantment is convenient for everybody. You will probably end up married to some stable boy." The others laughed, but Alexandra was saved from answering because the Prince of Poond made a face at Anaeth.

"Yech, you won't catch me kissing any girl."

"No, you are going to be turned into a toad, and some ugly princess will get warts from having to kiss you."

"A frog, a frog," squeaked the prince, turning remarkably bug eyed, "and she will not be ugly!"

"She will be if she has to kiss you to get a husband," Princess Anaeth snickered. "Perhaps Princess Alexandra will kiss you. That would certainly be convenient. Go ahead, kiss him." The others picked up the chant, "Kiss him! Kiss him! Kiss him!" The little prince jumped and ran away, but Alexandra clutched her fists and stood over the Princess Anaeth, ignoring the others.

"I won't kiss the little twit, not because you say so, or anybody else. I don't care a fig for what you say. I think you are a little monster, and when your prince comes he won't kiss you, he'll chop off your head." The Princess Anaeth gave a very unprincesslike squawk and turned red, then purple, then blue. The room was absolutely silent as the princes and princesses confidently waited the explosion to come. It didn't. Instead the beautiful little girl smiled, and looked positively angelic. She beckoned the others closer.

"I heard," said Princess Anaeth pleasantly, "that there is an impostor at the school. My mother told me one of the so called princesses has no enchantment. I wonder who it would be. I, of

course, am enchanted to sleep on my sixteenth birthday. Princess Avi is turning into a swan. Neje has a mother who will send her into the woods. Ariel will be carried away to a glass mountain.” And so she went around the room naming each girl’s fated curse or enchantment. As she spoke each of the girls shivered uncomfortably, as if they were the first to ever have their enchantment, and didn’t know the end of their story. They felt, just for an instant, the malice behind the comfortable enchantments they had grown up with. Until Anaeth reached Alexandra, then her voice took on an edge. “It is a funny thing I have never heard Alexandra’s enchantment. Tell me, what enchantment will bring your husband to your side?”

Alexandra felt a great gap open inside her. She didn’t know anything about her enchantment; no one had ever told her or even talked to her about enchantments. She turned red with shame, and hid her face. Anaeth crowed with triumph.

“Maybe it’s something really horrible, something really gross, or maybe you don’t have one. Maybe you’re a fraud without an enchantment, and you will never be married, never.” Anaeth smiled sweetly, “Well, we’re waiting.” Alexandra felt the silence grow cold and hard. She could feel the stares boring into her soul, her unenchanted soul, and she burst into tears.

Later she would write home and get back a distant letter from her mother saying it was nothing to worry about, and anyhow she and the King were working on a solution. Alexandra wept again when she got the letter from her mother, then she very carefully burned the letter and dried her eyes. If she was never to be married she would need to rule the kingdom herself. The little girl determined to be the best ruler in the world. She never again wept in front of the other children, no matter how Princess Anaeth taunted her. But she did make a calendar and start counting the 2554 days until the very beautiful and very cruel Princess Anaeth would prick herself on a golden spindle and fall into an enchanted sleep and out of Alexandra’s life.

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Alexandra looked at the two families before her again, carefully keeping her face empty of feeling. They, in turn, looked at her with almost equal parts of hope and despair, and at each other with loathing. The princess had to make judgment on their case since it was her week to be “Duke” of these people’s province of the School kingdom. The case was hopelessly complicated. Both families had been squabbling over the same tiny piece of land for generations. It was high in the hills above their village, and was useless for farming, yet it had a spring which not only gave the best water in the area, but on certain nights of a full moon had magical properties of healing. This magic spring had made first one and then the other of the families before her rich. One family or the other had brought the case to Student Court for a ruling, but no ruling had satisfied either the plaintive or the markers. Just last week, in fact, the Princess Anaeth had ruled that both the families should be exiled and the plot of land be turned over to the Duchy for exploitation. The markers had overruled the judgment, but Alexandra could understand both the hope and despair in the petitioners’ faces. The whole process was an exercise to teach the students effective governance, yet the student courts were notoriously ineffective. Judgments were overturned as often as they were upheld, and too often, even when the student’s judgments were upheld, they were overly simple or hideously complex. As the people before her explained yet again why the land should be the exclusive property of their family, she went over in her mind what other students had ruled on the case. Some had tried splitting the income from the spring, some had awarded it to one family or another, some had tried like Princess Anaeth to take possession of the spring for the government; others had even tried to have the spring blocked up. Alexandra was disgusted with the whole thing. The arguments died out as the petitioners saw the look on her face. Hope was replaced by despair and fear.

“You people disgust me. For how many years have you been coming before this court asking us to decide whose greed should prevail!? For decades this spring and its magic has split your town. Your feud has poisoned the whole province. Why should you continue to profit from some chance of fate?” She

could hear the pens of the markers scratching and the restlessness of the crowd. Students were supposed to make rulings, not commentary. She was going to lose marks, and that was the problem: every student had ruled on the basis of marks rather than the needs of the committee. "Hear my ruling." She waited until the rustling of the crowd stopped. "Hear my ruling. It is my opinion that both your families have profited long enough from the healing magic of the spring. From this day it is not lawful in this kingdom to charge for magic which is the result of chance ownership of land or water, or any magic which does not arise from a person's own strength or knowledge. The costs of bringing this case are to be split equally between both parties. In addition, both families will bear the cost equally of making the spring available to those who need its healing. You will not charge for access or accommodation during the period in which the spring is a healing spring. This is my judgment." Alexandra stood up signaling the session was ended, yet both families pushed forward to try to argue further. The markers were scratching away, and the crowd buzzed. No student had ever ruled so generally from a specific case; especially not on such an important issue. The school soldiers cleared the people from the square and Alexandra sat down again and waited for the comments from the markers. They didn't take long.

"An unusual ruling, Princess. What do you think the implications of your ruling will be?"

"Well, Princess, this judgment would cost a lot of people a lot of money, including the school government from loss of taxes. How do you propose that we make up the lost revenue?" The questions and challenges went on for a long time. Longer than any other time after Alexandra had sat in judgment. She answered the questions carefully, giving her ruling more thought now than she had when she was filled with anger at the waste of time and money feeding both families' greed. As time passed she became certain that her solution was indeed just. She defended it with passion and conviction. The sun had gone down and the discussion had moved into the town hall. Alexandra had defended her ruling and gone into the various arenas of taxes, hospitality, the reason for the existence of magic and

rights of ownership. In the end the markers gave the princess her ruling, not just in the specific case, but the general ruling. It was unprecedented in the history of the school, that a student ruling of such magnitude would be upheld. The discussion went right up to the Board of Governors. It confirmed Alexandra as the best student in the history of the school, and it confirmed her status as the outcast of her class.

After every turn at being judge the children would sneak into the common room after lights out and reenact the day's events to gales of muffled laughter. The evening after Alexandra's turn the children met as usual, but because she was still defending her ruling to the markers she wasn't part of the group. Princess Anaeth took the part of Princess Alexandra and both parties; she portrayed all of them with brutal sarcasm. She had just got to Alexandra's condemnation of the greed of the petitioners and was throwing herself into the part with great abandon.

"You pitiful peasants, you are sooo disgusting. Don't you ever take a bath? But that's right this is a court of law...well sort of anyway. You people shouldn't be so greedy; after all just because you own the spring doesn't mean you have any right to the water. You should drink out of the town well just like everyone else. You should poison the spring so no one else can use it. While we're at it, why don't we just poison all the magic springs? After all we can't have any of you poor slobs making any money, you might start taking baths..." Anaeth trailed off as she realized that her audience had been distracted. Alexandra stood in the doorway looking exhausted. "Hail to our exalted judge. The markers must have really run you over the coals. After that ruling you will be lucky not to be sent back to Page. Didn't you learn anything in all those boring classes? You don't mess with the tax base. Royalty needs greedy people so they will make money and give it to us. You are a little idiot."

"They gave me my ruling, even the general part of it, pending approval of the School Board of Governors. It took so long because I had to defend the changes in tax structure needed to make up the income lost because of incidental magic being freely available." Alexandra turned as if to leave, ignoring the

gasps and even subdued cheering of the other children, but Anaeth stood with her hands clenched and shaking with her rage.

“You’re lying. They would never let a little snit like you set that kind of precedent. You must be lying.” The beautiful girl was blotchy with rage.

“Why would I lie?” Alexandra said quietly. “You will find out the truth in the morning anyway.”

“You fraud, you aren’t even a real princess. You have no enchantment to bring a prince to marry you. You will be an old maid, and your kingdom will die.”

“Someone else made you a princess, Anaeth. You could be completely brainless. A potato could be a princess in your kingdom if it could fall asleep, and had lips to kiss. Someone else will rule your kingdom; someone else will choose your husband. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you are like. You are irrelevant.” The Unenchanted Princess turned again and left the room with, though she didn’t know it, a grace that left Anaeth speechless with fury.

The following morning Anaeth saw the posting of Alexandra’s ruling, and worse, that Alexandra had been made a “Duchess” and was now Anaeth’s superior. The tantrum she threw was legendary, but its only effect was to send her to bed with a raging headache. For the foreseeable future, Anaeth would have to obey the Unenchanted Princess.

As soon as she regained control of herself, Anaeth wrote her mother.

The next week the school had a visit from the Queen of Sopo. The princess was closeted with the school council for the better part of the afternoon. No one ever knew what had been spoken of in that meeting. One student swore that she had happened to be at the door as the visitor left.

“I have considerable influence in these areas,” said the Queen in her inimitable haughty tone. “I could do you great good...or harm.”

“We have no particular need for your influence.” The Chair of the Board of Governors was politely dismissive. “We have our own reputation as a school. This student will do nothing but enhance that reputation.” That piece of conversation she heard

was soon common knowledge amongst the students. It fueled Anaeth's anger at Alexandra, and it won Alexandra no friends.

They were in class while Mr. Smith talked about law and how they needed to be consistent in the way they interpreted and enforced the law.

"The law is the thing that holds your kingdoms together over time," he said. "Magic is all very well and good, but it is not consistent. Much of the time it causes more problems than it solves."

Princess Anaeth yawned.

"Am I boring you, Anaeth?"

"Why should I learn about law and all this boring stuff? It isn't like I am going to actually run the kingdom. Whoever I marry will rule." She batted her eyes at the teacher. "As Alexandra pointed out to me, my only job is to look beautiful. I'm good at that, aren't I?"

Mr. Smith sighed and went on with the class. Anaeth wouldn't graduate anyway. She would return home before her sixteenth birthday to fall into her enchanted sleep.

"Mr. Smith," Alexandra said. "Isn't it necessary to have good laws before we can enforce it fairly?"

"Well, yes and no," answered her teacher. "Good law certainly makes it easier to rule well, but even a poor law is better than none if it covers everyone equally. Let's look at an example..."

"You think you are so smart," whispered Neje as she brushed past Alexandra on the way out of class. "Because of you we have extra work to do."

"I could help you with it," Alexandra said.

"And have them think I'm like you? No thanks."

"You could do what Anaeth does. Nothing," Alexandra said. The other princess was already gone.

"I wouldn't mind some help," Herbert said behind her.

"Aren't you afraid they will make fun of you?"

"They already do."

Alexandra sighed, "It will be worse if you hang out with me. Sorry, Herbert."

She went to the library and sat down by the pile of books on

her desk. Somehow the books she needed were always waiting for her. She noticed similar piles on the desks of the other students, but none of theirs were as tall as hers. Soon she was lost in the world of books; here at least no one hated her.

After supper, Alexandra went back to her books. Herbert came and interrupted her.

“Why do you think Smith talks about law all the time?” he said. “It’s magic that is really important, isn’t it?”

“The magic is only for royalty and the rich. The average person will never see any magic their entire lives.”

“Does it scare you?” Herbert leaned over and whispered to her. “It scares me. I don’t want to be a frog. What happens if I get lost, or the princess doesn’t want to kiss me?”

“It doesn’t scare me. It makes me angry. Magic doesn’t seem to be very fair. There must be a better way.”

Herbert shook his head and wandered off. Alexandra pulled the letters from her mother out of the bottom book. They were meant to encourage her, telling her how the royal advisors were still researching her problem and would definitely have a solution to her lack of enchantment before it was necessary for her to meet her prince.

Later that night Alexandra heard the others as they slipped out to their nightly gathering. She stood outside the door with her stomach aching as she listened to Anaeth mock everything she believed in. Alexandra put her hand on the latch, but let it drop. There was no use.

She went back to her room and took out her calendar and counted the days until Anaeth went to sleep, and Alexandra was free of the snooty princess. Though now the calendar also represented freedom from her mother, and the demands of enchantment, somehow, somehow...



## Chapter 3

Alexandra

Duchess Alexandra was having trouble with her councilors. Two years of trying desperately to rule over an ever growing portion of the School Kingdom, as well as an increasingly uncontrollable council had made her use everything that she had ever read. For the last few months she left the books behind and was making it up as she went along.

Prince Herbert was red faced and shaking. He stood over Princess Anaeth still trying to come up with a suitable retort for her last outrageous insult. The princess sat smugly surveying the havoc she had wreaked on yet another meeting. Only Herbert had the nerve to cross the princess and he continually paid dearly for his courage. The others just sat and endured, occasionally applauding an especially telling insult. They blamed Alexandra for their situation, and Alexandra knew they replayed the council meetings after curfew. She didn't stand a chance.

"The peasants are increasingly angry," Prince Michael said. "We need to do something or there will be open rebellion." He kept a somber face until he caught Princess Avi's eye. They were a destined match, but they were also madly in love. No matter the subject, Alexandra knew that Avi would distract him.

"We all know who gave the peasants the idea that they have rights," Anaeth said.

"Peasant rights were enshrined in law more than a hundred years ago," said Alexandra.

"Oh, sure, in law," said Anaeth, "but no one ever paid attention until you started giving them ideas."

"It wouldn't be so, so bad if we ruled with some consistency," Herbert said, and Alexandra had to smile. He was the only one who actively supported Alexandra.

"And your rulings are consistent?" asked Anaeth. "I don't think you've made a judgment yet that anyone could understand."

"Well, that is consistency," Neje said, "of a sort."

Alexandra stifled a sigh. Herbert always paid for his loyalty.

“The fact is that the peasant unrest is a direct result of the failure of our governing.” Alexandra looked at each of her council in the eyes, except for Avi and Michael who were making eyes at each other. “It is not because the peasants have got out of place. It is because you have forgotten that you are here to learn to rule justly. Those of you who haven’t actively subverted my rule have sat back and allowed it.”

She got up and walked to the window and stood with her back to the table. She knew what each of them was doing. Anaeth was smirking while Neje watched her for cues. Avi and Michael were staring into each other’s eyes. Herbert would be looking at her with a worried face. The others would be watching her or Anaeth with varying degrees of confusion or anger.

The School Kingdom was in the worst shape ever, and it was Alexandra’s fault. The Kingdom of Sopo continued to harass the school, even threatening military action if the “upstart impostor” wasn’t removed. The Governors were after her to control her council, the people burned her in effigy. Her council sabotaged her at every turn. Alexandra wasn’t going to let it continue. Enough was enough. She took a deep breath of the musty air. The school courtyard was green with new grass and the fruit trees were in bloom. She was going to miss this place. She knew only one way to cut through this mess and perhaps give the school a chance to recover. Taking another deep breath, the Unenchanted Princess turned and faced her council.

“I have decided what I will do.” The quiet certainty in her voice cut through the silence. Her council looked at her with the familiar expressions of fear, hope and contempt. Alexandra wiped her hands on her skirt, and Anaeth pounced on her hesitation.

“So, are you finally going to hang all those disgusting peasants? If you were a real princess this wouldn’t have happened.” Anaeth looked around at her supporters, and seeing nods of agreement she smiled at Alexandra.

“I am going to do what I should have done a long time ago. I am going to hang every one of you for treason to the state. The execution will be held in public so that the dirt grubbing

commoners know that I am serious about how I deal with traitors.” Alexandra almost spoiled her announcement by laughing at her councilors’ reaction.

Princess Neje burst into tears, and while Avi took a death grip on Michael’s hand, Ariel ran for the door, but Princess Anaeth of Sopo just sat with her mouth open, finally left completely speechless. Only Herbert had anything to say. He cheered. He kept cheering as the students dressed as guards stepped into the room and escorted the princesses away to be locked in their dorms for lack of a better place. Only at the last second did Alexandra remember to tell them not to arrest Herbert.

She sent Herbert to make sure that the others were secure, then alone again Alexandra gave into her feelings and laughed until the tears streamed down her face. She threw open the window and shouted her laughter to the whole world.

The next morning the courtyard was filled with peasants who had been informed by Alexandra’s workers from the younger classes that something unusual was in the works. Set up in the courtyard were four gallows, and off to one side were four effigies which Alexandra’s agents had purchased. The effigies were dressed in royal clothes. Herbert and the guards brought out the prisoners. Alexandra stood on a platform beside the gallows and wondered why the teachers and Governors hadn’t come to stop her. Nothing like this had ever happened in the history of the school. She wasn’t sure she could see all the consequences of her actions, but she was sure that nothing would ever be the same again.

Nobody came out of the teacher’s house, not when Alexandra read the charges to the assembled crowd, not when she stated that treason to the state was a crime against every citizen, high or low, and that anything which worked against the common good was treason. Even when the effigies were hanged, and the crowd cheered, no one came.

Princess Anaeth was white faced and silent, but Alexandra could feel her glare burning on the back of her neck. She had made more than just a school child enemy with this day’s work. All the Kingdom of Sopo would be outraged at their precious sleeping beauty being hanged, even if only in effigy.

Yet after her laughter the night before had died down, Alexandra had tried to think of a way out. She had kept thinking until she wept with despair. When she had stopped crying she had thought again. This farce in the square was the only way she saw to deal with both her problems and that of the School Kingdom. She turned and walked to her room. No one tried to speak to her when they saw the look on her face, not even Herbert.

Later in the evening, after the square had been cleared, the principal came to bring Alexandra over to the Governor's Mansion. They walked across the square to the mansion which filled the entire north side. The only time students went into that forbidding grey stone building was on graduation day, or on the extremely rare occasions when a student was expelled. Since Alexandra's graduation was still two years away, the only reasonable explanation was that the governors had finally come to their senses and decided to expel Alexandra for her failure to meet the true royal measure. In spite of her brave words to Anaeth, Alexandra knew she was a fraud. Without an enchantment to justify her reign she was just another girl with pretensions to rule. No matter how well she ruled, everyone in her kingdom would know she was a fake. She had no magic, and every ruler who ruled in the known world either had been enchanted or had broken an enchantment, the lines were clear.

For generations back, Alexandra's ancestors had been enchanted. The enchanted princes were rare and had their princesses chosen to unenchant them. In the not so subtle distinctions of royalty it was considered much better to be enchanted and have a rescuer come to you. If necessary, Alexandra's parents could have arranged a disenchantment, if it weren't for stubbornness and pride. The years had passed and nothing had been arranged, her mother grew more desperate; Alexandra's troubles at the school had only made things worse. Today was the capping moment of her dubious career.

The pair walked in the double doors of the mansion. The hall was dim and cool and Alexandra could smell the wax on the floor. Their footsteps echoed through the hall as they walked up the wide curving steps. She could barely hear the echo over the pounding of her heart. While she had deliberately

planned to force the governors to expel her, that was a far cry from this lonely walk to meet her fate.

On the top floor of the mansion a square of gold light beckoned to her. The principal waved her into the room ahead of him. As her eyes adjusted Alexandra saw that the entire Board of Governors was waiting for her. They were relaxing in chairs before a roaring fire. Candles burned in every corner, sending the scent of warm wax through the room. One of the men indicated a chair for the young woman. As she sat, Alexandra wiped her hands on the arms, and realized that she was in the center of a circle of the twelve governors. One leaned forward and put his glass on the floor beside his chair.

“What do you think the consequences of your actions today will be?”

“I expect that the peasants will return to their work, and as long as the judges don’t deliberately provoke them again will be reasonably content. The students will likely work harder on being good rulers knowing they may be held accountable for how they pass judgment. The Kingdom of Sopo, specifically Anaeth’s parents, will be furious at Anaeth’s public humiliation. It is unlikely they will take any action against my parents’ kingdom considering Sopo’s vulnerability once they are sleeping. For the same reasons they will avoid any overt action against people who have any potential for revenge. Logically then, they will attempt some covert action against either the school or me. So I judged that the best course of action would be to remove myself from the school, thus eliminating the school as a source of anger. Once in my parents’ kingdom action of any kind against me becomes very difficult.”

Alexandra sighed and shifted in her chair.

“Very interesting,” said an elderly woman, “but what about the other kingdoms?”

“The personal differences are between me and Anaeth; once the other parents are apologized to and informed that I have been expelled they will accept that as sufficient and not press the matter.”

“And of the consequences you will face, child?” one of the younger woman asked. “What will happen when you go home?”

"It doesn't matter. My parents have all but given up on me. Regardless of what I do, I'm a hopeless case. With no enchantment, can I truly rule?" She forced back tears, and turned to stare at the fire.

"You have great courage, my dear, to deliberately try to protect everyone at your own expense." The old woman sighed. "Expulsion from this school carries a great burden of shame with it. No one is sent away except for the most terrible of transgressions. Your little display today may have been a little extreme, but we don't believe that it changes the fact that you are the best student this school has ever seen."

"It would not be good for the school's reputation if we expelled our best student," added the principal. "It does appear, however, that you have learned everything that we are able to teach. So, what you see here is a somewhat irregular graduation ceremony." He stood up and bowed to her, then, one after another, each member of the Board stood and bowed as well, except for the oldest woman who simply hugged her. Fear couldn't make Alexandra cry, and neither could anger, but joy brought tears to her eyes that she couldn't blink away. The fire and the candles wavered through her tears, and she couldn't see well enough to see the tears in other eyes.

All the way back to her room she walked in a daze. Not only had she not been expelled, she had been honored as no other student in the long history of the school. But more than that the white haired old woman's words rang in her ears.

"Though it grieves us that we could not be present at your christening, you have won for yourself greater gifts than any we could have given you. You hold more than you know in your hands. Have courage, my dear."

When Alexandra arrived in her room she found that all her stuff had been packed already. Mr. Smith was waiting for her. She began to ask what was going to happen next, but he shook his head and motioned for silence. He picked up one bag and gave Alexandra another. It seemed impossible that everything had fit in two bags, yet she could see nothing left in the room which was hers to take.

Still in silence they went back down to the doors of the stu-

dent building. Herbert waited in the shadows of the hall.

"I saw the servants packing your room. I've been waiting here to say goodbye." He glared at Mr. Smith. "You were going to just make her disappear, weren't you? Tomorrow we would have heard how she had been sent home for disgracing the school. It isn't right. Alexandra is the closest to being royalty of anyone here..."

"Herbert," Alexandra put her hand on his arm. "They didn't expel me, they graduated me! They, they said..." she found herself choking with the enormity of the honor she had been given.

"We said that the Princess Alexandra was without a doubt the best student this school has ever had the honor of instructing." Smith's voice was quiet, and he was smiling at Alexandra. Herbert gasped, and barely refrained from cheering loud enough to wake the entire school. He hugged Alexandra fiercely instead. The two students embraced for a few seconds then Herbert stepped back. He opened his mouth but nothing came out, and he turned so red that he seemed to glow in the dim hall.

"Herbert, of everyone here, you have been my truest friend," Alexandra grinned suddenly and catching his face in both hands gave Herbert a kiss on his lips. Yet when she stepped back, Herbert's face wasn't red. Instead he looked in the dim light like a true prince. He stood straight, and actually looked her in the eyes.

"My princess, I will always be your true friend," he caught one of her hands and kissed it. "Until we meet next."

Mr. Smith took Alexandra's arm and guided her out the door. As the door swung closed he glimpsed the future Prince of Poond turning cartwheels in the dim hall and he chuckled. The Princess Alexandra once again seemed to be in a daze as he helped her into the carriage which awaited her. Once the carriage started moving, Alexandra turned and looked out the back window at the school fading into the night. Was that a face looking out of the hall window? Soon all she could see was the dark night. She sighed and made herself comfortable for the long ride home. The princess looked at her hand and suddenly felt absolutely content. With a smile on her face she fell asleep.





## Chapter 4

Alexandra

"I will not put up with this anymore," Alexandra stormed into her parents' room. "Those stupid magicians have pinched me and prodded me, choked me with their smokes and drowned me with their potions. I have had enough!"

"Calm yourself, my dear." Alexandra's mother looked up at her daughter, "I know that this is difficult, but it is the only way. After that business at the school, none of the enchanted princes will even look at you. We must find you an enchantment. Then some younger prince who hasn't heard about you can save you, all right and proper."

"The school, the school?" Alexandra cried. "I am the best ever to come out of that school. They said it themselves. Yet you keep treating me like I failed."

"Alexandra, you went to the school to learn how to act like a princess. Not to make enemies of our neighbors!" the King banged the table. "As far as I am concerned, you did fail. Now, we need to find some way to get you married. I don't know what we're going to do."

"Married? I'm fifteen, let's not panic. There might just be someone out there rational enough to want to marry me, not some enchantment."

"My dear, enchantment has always been part of royalty..."

"Then what does that make me? Think about it: just what does that make me? Maybe you should worry about replacing me instead of enchanting me, because I will not be enchanted." The princess turned and walked out of the room. Her parents looked at each other.

"There must be some appropriate way to find the princess a husband. I really don't think that enchantment will work at this late date. Do talk to the advisers, dear, or Alexandra may get right out of hand." The King nodded and turned back to his tea. He already had a couple of thoughts in that direction.

Alexandra, in the meantime, went outside to walk in the garden. She found it calming to be in the garden surrounded by

growing things. It reminded her of her early days at the school, learning campaigning skills. Once she was in control of herself she went to the stables. There she could relax and let the whole business of enchantments and marriage go. Only her parents were bothered about those things.

At the stables she listened to George's tales. The head groom had been with the kingdom cavalry, and was always willing to tell stories of his years patrolling for bandits, giants or monsters. In exchange for her attentive ear, the princess was given lessons on how to ride 'like someone in the cavalry.' When she wasn't in the saddle or listening to George she was watching what went on in the stable, learning what she could from the stable hands and grooms about horses and their keeping. The word had spread through the stables about how intelligent and pleasant the young princess was. In return Alexandra was allowed to hear much of the gossip of which royalty was normally kept carefully ignorant.

This afternoon, however, she simply leaned against the fence and watched the beautiful animals as they were put through their paces. Safe in the afternoon sun she thought about the morning.

The magicians had done worse than try every spell they could think of to enchant her: they had made her feel dirty. Just the thought of them made her stomach clench. All morning she had gritted her teeth and put up with the stink and the nonsense. She had glared her anger through the thickening vapors in the windowless room. All the time one of the royal councilors watched. When the oldest magician had ordered her to strip so she could be naked, just as on her christening day, she had lost her temper. As he stared at her waiting for this last and greatest indignity, Alexandra had looked to the royal councilor to stop this insanity. Instead she caught the slightest of smiles on his face. She turned back to the magician and slapped him so hard that the sound stopped all noise in the room. The old man stumbled back, the mark of her hand already red on his face. She turned to the councilor and gave him the glare she had used to quiet her unruly council at the school. He reddened even faster than the magician and started pulling at his collar.

He opened his mouth to speak but choked on the noxious air of the room. While he was gasping and coughing Alexandra walked out without a word.

The grooms and stable hands stayed at a careful distance from the young princess, though her face tore at their hearts. She stared into the courtyard, even after the horses had left it, with tears running unnoticed down her cheeks. Finally George came over and stood beside her. Silently the two leaned on the fence in the heat of the sun. The odors of the stable surrounded them. To George they were the smell of home.

“Shall I sharpen up my old cavalry sword and challenge whoever has caused you this hurt?” At first he didn’t think she heard, and, feeling the rebuff, he stood up to go, the creak of fence seeming to reach her as his words couldn’t.

“George, am I royal?”

“You are the princess.”

“But you need to be enchanted to be royal, and I will not be enchanted.”

George heard the steel in her words and wondered again at what pain had forged it. Taking his silence as answer, Alexandra turned to him.

“If it comes down to a choice between being royal or being myself, I believe I will remain myself, whatever the cost. Leave your sword in its scabbard, I would not wish to see you hanged for my sake.” She nodded at him and walked back toward the palace. George watched her leave and thought to himself that she was more royal than any dozen of them, enchantment or not, and he cursed himself for not having the nerve to say it to her.

The stable hands saw that now George was staring into the courtyard at nothing. It seemed to be catching, whatever it was, and they gave the old man a wide space for his thoughts.

While Alexandra was gathering her thoughts and escaping the stench of the morning, the King was closeted with his counselors. He paid little attention to the young man who still was odorous with the magicians’ spells, and who was occupied with wishing he had never been born. The clerks were sneezing with the dust from old books of law and tradition, as they searched

for some respectable way of finding a match for the princess. They had given up on spells, curses and enchantments. They had considered the damsel in distress route, but the smelly young councilor had roused from his self pity long enough to point out that Alexandra was unlikely to simply wait about to be rescued and having her extricate herself from dragon or ogre would just leave them with a worse embarrassment. It was agreed that no ordinary monster could long hold the princess prisoner. The really good monsters were too high a risk since they had been known to eat more than a few knights, and even the occasional princess. All morning they talked and squabbled; some ideas were too risky, either to the princess or the royal dignity, while others had little chance of success.

At last the oldest councilor opened a book and mumbled to himself as he read through the cloud of dust rising off the paper. His eyes brightened as he realized that he had the solution to their problem. As he opened his mouth to speak, he sneezed. All the others in the room looked at him as he sneezed again and again. His eyes watering and itching, the old man tried to explain his plan. Finally he just pushed the book over to the King and placed his finger on the title of the chapter.

“A description of the great tournament to choose an heir to King Albert the XI,” the King read.

“So, what has this to do with marriage?”

“If...ah-choo...you can...ash-hoo...choose an heir...ashooo...by tournament...honk...why not...ah...ah...ah...”

“A husband for the princess!”

“....SHOOO! Egsakly, I mean certainly, your Majesty.”

“You have found the answer, I am sure. I will leave you to plan the tournament and take care of all the details.” The King got up to leave, and stretched briefly. “One more thing, if any of you mention this to the Princess Alexandra I will personally see you scrubbing floors, in the dungeon. Good day.”

Preparations for the great tournament moved forward rapidly. The King and Queen decided that they would inform Alexandra of the true nature of the tournament on the eve of the final round. There was no need to create a fuss until everything had been taken care of. They found ways to keep Alexandra

distracted until then.

The chancellor was drilling Alexandra on the ritual for the making of an heir. She found it harder to deal with the supercilious little woman than to learn her lines. The princess put up with the morning lessons for long after she had learned all her lines so well she was reciting them in her sleep. The chancellor was a fountain of unofficial history of the kingdom. She knew every gaff and foolishness of every person who had ever sat on the throne. Alexandra heard stories of a King who had paraded through the city in his underwear, and another who turned everything he touched into gold, including his food. Morning after morning she would leave the chancellor working at her papers while she struggled not to laugh out loud until she was well out of ear shot.

Alexandra wasn't looking forward to the tournament. While she might see some of the people from the school, she wasn't sure that she wanted to, or that they would want to see her. The princess heaved a sigh, and headed out to the stables. Once the King had learned of her spending time at the stables he instructed George to teach Alexandra the finer points of running an army. Much of it consisted of supply lines and sanitation. George quickly learned what they had taught her at school, and started on the things they had never mentioned. What to do when everything went wrong. He told her stories of foul ups and disasters, then made her tell him why it went wrong and what she would have done differently. He taught her how to play chess to make her think ahead, then forced her to play quickly so she had to think fast.

Every time Alexandra was sure she had him cornered he would find some way out that she hadn't seen. The desire to beat the old cavalry man became a driving force in her life, and she didn't notice the days passing. Until she woke up one morning and her maid had put out a new dress for the princess. The contestants for the tournament were arriving today.

Squeezed into the pale blue gown, and with hair piled in an arrangement which the maid had taken hours to make look casual, Alexandra made a mental note to tell the royal seamstress to take new measurements. She was not the same shape as

she was a few months ago.

She sat in the great hall nodding and smiling at an unending line of hopeful young and noble sons. It was strange how they all looked at her as if she was some kind of prize. As the day passed, she noticed that all these eager young men were single and un-fiancé. During one break in the afternoon, Alexandra asked the chancellor about this. She was surprised at the guilty look on the chancellor's face. The chancellor swallowed, then explained that they had wanted to give unproven young men the chance to make a name for themselves. Alexandra decided that the guilty look must have been her imagination. It became harder and harder to force herself to be pleasant. Her back ached and her neck muscles were tied in knots. The sun was sinking to the horizon when the last visitor arrived.

He entered the hall with the light of the setting sun behind him. The princess peered at him as he walked toward her. The few others in the hall stared at the new arrival. A buzz of conversation filled the hall. Then Alexandra recognized him.

"Herbert!" She jumped to her feet, and stumbled as her legs complained at the sudden movement. Alexandra recovered quickly and met Herbert at the foot of the dais. She took his hands and opened her mouth to speak, but found herself bereft of words. She took refuge in the formula of welcome that she had been reciting all day.

"Welcome, good prince. I wish you well in these games. Strive with honor to win the prize." Somehow they came out with warmer feeling than any earlier recitation. Herbert swallowed and tried to say something through a suddenly dry throat. Who knows how long they would have stood holding hands if the chancellor hadn't come and whisked Herbert away whispering furiously in his ear. Alexandra sighed and headed up to her room to change for dinner, with luck into a dress that fit better.

Meanwhile, Herbert had been shown into the presence of the King and Queen.

"Just what do you think you are doing here, young man?" the Queen snapped. "You are to be kissed by the Princess Alithias. So you are effectively affianced. You cannot compete."

"It would cause horrific problems, not to mention the insult

to Princess Alithias,” added the King.

“With all due respect, your Majesties,” Herbert bowed slightly, “you are a little out of date. Alithias’s father’s kingdom borders on the Kingdom of Sopo. It appears that they have given in to pressure and found an excuse to question the wisdom of the agreement. Something about there being a too close relationship on my mother’s side of the family.”

“We looked at that at King’s Council and decided that it wasn’t a problem.”

“Well, it is a problem now, sir. Until it is resolved I view myself as being free of any commitment to wed.” The King and Queen looked at each other. From what they knew of Herbert and the other princes of Poond, this quiet, confident young man was quite unexpected.

“Besides,” he continued, “if you throw me out of the competition I will make sure that Princess Alexandra knows the exact nature of the prize that you intend to award at the end of the tournament.”

“I think we can see our way to allowing you to take part. Do not expect any favoritism, however.” The King shrugged and dismissed the prince with a wave of his hand. As Herbert reached the door the Queen commented, “I remember you as a young boy. You wouldn’t have said ‘Boo’ to a mouse. The school isn’t that bad if it made you into this confident and diplomatic prince. I almost wish you could win this tournament.”

Herbert turned in the door, “Not the school, your Majesty. I learned this from your daughter.” Then he closed the door and fled. It was only after he had reached the courtyard once more that Herbert realized that he had committed himself, along with all the other contestants, to not telling Alexandra the nature of this tournament. Keeping that secret from her could only mean trouble for him, yet to tell her would mean even more trouble from her parents. He would have to find some way of warning her that wouldn’t break his word. Shaking his head he headed toward the Great Hall to find a servant to show him his room. Dinner was rapidly approaching, and he needed to change.

Dinner was torture even worse than the day spent in the Great Hall greeting the visitors. At dinner Alexandra was

expected to talk to the competitors whether they were earnest, nervous or macho. Some of them vacillated from one pose to another. None of them would make any intelligent conversation with Alexandra. Apparently they all thought that if she had ever thought about anything other than needlepoint and clothes, it was only about who she was going to marry. The only person she really wanted to talk to was seated on the other side of the room. Herbert looked just as lost and uncomfortable as she felt. Just to finish her evening off, her new dress didn't fit any better than the first one. She kept pulling up her neckline, and trying not to breathe too deeply. On one side of her sat a Prince Jordon who was smooth and refined. He had a considered opinion on everything under the sun, likely Alexandra thought, borrowed from his father. He wouldn't let her get a word in edgewise.

She did manage to ask Jordon about why she had never seen him at school.

"Oh, my father, King Charmant, doesn't hold with the school. They are always teaching something new. He feels that we can learn what we need at home. My brothers and I have a tutor who teaches about the breaking of different enchantments and the proper fairing on quests. Besides, at home our father can make sure that we don't get too far away from what we need to know."

Alexandra was sure that he was making a veiled comment about her eventful time at the school so she turned to the prince on her other side.

Prince Albert, it seemed, was apologetic about breathing. He didn't think at all, it seemed, and was shocked that Alexandra did. Farther away she could hear arguments about who had the best chance of winning the tournament. The food sat in her stomach like lead.

The final part of the ordeal was the ball. Even with all the visiting princesses and maids, they were vastly outnumbered by the princes, all of whom wanted to dance with Alexandra. The only high point of the evening was that she got to dance with Herbert and catch up on her friend and his life. She found that he was just slightly taller than her now. He had grown in more subtle ways as well. Much of this, Herbert told her, was due to



the fallout from Alexandra's 'graduation.' He had defended his friendship with the princess to everyone from his parents to his prospective bride. He had explained again and again the reasoning behind her actions; in the process he arrived at a better understanding of how she thought, and incidentally how he thought. He no longer became red faced with anger he couldn't express, and for some reason the people he was talking to resented it.

Alexandra reveled in the chance to finally converse with someone who took her seriously. Somehow she ended up dancing more with Herbert than any of the other young men. At least until she noticed the jealous looks of the others, then she forced herself to move around more. She gritted her teeth and gave thanks that she wouldn't have to marry any of these sorry specimens. She found herself glaring at the Princess Alithias. Alexandra told herself it was because Alithias didn't properly appreciate this new and confident Herbert. At least she wasn't completely empty headed like so many princesses. Herbert was lucky. She hoped she would be as lucky when her turn came.

When she was finally allowed to go to bed, Alexandra simply collapsed. Drowsily she wished she would dream of her future husband, just so she would know. She dreamed instead of a tremendous swamp filled with foul smells and strange creatures.

## Chapter 5

Alexandra

With the rising of the sun, pandemonium reigned in the palace grounds. Horses were being exercised and the contestants were either stretching, meditating or fencing at shadows according to their mood. Rings for sword play and the lists for the tilting were being given their final inspection by the judges.

Alexandra had woke early to discover that once again she was expected to sit on display for the entire day.

For a brief moment she considered throwing a tantrum, but after a deep breath she settled for refusing to put on yet another ill-fitting dress. She sat at her vanity while one of her maids ran to find the seamstress. She brushed her hair and stared into the mirror. She would never, she thought, be a raving beauty like Anaeth. As the seamstress entered Alexandra turned to face her.

“Look at these dresses.” She waved her hand at the bed. “They neither fit nor suit my taste.”

“You woke me out of my sleep to tell me this? I am not a young woman, Princess. You could have waited out of consideration for me. These dresses are the latest fashion, and I made them to your measurements myself.”

“I am aware that they are your own work, the quality speaks for itself. But you have not taken new measurements in some time, and I am not a little girl anymore.” She handed the seamstress a sketch.

“You will sew me a dress in this fashion for this evening’s ball. And you will sew it to the measure you take now.” A maid handed her a measuring string. The older woman became immediately professional and took a great many measurements, muttering under her breath the entire time. When she had finished she briskly rolled up the string and handed it back to the maid.

“I will send you some essentials that you need now. The dress will be ready for fitting by the noon meal.”

As she turned to leave, Alexandra stopped her with a look.

“In the future, you will not make any new gowns for me without consulting me first. You may go.” With a nod the princess returned to brushing her hair.

The seamstress stood outside the door a moment to catch her breath. She looked at the sketch in her hand and shook her head. It seemed that this young woman had her own ideas about fashion, and interesting ones too. Well she had better get to work, and the first thing to do was to wake up all her assistants. Chuckling to herself, she walked back to her room.

In the meantime, Alexandra put on an older gown which was less tailored than the new ones and still fit. Dressed comfortably for now, she headed down to the kitchen for a bite to eat before heading out to watch the preparations for the tournament. The opening ceremonies were scheduled for mid-morning, and the first matches would start before lunch. She leaned against a fence watching a princeling trying to control a coal-black charger with shouts and curses. A chuckle beside her announced George’s arrival.

“No horseman there, heh?”

“If he strikes that horse I’ll go in there and throw him out myself.”

“Don’t worry, here’s his groom to put him right.” George chuckled again and shook his head. “Did I ever tell you about your Uncle Jack?”

The princess simply shook her head, still watching the struggle to control the high-strung horse.

“Well, he was your father’s older twin.” Alexandra whipped her head around to stare at George. “Easy, your Highness, watch the horse. These days your Uncle Jack isn’t well known about these parts, but he caused a proper scandal in his day. He and your father were your age when the old King was going to declare his heir. Jack wasn’t much on governing and running the kingdom. He much rather’d be out on the border, dealing with the giants. They were rather a dense lot. Still are for that matter.”

“Anyway, there he’d be, all alone using only his wits to trick the giants and keep them out of the kingdom, and some pompous messenger from the King would ride up and blow his

trumpet and make all kinds of a fool of himself, and demand that Jack return to the castle and his duties. Jack was furious, and so when they finally held the ceremony to declare the heir, Jack tricked your father into wearing his clothes and taking the oaths. They looked enough alike that no one noticed until it was too late. Your father didn't really mind, and I think he made a much better King than Jack would've been. Soon after the coronation Jack made himself scarce, thinking that another man who looked just like the King was too much asking for trouble. King John, your father, agreed, and while Jack's name isn't exactly forbidden, the naming of him isn't encouraged either."

George sighed and straightened.

"I'm not as young as I was." The princess stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Why have I never been told about Uncle Jack?"

"Well, the King isn't about to bring the subject up, your mother always follows your father's lead, and the chancellor who knows, and tells, every other scandal in the history of the kingdom, was sweet on Jack, and to this day can't talk about him without choking up." The sound of trumpets interrupted them, and the princess and the old groom hurried off in different directions to take their place for the opening of the games.

The Princess Alexandra sat on her uncomfortably padded chair and watched as the thirty or so assorted princes, knights, earls, dukes and barons paraded past her shaded stage. They were as colorful as peacocks, and most of them, she thought, just about as intelligent. Each had their own distinctive colors, not all of them chosen to be complimentary. The unfortunate Prince Albert was panoplied in lime green and lilac. No wonder he was so apologetic all the time. Prince Jordon, on the other hand, was attired in black and gold and looked very handsome. He obviously knew it too. Each young man saluted as they passed her, and each favored her with a look of stunning avariciousness; except for Herbert. In his eyes Alexandra saw pity. She puzzled over that through the opening matches.

The judges had created a hideously complicated system to weed out the contestants. Each would be tested in combat riding and on foot, alone and in groups. The opening matches

were little more than demonstrations of riding skill. Jordon rode like he was part of his horse, doing with ease and grace what made others sweat with concentration. Herbert rode gamely, but was little more than competent. Alexandra herself could ride better than most of those on the field.

After the cold luncheon was served on the field the princess went to be fitted for her new gown. She found that the seamstress had been very busy. One gown was all but complete, while she had some others, variations on the theme ready for approval before they were finished. Alexandra was very pleased with the results, and even more pleased with the deference the seamstress gave her.

"I hope you will allow me to do your wedding dress, your Highness. You have exquisite taste." It was the end of the fitting and the seamstress was putting away the pieces of each dress carefully.

"When it is time." Alexandra laughed, "You may be sure that I will ask you to supervise every stitch." Yet while she laughed she caught an odd expression on her seamstress's face. The old woman was afraid she had said something untoward. Yet it was not unusual for her to want to sew a princess's wedding dress. As she watched the women clear out of her room and her maids set out her dress for the afternoon, Alexandra puzzled at the events of the day. Her seamstress worrying about a chance comment about weddings, George telling her a story about an Uncle Jack whom she had never heard of, a battalion of noble young men making eyes at her, Herbert looking worried and full of pity. Her parents were up to something, and Alexandra knew that she wasn't going to like it. If it was pleasant they would have told her.

The afternoon was much like the morning. The matches were more jostling for position than serious competition. Yet already Alexandra could sort out the handful of young men who would be contenders for the prize. Prince Jordon was leading the field, doing everything with a casual grace which made it look easy. Herbert surprised her with his determination to stay with the leaders, though she was afraid that he would hurt himself. There were a few others who by dint of great effort were

almost keeping up with Prince Jordon. Some others, like Prince Albert, had already all but dropped out.

At the evening meal there was less boasting and more speculating about the competition. Alexandra had talked to the hall steward and arranged for Herbert to be sat beside her. Prince Jordon sat on the other side. All evening as she tried to start a conversation with Herbert, Jordon would jump in with one of his opinions and stop it dead.

The princess was shaking with rage by the end of the dinner. Prince Jordon was acting possessive, though she had given no indication of any interest in him. Yes, he was very handsome. He was tall, blond and blue-eyed. He moved with natural grace. Yet there was something about him that made Alexandra uncomfortable. Perhaps it was simply that he was one of the younger Charmant brothers, and assumed, as all that family did, that his place in creation was assured. Part of that assumption seemed to be that Alexandra would fall swooning at his feet.

Given the circumstances, it was natural for there to be competition between the princes, but the interaction between Jordon and Herbert went beyond that. Alexandra noticed that a number of the young men seemed to be avoiding her. Thinking they might just be shy she went over to talk to them but they melted away. Alexandra began to feel the return of her anger from dinner. She was being manipulated by her parents, she was sure of it. With Jordon and Herbert circling each other like two dogs with a bone, even Herbert's comforting presence was denied her. Every poor boy who gathered courage to ask her to dance was scared away by glares from Prince Jordon and Prince Herbert. Arguments between others had broken out and in one case they came to blows. Alexandra resolved the dispute by banishing both young men from the tournament. Their anger seemed out of proportion to their loss, one opened his mouth to speak, but something changed his mind. Turning to leave the two, Alexandra bumped into Prince Jordon, who was glaring over her shoulder in an extraordinary fashion.

"Leave me alone, Prince Jordon. I find your hovering over me offensive." The prince stepped back and transferred his

glare to her.

“My presence is something that you will get used to shortly enough.” He softened his look. “Many a princess would be glad of a chance to get used to my presence. May you in time.” He turned and stalked out of the hall. Alexandra looked to Herbert.

“What is going on? Something is up. Please, tell me.” Herbert stood looking at her. For the first time since he arrived, Alexandra saw that Herbert was almost on the point of tears.

“Please, don’t ask me,” Herbert said. “I can’t say anything.” His eyes pleaded with her. Somehow Alexandra couldn’t come up with the strength to ask him again. Her heart troubled, she nodded to the prince and moved back to the seemingly endless round of dances and empty conversation.

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She didn’t see the stranger until he stepped out of the shadow and grabbed her. She felt the cold knife on her throat and knew she was going to die. Only she didn’t. Somehow Prince Jordon was there and he grabbed the knife barehanded. Alexandra could see the blood on his hands yet he didn’t pause. He pulled the attacker off balance and away from the princess. Spinning, the prince threw the other man against the wall and efficiently knocked him to the floor. Alexandra recovered enough to call for the guards. They came quickly and dragged the attacker off. They wanted to take Prince Jordon away to fix his hand too, but he wouldn’t leave until he had seen for himself that the princess was all right. He bowed over her hand and left a bloody hand-print behind.

“I came to apologize for my behavior early this evening,” the prince said. “Now I am pleased that I had reason to be here to aid you.”

“I thank you for your timely help,” Alexandra said.

Alexandra was escorted back to her room, and the maids fussed about cleaning her up. She never noticed. She still didn’t like the handsome prince, but he had saved her life, and that brought up feelings too complicated for her to deal with right now. Still in a daze she let her maids put her to bed.

The next morning she had to describe the attack again and again to her father and then to the head of the castle guard. The entire castle was in an uproar. First, because of the attack, and second, because the attacker had disappeared from the dungeons leaving the door to his cell still locked and guarded. The obvious inference was that Sopo was involved, yet it didn't feel right to Alexandra. She thought that Sopo would be at once more subtle and more deadly.

The games continued and the princess was more comfortable in her new gowns, but something had gone out of the tournament. Word of the assassination attempt spread through the competitors. One of them was always nearby, as if the two burly guards that were with her constantly were insufficient to protect her life. The princess paid less attention to the competition, though she always managed to be there for Jordon's and Herbert's matches. The intensity of the antipathy between the two princes grew in spite of Alexandra's struggle to calm them.

It came to a head in a match between the two. They were fighting with blunted swords in a classic duel. Herbert was doggedly defending against Jordon's swordsmanship. He wasn't brilliant, yet somehow Prince Jordon couldn't get a strike on him, and Alexandra could tell that the son of King Charmant was becoming more and more frustrated. After yet another astonishing move, and yet another desperate defense, Prince Jordon shouted in frustration.

"You shall not have her. She deserves more than you can give her."

"Stop! Just stop." Alexandra stepped into the ring. "Prince Jordon, explain yourself. Now." For the first time Alexandra saw the Charmant Prince discomfited.

"I may not, your Highness. I am bound by oath."

"To my parents."

"Yes," the prince hung his head. Alexandra looked at Herbert.

"You too?" He just nodded. "Did you really think that I would simply stand by and let myself be given away as a prize in a contest? Dare I ask what second prize is?" The crowd gathered taking in every word. There were murmurs both of



sympathy and anger. Alexandra gave both the princes a withering glance; both the young men reddened and looked down. But neither spoke.

So Princess Alexandra left them dusty and sweaty from their struggle and went looking for her parents. As she walked through the crowds she realized that talking to her parents would be a waste of breath. They were determined that she would get married. Obviously they didn't really care to whom. Prince Jordon was handsome, and accomplished, and really very Charmant. And he had saved her life. Yet she did not want to marry him. She did not want to marry anyone, yet. So instead of finding her parents she went to her room and packed. She took only what she would have taken for campaigning at school. With regret she left her new gowns in the wardrobe, and took her riding dress, and some old clothes she had scraped together for her riding lessons.

Suddenly she understood George's story about Jack. Alexandra realized that this Uncle Jack was the hero she and everyone else in the kingdom know as Jack the Giant Killer. George was telling her in his own way to trust herself. So she packed, then bundled herself in a cloak and made her way to the stables.

George was waiting for her.

"Dam fool idea this tournament was, but it isn't my place to tell royalty how to live their lives." He led her into the stables. "I heard the commotion and thought that you might drop by. You know where everything is. I think I will go and join my fellows for a beer. Farewell." The old man turned briskly and left the stable.

Alexandra wasted no time in saddling a mare and stuffing her gear into saddlebags. As she led her mount into the courtyard she saw Herbert standing waiting for her.

"I'm sorry. I came here to try to save you." He looked at her with tears in his eyes. "I didn't know what else to do." The prince held out his hands to help Alexandra mount, and suddenly she was high on her horse looking down at her friend.

"I am not sure what I want to say to you." She held her hand out to him.

"But for now it must be goodbye." Herbert held her hand a brief moment then stepped back. Alexandra spoke to her mare, Rust, and they cantered out of the yard and down the road. Herbert stood and watched her go. He felt like his heart was nailed to the dust. Forever after the smells of a stable would bring back an echo of that ache.

A rough hand on his shoulder brought Herbert out of his reverie. Prince Jordon shook him.

"Where did she go, boy?" Herbert pulled free and glared at the taller man.

"Your Highness." Herbert's voice was cold iron. "She is beyond both of us."

"Where is she? I must find her." Jordon's voice almost broke. "I am not there to protect her."

"Your Highness." The iron softened and Herbert put his hand on Prince Jordon's arm. "Why do you think she needs anyone's protection? She is the best of any of us."

Prince Jordon shook his head but let the younger man lead him from the stable.

The confusion of the morning was nothing to the King's reaction to his daughter's disappearance. Guards were dashing everywhere searching while the King and Queen questioned Herbert and Jordon again and again. The King several times called the guards to throw the Prince of Poond into the dungeons, only to have his councilors convince him that causing a diplomatic fuss with Poond was the last thing they wanted at a time like this. Squads of cavalry were searching for the princess throughout the kingdom.

The moon was high and shining through the windows of the Great Hall. Four people sat in a corner of the hall illumined by cold moonlight. The King and Queen, Prince Jordon and Prince Herbert glared wearily at each other.

"Sire," Prince Jordon said, "if you declare a quest to find the Princess Alexandra, you can give her hand in marriage to the one who rescues her."

"Alexandra does not need to be rescued," Herbert said. He stood and looked out the window. "She has not been abducted. She left because she was tired of being manipulated, because

she did not want to be a glorified trophy. When she is ready she will come back. It is bad enough that you have half the kingdom searching for her, now you want to make her the object of a treasure hunt! I will have nothing more to do with any of this nonsense.”

“And what makes you think you have any right to speak this way to us?” the Queen said. “Prince or no prince, you are perilously close to a flogging.”

“I am Alexandra’s friend. I have been her friend since she had no friends. Now, since the princess isn’t here, I speak on her behalf, because no one else is.”

“Do you really think you know my daughter better than I do?”

“Yes.” The word hung in the air between the four, strangling any further talk.

Finally the King sighed.

“You might just be right. Regardless, you will be beyond the bounds of my kingdom by tomorrow midnight or I will not be responsible for your safety.”

Herbert, still looking out the window nodded, and sighed.

“You and I,” growled Prince Jordon, “will meet to finish our match, with unblunted swords, for the honor of the Princess Alexandra.”

“I suppose you think that killing her oldest friend will endear Alexandra to you?” Herbert spun to face Jordon. “You will need to do better than that. Princess Alexandra is not impressed by foolishness. I will never again willingly cross swords with you.”

“Cowardice, Prince Herbert?”

“Wisdom, Prince Jordon.” Herbert, Prince Heir of Poond turned and walked out. When Jordon made to follow, the King stopped him.

“I promised him one day of safe travel, young prince. I fear in your present mood you might be tempted to break that promise.”

“I will honor your promise, Sire.” Jordon stood wearily. “You may find me in my rooms.” He followed Prince Herbert out of the Great Hall. The corridor was empty.

Herbert had shaken off his weariness as soon as he left the

Great Hall and had headed straight for the stable where his horse, Toad, was stabled. Nothing he needed was in his rooms. If he left immediately he would be ahead of the inevitable followers. There would be people who would assume that he knew something worth knowing, and come looking. There would also be a certain person who would follow Herbert for his own sake. Herbert had no interest in meeting Prince Jordon again anytime soon: or maybe ever. Toad whinnied a welcome. It didn't take long to saddle the gelding, an extraordinarily ugly horse. Herbert rode into the waning night, just as it started to rain. The prince laughed. It was the fitting end to the day.

Still laughing he set out on the road west to return to Poond, and face a new battle at home. Herbert had known for years that the only person he wished to marry was Alexandra, and he had no idea how to tell her, or anyone else.

## Chapter 6

### Anaeth

In the Kingdom of Sopo, the Princess Anaeth was sitting in her tower room. When she had returned from the school she had tried to argue for going to war with the school, with Alexandra's father, with Poond, with anyone who had any part in her humiliation. The Queen of Sopo had flatly refused and reminded her daughter that in a few short months she and the entire kingdom would be in an enchanted sleep. Sopo needed to take the long view. Anaeth could not move her mother with any argument, or even a tantrum which upset the castle routine for days. There would be no war. So Anaeth sat in her room and plotted. The bedroom was white and lacy and very much in character with Princess Anaeth. The servants had repaired the havoc of the tantrum and left her alone again in her perfect room. Anaeth was tempted to destroy her room again, but her mother had ways of punishing her for behavior that went outside the bounds allowed for a princess. One tantrum was allowed, two would put her in trouble. She did not want to risk her last few months before her birthday living through one of her mother's "lessons."

Anaeth considered her options. She put on her calm, genteel face and went about her days. The people who knew her best watched for the coming storm. But Anaeth surprised them. She continued to be even tempered and even pleasant. She graciously thanked her maids and her ladies in waiting hadn't broken down in tears in days. Anaeth had discovered that she enjoyed being devious. When she heard of the coming tournament to celebrate the Princess Alexandra's return home and installation as the heir to her father she smiled. She rejoined the castle society, dancing and laughing, and cultivating the young princes who flocked about her. She planted words in their mouths and ideas in their heads. She was going to enjoy this. Laughing gaily she allowed yet another gallant prince to whirl her around the ballroom.

The endless series of grand balls were meant to cement the

wealth and power of the Kingdom of Sopo, and to make sure that there would be candidates to awaken the princess after her hundred year sleep. They probably could have arranged a shorter term. But the hundred years was traditional and it was long enough for the Sopo agents to build even more wealth for when the kingdom awoke. It was also long enough for the Kingdoms to forget a certain unenchanted princess. Not that she intended to leave that up to chance. So she arranged to meet with a man who looked very uncomfortable with the conversation he was having with the beautiful princess. It wasn't the concept itself that bothered him, but being hired to kill by a girl younger than his daughter seemed wrong. Nonetheless, her gold was as good as the next person's.

Anaeth was sure that Alexandra wasn't going to enjoy a moment of the tournament. Anaeth had planted enough ideas into the empty heads of the princes to ensure that. Then at the height of her misery, she would meet her end. By the time Anaeth woke, she would be barely a footnote in the history of the Magic Kingdoms. So it was that she suggested to her parents that an especially grand ball for the heirs of the Kingdoms was in order. For some reason only lesser sons and heirs had been invited to the tournament, she might as well enjoy a ball with the really important people.

A couple of days before the grand ball, Anaeth decided that a walk in the garden with her ladies in waiting was a good idea. They walked around the carefully manicured path. Her attendants knew how to keep their conversation innocuous enough to avoid their princess's wrath. The day was pleasant and cool. They had reached a point in the garden near a tiny copse of trees when Anaeth heard someone call her name. She instantly hushed the other girls. They obviously heard nothing, even the second time.

Anaeth left them on the path and headed into the tiny woods. Only when she got there she realized that they were bigger than she had thought. She followed a path into the trees. The warm sun disappeared and she shivered a little. She thought about turning around, but her feet kept carrying her deeper into the forest. It was getting gloomy under the huge

trees and Anaeth found herself gasping for air. It was so quiet she could hear her heart beating.

“Anaeth!” she heard. She tried to cover up her start and very un-princesslike squeal by stamping her foot. She just heard laughter behind her. She spun to look behind her and saw nothing but trees. The cruel laughter came from her left, then her right. It jumped all around the tiny clearing she found herself in.

“Stop it!” she screamed and put her hands over her ears.

“Of course, your Highness,” the voice wasn’t much better than the laughter.

“Stay in one spot,” she yelled, stamping her foot again.

“Is this better?” whispered the voice from behind her right ear. Anaeth squealed and jumped again, and the laughter started over.

“What do you want?” cried Anaeth.

“I want to help you,” whispered the voice in her ear. “I am afraid that your plan to have Princess Alexandra...disposed of failed. One of the gallant princes caught your assassin. Fortunately, he has vanished from his cell. I do hope he wasn’t a favorite of yours. His vanishing is rather...permanent.”

Anaeth forgot about her fear as rage swept through her.

“That witch!” she hissed. “It is as if there is someone watching over her.”

“There is, there is,” crooned the voice, “but there is something you can do to distract them from their work.”

“What might that be?” asked Anaeth. She no longer felt cold, she didn’t care that the little clearing was deep in shadow. All that mattered was the voice that whispered in her ear.

She found herself back on the path with her ladies and only the foggiest memory of what she had seen in the woods. The other girls were laughing and talking as if she had only been gone a moment. Anaeth shook her head, and the last cobwebs of memory floated away. They finished their stroll in time for tea then Anaeth was whisked off to be fitted for her dress for the grand ball.

The night of the ball, the princess was out of sorts. There was something wrong, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She

took her frustration out on her maids and attendants. More than one was banished in tears by the sharp edge of Anaeth's tongue. The ball began, and she was the center of attention, but their flattery just got on her nerves. She wanted to scream. She wanted to escape. The more the people around her tried to help the worse she felt. The breaking point was when her dance partner stepped on her foot. He even dared to hint that it was her own clumsiness. Anaeth raged at him in white faced fury. He finally fled in fear of his reputation, if not his life.

Anaeth looked around at the circle of shocked royalty and forced a tremulous smile.

"Please accept my apologies for my unseemly outburst," she said, "I am going to ask my maid for something for my head. Please continue without me." The music started up again as she stalked from the ballroom. Anaeth found herself facing the door to the tallest tower in the castle. It was the door she would go through on her sixteenth birthday. She pushed the door open and began the long climb up the winding stairs. She knew that she wasn't supposed to be there. She didn't care. Her feet carried her up the stairs to the tiny landing at the top. The door stood open, and she could see the canopy bed waiting for her. Anaeth walked through the door and it shut behind her. Now she saw the spinning wheel sitting in the corner. It glowed with an eerie gold light. Anaeth found herself walking toward the wheel. A voice in the back of her head was screaming that this wasn't the way it should be. It was too soon, too soon. The voice was drowned out by the laughter that erupted from all the shadows in the room.

Anaeth pricked her finger on the spindle and felt the sleep taking over. Hands helped her to the huge bed and arranged her on the covers.

"A prince's kiss may waken you, but only a royal heir named for me will wake your kingdom," whispered a cold voice in her ear. Then she slept.

The sleep traveled down the stairs into the castle. Dancers dropped in their tracks, musicians slept over their instruments. It moved into the town and the commoners slept. Birds and animals fell asleep where they lay. A lone horseman galloped



toward the border. The humiliated prince had decided to leave early and had seen people fall to the ground. He knew what it meant. The sleep followed him, sucking up the sound of his horse. Just paces from the border the horse succumbed to the sleep. The fleeing prince was thrown from the saddle and rolled to the other side of the border. He picked himself up and wearily began the long walk to let the world know what had happened.

## Chapter 7

Alexandra

Alexandra rode off into the darkness without much thought about where she was going. All she knew was that she could no longer stand being at home. She flipped between rage at her parents presuming to give her away like a prize at a village fair, and grief at the loss of everything she had valued. Even Herbert, whom she had always counted as a friend, had betrayed her with his silence.

The night was cool and clear. The moon shone on the road ahead of her. So she forced herself to just concentrate on riding and to forget all other concerns. She was wearing her new riding dress, so she was comfortable enough, for now. But as the night grew colder she found herself appreciating the extra warmth of Rust beneath her.

Clouds covered the moon, and the runaway princess found herself riding through a very dark night. The road headed straight west so Alexandra just let her mare have her head. They clopped along at a walking pace. She had no doubt that she could just keep going until morning, then sort out her next step. That was before it started to rain. She laughed. It was fitting that everything should continue to go wrong. The rain soon soaked her to the skin and made the cobbles of the highway slick. Rust was finding it difficult to keep her feet. Alexandra turned to the south on a small dirt track.

She soon decided that it was a mistake. The rain that made the cobbles slick turned the dirt into a thick muck that pulled

and dragged at Rust's feet. She found herself shivering harder. Just as Alexandra had decided to get off and walk, the mare stumbled. She barely managed to jump clear before the horse pinned her to the road. She landed in the ditch. The mud covered her from head to toe. Rust scrambled to her feet, but Alexandra saw immediately that the mare was lame. She would be walking from here on.

"Don't worry, girl, it isn't your fault." She grabbed the reins and started leading the horse along. Alexandra tried to keep to the edge of the road, but the mud still pulled at her. At least the rain washed some of the mud off, and walking helped to warm her up.

As the night progressed, walking no longer kept her warm. Alexandra found herself leaning more and more on Rust. Finally they stumbled into a tiny village. The sky had lightened just enough for her to see that there was no inn. Alexandra hoped that it was late enough that people would be awake in the large house on the square. She tied Rust to a tree and dragged herself to the front door. The princess used the last of her strength to bang on the door.

It was opened by a young woman who was still wearing a housecoat.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"I need a bed and perhaps a warm meal," Alexandra said.

"We don't take in vagrants," the girl waved vaguely toward the other edge of town. "Widow Black occasionally helps out the less fortunate." She closed the door on the princess while her mouth was still open.

Alexandra pulled herself back to Rust. The pair leaned on each other as they made their way to the edge of the village. The last house was a tiny cottage surrounded by a white fence. Alexandra left Rust by the gate and staggered to the door. She didn't have time to knock before it was opened by an old woman already in dress and apron, and flour up to her elbows.

"I..." started Alexandra before darkness swept over her.

She woke to find herself tucked into a comfortable bed. A shadow moved in the room.

"How are you doing, dear?" the voice was kindly, but unfam-

miliar. Alexandra tried to speak, but her mouth was too dry. A wrinkled hand put a cup of water in her hand. Alexandra sipped at it and felt better immediately.

"I am sorry to put you out," began the princess, but then she remembered her mare. "Oh, no, Rust!" She tried to get up but the same hand pushed her back down.

"If you mean that beautiful mare that was tied to my gate, then I put her in the shed for the night. There is a bit of hay for her."

Alexandra sighed in relief and let sleep pull her back into its embrace.

She woke again to sun shining through a window into a cheerful little room. The old woman was bustling about by the stove.

"You're awake, good," said the woman. She put a steaming bowl on the table beside a teapot. "Come and eat while the porridge is warm."

Alexandra found she was wearing a worn nightgown. With a mental shrug she pushed herself out of the bed and walked to the table. The porridge was indeed hot, and sweetened with honey. She had finished the bowl before she thought about it, then sat back and sipped at her tea.

"How can I thank you?" Alexandra said.

"Having the princess drinking tea in my home is thanks enough," replied the old woman. "I would curtsy, but my knees don't bend as they should."

"Please, Widow Black, call me Alexandra. I don't feel much like a princess these days."

"My dear," said Widow Black, "you do me too much honor. But if you will, please call me Miriam. You remind me of my oldest boy. My husband was a blacksmith since he was big enough to pick up a hammer. He saw what a big lad Henry was and just assumed that Henry would become the next generation of blacksmith. The problem was that Henry really wanted to be a forester. He and his Da used to have the worst fights until one day Henry just left."

"So he's a forester now?"

"No, that is the funny part," Miriam laughed to herself. "He

was a terrible forester. He got lost constantly and he hated the bugs. He has a forge right up against the forest. He and his Da made up before my husband died. Henry brought his boy to be apprenticed at my second boy Josh's place. He's just on the other side of town. You would have passed it coming in." She poured them both more tea. "The point is that Henry didn't know what he wanted until he tried it. He can't imagine being ought to a smith now, but if he had never struck out on his own there would always be a part of him that wished it was different."

"But I don't know what I want. I just know that I don't want to be the prize at a fair, no matter how grand it is."

"So, what can you do besides prancing?"

"We had to learn embroidery and fancy stitching. I didn't mind it, but I was never more than average at it."

"I think you will find that your 'average' is well above what most people see. I have a sewing box around here somewhere. It has a bit of thread and doings in it. My daughter-in-law is about your size. I am sure she won't mind trading a couple of dresses with you."

"Could you watch Rust for me, or better yet, take her back to the castle? George will make sure that you are rewarded for your time."

"I would imagine that Josh and his wife would enjoy a trip to the city," Miriam smiled.

Alexandra did little that day but go through the sewing box and try a couple of small patterns. As Miriam had thought, Josh's wife was very glad to trade a couple of plain dresses for the princess's riding dress. She even found some more colored thread for Alexandra's box. The princess did make a quick visit to the shed to explain to Rust that she was being left behind. The mare was too intent on her oats to pay attention.

The day after, Alexandra the fancy worker carried her kit out of town. She was heading for the town a little west that had a fair in the offing. She stayed at inns or large homes, trading fancy work for room and board. In the evening she worked on her own dresses and listened to the talk of the people around her.



## Chapter 8

### King Albert

The King of Poond was in a foul mood. The day was hot and dry, and the light in the hall was hurting his eyes. He had always suspected that his tenure as a frog had had some subtle effect on him after he had been kissed. The King shuddered; being a frog, even for the brief few days that it took for his wife to bring herself to kiss him, had been an excruciating experience. Ever since, he carefully guarded his dignity against those who sneered at his once being an amphibian. What made matters worse was that the Queen constantly threw in his face that if it weren't for her, he would still be a frog. Occasionally, when she was being especially spiteful, she would tell him that he still tasted like a frog.

A few days ago Herbert had arrived back from the fiasco at the tournament. The entire civilized world knew how Herbert, who was supposed to be kissed by Princess Alithias, had fallen for the Unenchanted Princess. Already Alithias's father's ambassador informed the King that they would view Herbert's appearance at the tournament as a dissolving of the agreement. The princess would find another husband and Herbert would be left without a princess safe at hand to make his tenure as a frog a short one. As angry as the King was with his son, he did not wish an extended life as a frog on Herbert. The prince was even now in his chambers fully aware of his father's displeasure. What the boy didn't realize was that the whole fabric of society in the Council of Magic Kingdoms was unraveling. Princess Alexandra had started an avalanche of discontent with her ridiculous rulings.

"Magic should be available for everyone, rulers must act for the good of all the people," he muttered. "It's outrageous!"

"Pardon, Sire?" King Albert's Prime Minister stood at his elbow nervously drumming his fingers on the arm of the throne. The King shook his head and paid no attention to the shrunken little man. The Prime Minister did everything nervously. The King liked it that way; if the man was that nervous he wouldn't

dare even think about laughing at his King. Though, at this particular point in time laughter was far from his thoughts.

“Pardon, Sire.”

King Albert sighed and gave his attention to his chief advisor. If he interrupted the King’s thoughts twice it must be something important.

“We have received word from the Kingdom of Sopo. Or, more exactly, from the borders of the Kingdom of Sopo. No one in the kingdom will be sending word anytime soon. If ever. The Kingdom of Sopo sleeps, though it is not yet the Princess Anaeth’s sixteenth birthday. It is said that the kingdom was not prepared for the sleep and that the common people are fallen in field and forest. We only heard because of a prince who had angered the princess so completely that she set her guards on him. He only escaped because he stole a horse and rode straight for the border. The prince actually saw people fall asleep while working in their fields.”

“Sopo has always looked down their noses at us. Let them have stiff backs instead of stiff necks for a change.” King Albert smiled to himself, pleased with his witticism.

“Sire, it gets worse. Some of our people were caught by the sleep. They had no warning and no time to get out. Any who go to rescue them will be caught themselves. The border is closed and their agents are in disarray.”

“Well, I will leave a note for my great-grandson to be sure to ask for compensation for our people caught by the sleep. Much good it will do them.”

“That is not all.”

“What!? What else could there be?”

“The prince whose grandson was to kiss the Princess Anaeth has also been caught by the sleep. The succession is broken. The sleep of Sopo is a wild enchantment.”

King Albert paled. A wild enchantment was the situation that the Council of Magic Kingdoms was formed to prevent. Breaking a wild enchantment was extremely risky. Yet with no clear successor to Sopo many young princes would be riding into the sleeping kingdom to try their luck. Though the Council would forbid it, princes were notoriously headstrong.

“Sire.” The King gave his minister such a look that he almost burst into tears.

“Go on,” the King sat back on the throne wearily.

“There was a ball, in Sopo. Just about everybody who is anybody was there. It seems that the Princess Anaeth was celebrating something or other, though she was throwing a tantrum as our source left. Of course, he was the reason for the princess’s tantrum...”

“The point?” growled King Albert.

“Nearly all the heirs to the thrones of the Magic Kingdoms are sleeping, and will be for the next hundred years. In fact, Princess Alexandra and Prince Herbert may be the only heirs not sleeping, and Princess Alexandra is missing. It isn’t just Sopo that has fallen to a wild enchantment. Every kingdom of the Council is at risk.” The two men sat in silence staring at each other. The horror of the news erased the difference in rank.

“I suppose you had better make all the preparations for an emergency Council meeting. Contact all the kingdoms. We will begin as soon as a quorum is gathered. In the meantime, I want agents combing the kingdoms for a suitable princess. I will not have Herbert’s enchantment going wild.”

The Prime Minister straightened slowly and nodded. He seemed to lose years as he walked the length of the throne room. When he reached the door he was almost running.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Council convened in a town which was almost the center point of the Magic Kingdoms. The town’s only business was the Council, and in order to remain neutral it was independent of all the kingdoms. Herbert and his parents arrived in good time to commiserate informally with the Kings and Queens of the other kingdoms. While for some the matter wasn’t urgent, for others, like Herbert, their enchantments loomed over them with new and immediate menace.

Herbert saw Prince Jordon at a distance, his face drawn with worry. It was to have been his older brother whose descen-



dant would have released Princess Anaeth from her spell. But the Prince of Charmant avoided Herbert and granted only the coldest of nods when circumstances forced him.

Others, too, snubbed him or avoided him; his friendship with Princess Alexandra well known and remarked. Somehow the missing princess had come to be blamed for the disaster. If she had been reasonable, if she had not infuriated Sopo, if only she had been enchanted. What for Herbert was proof of her ability, for others was evidence of her guilt. Of all those present only Jordon and Herbert wanted to search for her. Jordon thought she needed rescuing. Herbert thought she was the only hope to rescue them.

When the quorum had arrived the Council began. Herbert stood beside his father's seat as page. In all the turmoil no princess had been found to kiss his son. King Albert wasn't going to let Herbert out of his sight. Jordon, too, stood by his father who was chairing the Council as the Charmants had since the beginning. Princess Avi and her maids had turned into swans and flown north. The prince who should have been there to follow her was sleeping in Sopo. Princess Ariel was due to vanish soon but her prince, too, slept. The list went on. Suggestions were made of invading Sopo and rescuing the sleepers, but no one knew how to get by the enchantment. Arguments about alternate arrangements broke out as it was discovered that there were no longer sufficient princes to break all the enchantments. No one wanted to be rescued by less than royalty. The Council raged on for days. Each day Herbert would stand silent only by great effort of will. Then, after the Council had adjourned, go to the training yards and thrash any who were fool enough to challenge him. Only Jordon did he refuse again and again. It was the only time that the prince would speak to Herbert, and then only to challenge him with endless patience.

After a week of this routine, Herbert couldn't stand it anymore. In the middle of the morning Herbert took a deep breath and spoke to his elders and superiors.

"Sires, while you may be able to cobble up some arrangement to alleviate this disaster, you cannot change the fact that our society must become something quite different if we are not

going to fall to some similar disaster in the future.”

King Albert made violent hushing signs to his son, but Herbert refused to see them.

“Prince, you have no right to speak in this gathering. You are out of order.” The King of Charmant’s voice was rough from days of trying to keep men and women who were rulers of their own kingdoms in order.

“With all due respect, Sire, the disorder is not just mine. Why are you arguing about which throne has precedence when your daughters are lost and wandering the world? Why are you casting blame at one another when everyone is troubled? I stand here the least of this Council, yet I can see that our world is being changed forever. The wild enchantments are not the cause of our difficulties, and they did not begin them.”

“Well then, oh wise Prince, tell your poor blind elders what the problems are. And maybe at the same time you can tell us the solutions too.” King Orthin leaned on the table and glared down at Herbert. King Charmant waved his hands to catch the Council’s attention. Seeing that he might as well have been invisible he turned and sent his page for tea.

“I don’t have any idea what the solutions are to the problems you face, but I know who has always seen clearly when others have failed. I suggest we find the Princess Alexandra and ask for her help.”

The Council erupted. Some shouted that this whole mess was the Princess Alexandra’s fault, and that she should be found and punished. Others cried that she was a spoiled child and should stop involving herself in adult affairs. More than a few were arguing that she needed rescuing like any other princess. The Chair sipped his tea until the uproar had died down a little.

“Shall we get back to the business at hand, gentle Sires?” Charmant looked mildly at Herbert. “If you speak out of turn again you will be banished from this room.”

“Banished from this room? Bah!” King Orthin pounded the table. “If you come anywhere near my kingdom I will set the dogs on you.”

“Hear, hear!” agreement from around the table made Her-

bert pale. One kingdom after another banned him from their borders. He could see their gloom lift as they took action, however petty. Finally he looked at his father.

“I will go to seek my friend. It is only when I think of her that I can imagine any hope, for me or for any of us.”

King Albert sighed then put his hand on his son’s shoulder.

“God go with you, Herbert.”

“For certainly none of us will,” finished King Charmant acidly.

Thus it was to the sound of the Council’s laughter that Herbert turned and left.

Jordon followed Herbert out of the room and to the Poond delegation’s suite of rooms. He knew that Herbert was going to try to seek out the Princess Alexandra. The prince was unable to sort out how he felt about the princess. She was infuriating. She made him feel things he wasn’t used to feeling. He was used to being in control, and he had never been less in control in his life. Now he was desperately trying to regain control. Alexandra was out of his reach, but Herbert was here now.

As the younger prince came to the door Jordon drew his sword and stepped up to Herbert.

“Draw your sword, and we will sort this out now.” Prince Herbert turned slowly.

“I am sorry, your Highness, I do not know what it is that we are supposed to be sorting out,” he held his arms out. “I have said to you before that I will never willingly cross swords with you.” Jordon’s sword moved to Herbert’s heart. “I see you are not going to give me a choice. You must let me get my sword. On my honor as a prince I will return to give you battle.” The sword point dropped and Jordon nodded once.

Herbert slipped into the suite and called for his servants. He gave orders rapid fire as he threw together a light traveling pack. In a matter of minutes Herbert was ready to climb out the window.

“Jones, I need you to saddle and ready Toad for travel, use cavalry campaigning tack. Add whatever else you think will be necessary.” Herbert handed him his pack.

“Take the north road out of town. There is a bridge over a

small creek. I will wait for you beneath that bridge. I will meet you by nightfall or not at all.”

Herbert handed his sword to an elderly servant.

“I want you to wait until the Prince Jordon bangs on the door and asks for me. Then you will give him my sword and my message.” The old woman nodded nervously. The prince climbed down the trellis to the Council meeting grounds. He checked to watchers, but attention was focused on the meeting of the Kings and Queens. Nobody was really interested in the actions of one prince. Struggling to remain casual, he sauntered out the gates and into the town.

He was dressed in his oldest and plainest clothes. Prince Jordon was not going to be content with his message. Sooner or later he would follow Herbert, and the Prince of Poond wanted to have a good head start. He was not one of the better known princes and no one paid him much attention. The people of the town were busy at their tasks, and Herbert felt he might as well be invisible.

The summer was fading and the prince felt hot in his traveling clothes, but the nights would be cool soon. The smell of dust and growing things filled his lungs and Herbert almost laughed out loud. He was free. It was several months before his birthday, and he was finally heading out to find Alexandra. Though he had at first argued against trying to search her out, he had burned to set out on her trail, to see her again. He didn't feel truly himself without her. He had no idea where Alexandra was or how he was to find her, yet he was certain that he would find her.

It wasn't long before Herbert had left the town behind, and was walking through a forest. The shade cooled the air, and with each step he felt better. He even laughed as he thought of the look on Prince Jordon's face when he received Herbert's message. Though, Herbert was sure that he would pay dearly for it later.

He reached the little bridge sooner than he had expected. As the prince settled on a convenient log he wished that he had brought a fishing line with him. There was a nice looking pool just downstream of the bridge. Too bad it wasn't far enough

from the road for swimming. The heat, even in the cool of the forest shade, was oppressively making his clothes feel tight and uncomfortable. The sunlight through the leaves was a dagger in his eyes. Herbert retreated to the darkness under the bridge and hunched down, but he was still uneasy. There was someone with him under the bridge. He could see a vague shape on the other side of the creek.

“Well, boy, I am sorry to cut into your little holiday, but I do agree that Princess Alexandra is the only one likely to make any sense out of this mess.” The voice sounded reasonable, even friendly, yet Herbert’s skin crawled. “You can understand that I would prefer not to have her found. It is early yet. I have my own plans, and your princess doesn’t feature in them until later. I think that she will have to stay lost, for just a while longer.” The laughter was worse than the voice, rich with humor, yet somehow it dripped slime.

“What do...you...want?” Herbert forced the words out of a mouth that was the wrong shape. The color was draining out of the world, and it was losing depth. Herbert felt a vibration in the ground as something heavy jumped over the creek. Something was squeezing him out of shape. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t move. He was dying. Danger...enemy...flee...JUMP.

The frog leapt out from under the hand descending to snare it. With a splash it landed in the water and swam to the bottom. With every nerve a quiver the frog let the current carry it downstream. Inside a voice was screaming, “I am a man, a man, a man...” But survival was first. The voice would have to wait.

The darkness under the bridge cursed. It was not part of the plan to have the Frog Prince lost in the wilderness, but even its magic could not detect the prince in his new guise. But, after all, it still had the others. The plan would still work. It heard the sound of hooves on the road. The servant, too, was early. The darkness became a crow which swooped up under the horse’s feet and spooked it. It laughed raucously as it flew away over the trees.

It didn’t take Jones long to regain control of the horse, though his own heart beat faster than usual. Under the bridge he found Herbert’s clothes left in a pile as if the prince had

simply vanished from within.

“Oh, my prince.” He looked about for a frog sitting nearby but saw nothing. “Oh, my prince, your father’s heart will break.” Without waiting any longer he swept up the clothing and mounting Toad he galloped back to the Council Village.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jordon sat in his rooms paralyzed by rage. The old woman had given him the sword and the paper with Herbert’s message.

“Your Royal Highness Prince Jordon of Charmant,” it read, “I have in the last few days come to value my princely honor almost not at all. In fact, my honor has caused me little but grief, sending my dearest friend off alone and earning me your enmity. It does appear that you still value your honor. I have decided to give you mine as well, so you might have a double share. My sword accompanies this missive, so you will not doubt my word. I will not wage any duel with you, though it means my death. You may do with these as you will. Since I am no longer a prince free to travel the Magic Kingdoms I sign this, Herbert.”

Prince Jordon had no experience to deal with this. He couldn’t imagine doing what Herbert had done. He wanted to label it cowardice, but then he remembered how the younger man had stood up to the Council, and even the King of Charmant. He remembered how Herbert had faced him quietly in the hall with the point of Jordon’s sword over his heart. Whatever this was it was not cowardice. There was no word Jordon knew to describe Prince Herbert.

If he could not understand the prince, how was he going to deal with him? Jordon’s confidence was badly shaken. He had thought he knew how the world worked and his place in that world, now the world was changed. Jordon didn’t like change. Finally he sighed, and with a visible effort put aside his rage. The Council needed to hear of Herbert’s actions. For the second time this day a younger son must find the courage to speak. The Prince of Charmant buckled Herbert’s sword on opposite his own. It looked strange and felt stranger, this almost

balanced weight at his waist. He carefully folded Herbert's note and placed it in his pouch. Then, with another sigh, he went to confront his father and the Council.

Hours later Jordon was still arguing with the Council, unknowingly confounding Herbert's expectations of him. The Council was unwilling to have anything to do with either Herbert or Alexandra.

"Out of sight, out of mind."

"They were both troublemakers and let them stay lost."

"We don't have time to deal with a couple of spoiled children."

The only reason he wasn't dismissed as summarily as Herbert was because of Jordon's father scowling at the head of the table. King Charmant's voice became colder and colder. Prince Jordon knew he was in trouble, so he figured he wasn't likely to make things worse by continuing to argue on behalf of Herbert and Alexandra. It was only then, at the end of the longest afternoon of his life, that he realized that his feelings were even more complicated than he had thought possible. Herbert was as utterly different from him and the other princes, as Alexandra was from the princesses he knew. He had no idea how to react, except that he wasn't going to disappear after them.

Not yet.

## Chapter 9

Alexandra

Alexandra arrived in the Council Village just in time to see Jones galloping through the town with tears in his eyes. She was wearing a worn, colorless dress, covered with dust from the road. Her look was typical of the people who wandered through the Council Village on occasion, looking for work, but rarely staying for long. She sat in the shade of a tea shop and sighed audibly. The waiter was surprised when she ordered tea in a quiet, cultured voice. He was even more surprised when she paid for it. The young girl sat through the afternoon sipping at her tea, and listening to the conversations around her.

The major subject of speculation, as everywhere in the Magic Kingdoms, was how the Council would react to the wild enchantments which were causing chaos in the ruling families. As a rule, however, that concern was for the royalty and not for their own lives. The common people were really too busy with their daily lives to get caught up by enchantments and quests. As the afternoon passed, the waiter brought another tea, and some biscuits, this time.

A young man bustled in with a self-important air which proclaimed that he had important news. He settled in at a table with some friends who quickly bought him a drink. The dusty young woman perked her ears up but could not quite make out what was being said. She chuckled as she noted her waiter standing helpfully near the table. It must have been big news indeed because the waiter forgot himself and overfilled the young man's glass. He blushed and quickly mopped up the spill as the young man and his friends teased him. The waiter noticed his mysterious customer watching and blushed again. He came over to her table and refilled her tea cup.

"I just heard. Prince Herbert's servant returned and informed the Council that Prince Herbert has been turned into a frog, and that he's in a creek in the north woods. Caused a regular upset it did, having a servant burst in on the Council."

"Herbert, enchanted? It is too soon, too soon!" Alexandra



threw some coins on the table and stood up. "North woods you said?" The waiter just nodded dumbfounded. She almost ran out of the shop and he saw her head north. Among the coins on the table was a glint of gold. He swept the money into his pocket then went to tell his news to his friend at the bar.

Alexandra ran down the street paying no attention to the stares the people gave her. She didn't know if she could find her childhood friend, but she meant to try. She didn't slow until she saw the grouping around the bridge. King Albert and his entourage were splashing around in the creek near the bridge. All of them were calling Herbert's name and some were carrying nets. It didn't appear that they had any luck. Tears ran down King Albert's face. As she came closer she could hear between calls for Herbert, the King muttering about how his son was three times a fool to go looking for some trouble-making princess, no matter how smart.

She hadn't been noticed yet, so Alexandra slipped into the woods. She noted which direction the current flowed and headed downstream. She had no idea what she was going to do. A few minutes of careful walking brought her to the creek downstream of the others without notice. Even here the bank was trampled and muddy. The princess started following the current. It was late in the afternoon and the light was going. Finally, after falling into the creek for the third time, Alexandra gave up and leaned against a tree to rest and wait for the morning.

The moon rose over the trees and in its silvery light the frogs of the forest began to sing. In voices both high and low, loud and soft, the chorus surrounded her. It was so beautiful that her heart lifted. She felt rested for the first time since she had left her home. Then she thought that perhaps Herbert was singing with them, and she burst into tears. She put her head on her knees and wept for both her friend and herself, both lost and alone.

In the morning Alexandra continued downstream for lack of any better direction. Over the next several days the little stream picked up in size and now could rightfully be called a small river. In fact, on the maps it was now called the South Fen River.

In another day Alexandra would reach the Fens themselves. She had no plans. She hadn't really had any plans since she realized that while she was a fair hand at sewing fancy work, she was better at helping people to work through their problems. Only people didn't want to take advice from a seamstress. Alexandra had come to the Council Village with some vague thought of reconciling with her parents. The news of Herbert's enchantment had driven it out of her head.

The Fens were a vast wasteland of marsh and bog marking the northern border of the Magic Kingdoms. According to the gossip in village markets, the Princess Avi was up here with her eleven maids doing whatever it was that enchanted swans did while awaiting the prince who would save them. Though this time the prince was sleeping far away in Sopo; which, decided Alexandra, gave her as good a target as any. She sat down, made a fire, and once it was going pulled out a length of fishing line. In short order she had a brace of fish roasting and some cattail roots to go with them. The food restored her and gave her time to think. How was she going to cross the Fens? There was a causeway to the west, but it was almost a week's walk from where she was. Or she could try crossing straight through the middle, which, from all that she had ever heard about the Fens, was a quick way to a slow and horrible death. She sighed. The first step was one less to go.

"I wouldn't step there. The Fens are deceptive. You would disappear without a trace."

"Herbert!" Alexandra looked around for him. "Where are you?"

"Before I tell you, you must make a promise."

"I have kissed you before," Alexandra laughed. "Of course I will kiss you."

"NO!" There was a splash as a large frog jumped into the water.

"Herbert, Herbert, come back. I will promise you anything you want." She looked frantically through the reeds.

"OK. You must promise me that you will not, under any circumstances, kiss me."

"Yes, if I must. I promise." A large frog jumped out of the

bog and nodded to the princess.

“I have been giving this some considerable thought. I have been banned from every kingdom except Poond, and what I need is not there. As a frog I can do some things I cannot as a prince. There are a great many things I need to do. Your help will make it a lot easier.”

“You were at the Council, weren’t you?” Alexandra sat down in front of the Frog Prince. “You had better fill me in.”

The next morning saw the pair set out across the treacherous landscape, Herbert calling out to the princess where to step and where it was unsafe. He had explained to her the previous evening that being a frog had somehow given him an instinctive understanding of bogs and what was to be found in bogs. The Fens were a study in contrast; often the air was foul with the stench of marsh gas, yet the morning sun gilded the world with light. Delicate flowers competed for space with pond slime. Poisonous snakes swam through water in which delicious fish lived.

For days the unlikely pair traveled north, gradually working their way west to the causeway. They had decided to look for the Princess Avi in the north. Each night they would talk over the events of the past weeks and argue over what the Council should be doing, and who the mysterious voice in the darkness was. Herbert tried to describe how it felt to be a man who was a frog. After his initial panic, which had probably saved him, he had worked out an uneasy balance between amphibian and human, though every once in a while Alexandra would find him simply sitting and shaking.

“It is,” Herbert said, “the feel of being a frog.” He was used to walking upright, but as a frog he must jump through the reeds and grasses. His vision was terrible, distinguishing movement, but no depth or color, yet he was extremely sensitive to vibration in the ground and water. The worst was he hated the light. It felt like a spike through his head, and he dried out faster in the sun. Every once in a while the dryness became a torment and he needed to go for a swim. Each time he left Alexandra to swim it was harder to keep control of his precarious balance. He was afraid that one time he would just forget that he was

also human and just lose himself in the Fens. Alexandra would listen and bite her tongue and refrain from suggesting that she free him from his enchantment. She suspected there were more reasons than he had given for his staying a frog.

The pair had good weather for their journey and with Herbert's guidance made good time. Just before they reached the causeway, Alexandra set up a pouch with moss to keep Herbert damp. Alexandra was much happier on the stone paved causeway. She hadn't realized what a toll it took on her to have to carefully plan each step. The princess slumped down on the road and took some time to just breathe. So it was that she didn't notice the wagons coming up from the south.

"Hello." She swung around to see a weathered old man holding the reins to his mule team. "I meet the oddest people here on the causeway, but most often they are going somewhere. Tis the first time I ever met a lass just sitting there going nowhere in the middle of nowhere."

"I came out of there," Alexandra pointed out over the Fens.

"Well, I never. Come here, Junior. Here's a girl who's come across the Fen." A slightly younger man came out of the wagon.

"I heard about folks going into the Fen, but never anyone who come out again. Unless it were Uncle Bob, and he only on the edges." He wiped his hands on his pants and held it out to Alexandra. She took it and stood up.

"I had some help from," she felt a bump from her pouch, "ah...from an expert." The two gave her an odd look, but didn't comment.

"It's about time for tea I think." The older man dropped the reins and the mules moved to the edge of the road where they could reach the grass and began munching.

"My name is Gen; not quite a gent my wife always says. Do join us, dearie."

"I'd love to. Just let me fetch some berries. I saw some a little ways back." She jumped off the causeway and carefully hopped back into the Fens, occasionally cocking her head as if she was listening to the bog. The two men looked at each other and Gen nodded his head.

"She's a real one, all right," he bent, lighting the little stove and putting water for the tea on. Junior simply nodded and watched the girl picking berries.

The conversation over tea was provided mostly by Junior and his father. They had their own views about the troubles in the Magic Kingdoms. In their minds magic was much too tricky for ruling a country, and perhaps they would all be better off without it. Gen especially had sympathy for the troubles of the royalty, but had no time to be chasing after enchantments.

"Some well dressed folks wanted to hire me to show them north. I told them to follow the road, same as anyone else. What, do they think that I can just leave my customers waiting while I gallivant around chasing swans? I don't go anywhere near where the swans will be. Not all the gold that fool was shoving at me would make me go near them ruins." Junior shuddered at the thought.

"My granddad said he went there the last time there were swans. Never would talk about it. Just said, 'Best to leave it to them who have no choice.'"

"I never heard of ruins up here. I wouldn't think this would be a good land for living in."

"Land wasn't always like this. Used to be fine land for farming and the like. Some curse took it over sudden, left only the ruins to remember it by."

"Where are these ruins?" asked Alexandra. Gen looked at her for a long minute.

"Junior, the mules need watering." The younger man sighed and went to see to the animals. "Why are you asking after the ruins, girl? It is bad luck even to talk too much about them."

"Your father said it should be left to those who have no choice."

"And you're one I suppose. Well, my dad said they were a ways west of the causeway, up almost to the mountains in the north. You need to turn off where you can see an apple tree from the causeway. More fools have died trying to pick those apples. Supposed to be magic. Unreachable is what I think. The tree is about three days north of here. You can ride that far with us if you'd like. Just don't let Junior see where you take off.

I don't care to lose him, and he has a girl who's sweet on him back home." He stood up and kicked the lid of the stove shut, then carefully picked it up and stowed it in the wagon. He helped the princess up and jumped up beside her. Junior jumped at the back of the wagon and they were off.

Once she had actually joined the two men, Junior became extremely uncomfortable around her and probably didn't say three words over the next three days. As if to compensate Gen never stopped talking. He was full of advice and anecdotes about the Fens. It seemed that his family had been plying the causeway since before it was a causeway. Princess Avi's enchantment was in fact the descendant spell of the curse that had turned a fruitful land into a bog. The King of that time had angered a powerful and dark fairy sorcerer. The actual cause of the dispute was lost in history. The events were simple, as they usually were in these situations. The sorcerer made a demand of the King, and the King refused. Emotions escalated and soon neither combatant was able to back down without losing face. The end result was that the only daughter of the King was turned into a swan along with her maids in waiting. The King, instead of finding a suitable prince to rescue her, went to war with the fairies. The result was devastation. The farmland was flooded, and the orchards were ruined. Not one habitation was left standing except for the ruins of the King's palace. It remained as a dark warning for those who would defy the power of the fairies.

The daughter, who incidentally was also called Avi, had finally been rescued by a prince from the east, who brought her and her maids back to live with him. The curse lived on in the form of the enchantment that held Princess Avi even now. Only the sworn love of a true prince could break the enchantment. Unfortunately for Avi, her prince wasn't going to come to make the vow of undying love, not for a hundred years, maybe not ever.

Alexandra listened and tucked the information into the back of her mind. Her main concern, however, was keeping Herbert comfortably damp. She did get some rather strange looks from the men as she kept carefully pouring water into a pouch on her

belt. She already was seen by them as something out of the ordinary, so she didn't worry too much about adding to her reputation as a marvel. The princess expected that she would quickly become one of his favorite stories.

The apple tree appeared to the east and Alexandra slipped off the back of the wagon. She waved to Gen and Junior's unseeing backs, and disappeared into the Fens. The very first thing she did was let Herbert go into the water. While he hadn't complained she knew he must have been terribly uncomfortable in the little pouch. Alexandra didn't expect the speed with which he disappeared down to the bottom. Herbert was gone a long time. Long enough for Alexandra to get a little worried. Then long enough for her to get very worried. She began calling out Herbert's name and looking carefully through the reeds. She thought she had found him once but the frog had just looked back at her with a glassy look.

She blushed thinking that she had been talking to a frog. She looked around to see who was watching only to laugh at herself for being foolish. No one else was going to be around in this bog. So she jumped and gave a little scream when someone spoke behind her.

## Chapter 10

Alexandra

“Lost someone, have we?” The speaker was a strange sight. She was old and bent over. Her hair white and tangled with twigs and leaves. Alexandra even saw a bird’s nest. Yet, as bent and twisted as she was she had to look down slightly at Alexandra.

“I said, have you lost someone? Close your mouth, it isn’t polite to stare. I would have thought that a princess would be better raised than that.” Alexandra had to fight against staring again. Obviously this was a giant, and yet unlike any giant she had ever heard about.

“Yes, a friend of mine wandered off, and I am worried about him.”

“Very foolish to wander off about these parts, you might never wander back. Well, I guess you had better come with me. I’m going to cook up some frog’s legs. Care to join us?” The old woman smiled as Alexandra gasped and turned pale. She took hold of the princess’s arm and pulled her along. Only now did the young woman notice the wriggling sack gripped in the giantess’s other hand. Their passage through the bog was fast and sure. Even with Herbert’s guidance Alexandra could never have moved through the Fens with such confidence. Soon the causeway was out of sight on the horizon. They passed several apple trees with small green fruit growing on their branches, even a small grove of trees gone wild and twisted. The ground was getting drier and easier to find a path. The sun was low in the west when they arrived at a small hill. It looked immense in comparison with the flat bog around it. They climbed up the grassy slope to a pleasant cottage at the top. Or it would have been pleasant if it hadn’t been the size of a barn.

Inside the giantess tossed her sack into a barrel and put a lid on it.

“Pesky creatures, frogs. Always hopping out of wherever you put them.” She waved Alexandra to an immense chair. “Let me put on the kettle to boil. We can have tea, and then boil



some frog's legs."

"NO. I mean, please don't."

"You're right, perhaps fried would be better."

"Please," Alexandra took a deep breath. "My friend that wandered off...he is a frog."

"You brought a pet frog into the Fens? That was very foolish of you." She continued to bustle around making preparations.

"It is a bit more complicated than that. He is my friend, not a pet, and he wasn't always a frog."

"Ah, then that was even more foolish of you. I suppose you have some way of identifying your friend. I mean, what if he somehow lost the ability to talk and got mixed up with a bunch of other frogs? How would you know which was him? If he were in that barrel, how would you know?" The princess sat in the chair and stared at the barrel.

"I'm sure I would."

"I'm not averse to having a bit of a game. Now, here are the rules. Your friend is in that barrel. You must tell me which one is him. If you can't, then my boy will get a good feed of princess to go with his frog's legs. And one other thing, you can't kiss the frogs. That would be too easy now wouldn't it?"

Alexandra gulped, but she had to try. She jumped off the chair and crossed to the barrel.

"Be careful you don't let them all go, I went to a lot of trouble to catch them. And I do like frog's legs, almost as much as I like princess." Alexandra picked up the empty sack and took the lid off of the barrel. She grabbed the first frog to jump out and put the lid back. She held the little creature carefully and thoughtfully. Then she brought it toward her pursed lips.

"Ah, ah, the rules, girl." Alexandra just glared at the giantess and put the frog in the sack.

"Don't worry I will not kiss any of your frogs." The giantess laughed.

"This will be even more interesting than I thought. Continue, girl."

Alexandra went carefully through her routine. Taking one frog at a time she made as if to kiss it. Each one simply sat in

her grasp and shivered. Finally the last frog had gone into the sack and not one had given her any indication that it was anything other than a regular frog. The princess sighed.

"None of these is my friend." She put the frogs back into the barrel.

"Now, I would like you to give me my friend from wherever you have hidden him."

"What makes you think that I know where he is?"

"You knew that I am a princess. You knew about my friend. You knew he could talk to me. You know where he is. I have won your game, now I will have my friend."

"Very well," laughed the giantess as she pulled another bag out from under her rags. "Here is your friend." She opened the bag and a large frog jumped out and hopped over to Alexandra.

"I'm sorry, Alexandra. The water felt so good that I got a little careless, and let my mouth run on a bit."

"I'm glad you're back." Alexandra put him in her pouch. "I will be going now."

"Fee, fi, fo, fess," boomed a voice outside the door. "I smell the blood of a princess."

"I don't think so, girl," chuckled the giantess. "My boy is home, and he is not as kindhearted as I am."

The door crashed open and a huge red-headed giant stepped into the room.

"Where's my princess?" He looked around the room. Alexandra took a step and knocked over the barrel which contained all the frogs.

"My lunch!" He clumsily tried to catch the escaping frogs, but they all frantically hopped about, and most made it out the door. He was now trying to stomp on the last few frogs.

"You shouldn't have done that. You have just made him angry. I haven't seen him this angry since we had to leave the northern mountains."

"He is not half as angry as my Uncle Jack will be if he comes and finds out how you have treated me."

"Jack? JACK! THAT MURDERING PIPSQUEAK MADE ME MOVE HERE!"

"Dear, you know it gives me a headache when you shout."

“Sorry, Mom.” The giant turned and looked at Alexandra for the first time.

“You let my lunch go.”

“I have a fondness for frogs, as your mother will tell you. I really had no choice.” She sighed and looked at the rapidly darkening sky. “I must be going. If I am not at the ruins in time, my uncle will be worried. After all his time spent in the north, he knows how dangerous the world can be.”

“Your uncle wouldn’t really be the Jack you little folk call ‘The Giant Killer,’ would he?”

“That’s him,” Alexandra said brightly. “Have you met him?”

“If we had met him, girl,” the giantess snapped, “we wouldn’t be here, would we?” She turned to her son. “We had better let her go.” They both moved away from the door. As the princess walked out of the giant’s house, the giantess winked at her, leaving Alexandra free but very confused.

“I think,” she said to Herbert, “that we will travel late tonight.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They traveled through the night heading north by west. The countryside continued to change around them. It was dry enough now that Herbert only needed to issue occasional warnings. The moon shone silver and bright, and the night was warm and fragrant, and not with the stench of bog. The frog chorus still surrounded them as it had since they entered the Fens. Herbert fought down the urge to join the singing from his pouch on Alexandra’s belt. When the moon set she stopped and built a fire beside a tiny pool and set Herbert on her knee.

“Do you need to swim?” she asked.

“No, just splash some water on me.” Herbert sighed as the cool water wet his skin. “Never let me go again, I don’t know if I would ever come back. That is what happened yesterday. I forgot I was a prince. I forgot even that I was a man. I swam and sunned myself and caught flies. I only spoke when I was picked up by that giantess. Then I spoke all too much I’m afraid, and let her know who I was and that you were following. I nearly got

us both killed.”

Alexandra picked him up and held him gently.

“Don’t blame yourself, Herbert. Both of us have made our mistakes. The important thing is that we are both safe, at least for the moment.” She put him back on the ground. “We need to rest for a while.”

“You rest. I can sleep well enough in the pouch tomorrow. I will keep watch.” The princess simply nodded and rolled herself into her cloak, falling asleep instantly. The frog sat quietly at her side. Herbert hated being a frog. He could not see the girl he loved. When she held him, his frog instincts fought to make him leap and hide. It was harder and harder work to remember his humanity. Yet still he had refused to let her kiss him. He knew as Prince Herbert he would be unwelcome in most of the lands of the Magic Kingdoms. He also feared that his presence would give her away to those who were looking for her. Herbert desperately desired her kiss, yet he wanted her to kiss him because she loved him, not out of pity, or childhood friendship. His desires and fears were tearing him apart. This frog’s body he was trapped in wasn’t meant for such feelings. Through the night he argued with himself, and at sunrise was no closer to any solution.

They continued on their journey. The Fens barely deserved its name now and travel was easy. But while their traveling was easier the relationship between Herbert and Alexandra became more strained. He was terrified that he would let slip his feelings for her, and that she would laugh or reject him. He could see that she was hurt because he was closing himself off from her, and she didn’t know what she had done. Yet Herbert rejected all of her attempts to bring them back to the comfortable friendship they had enjoyed.

Some days after their escape from the giants, the prince and princess were resting in the corner of an abandoned farmhouse. Herbert felt the vibrations of something large approaching. He hopped up on the fallen wall.

“We have a visitor.” Alexandra jumped up and looked out too. Prince Jordon was riding into the clearing leading a white mare. He saw the ruin and dismounted with the careless grace

that Herbert had always envied and admired. Alexandra ran out to him.

“Jordon! What ever are you doing here?” The Prince of Charmant stood amazed. Then he swept up Alexandra’s hand and kissed it soundly.

“I have hoped beyond hope that I might find you. Yet I never expected to find you here in this treacherous country. I was sent to try to find and speak to Princess Avi.”

He reached into the white mare’s saddlebags and brought out some clothes.

“Some of these may fit you well enough, and fit your dignity better than your present raiment.” Alexandra blushed and looked down, seeing as if for the first time the clothes she wore. They were coarse and stained, torn in several places. She took the clothes from Prince Jordon and retreated to the ruins, while the prince turned his back to see to the horses. She didn’t see Herbert watch her sadly.

Soon Alexandra came out to help Jordon. Dressed in clean clothes and soft materials she looked like a princess again. She had found a tiny spring near the walls, and had even managed to wash. Jordon had already set up a campsite with gear from his saddlebags and had a small fire going. The smell of cooking filled the air. She set some water to heat for tea, and called for Herbert. When she called, Jordon stood.

“You have been traveling alone with Herbert?” he asked clenching and unclenching his fists. “Where is he?”

“If I knew where he was,” Alexandra replied, “I wouldn’t need to call him.” She looked around some more. “Oh, there you are.” She picked up the big frog and looked him in the eyes. “I see you found the spring.”

“I could tell you were distracted,” Herbert replied. “I thought I had better get used to looking after myself again.” Alexandra found herself blushing and put the frog down.

“That is Herbert? I feared that you had broken his enchantment.” Jordon stood stock still. “I was going to give you back your sword, and finish our match. I see that it is no longer possible.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I have no more use for a

sword as a frog than a prince. You will have to carry it a little longer, unless you just toss it in the next deep pool.” The frog hopped into the shade of a stone and sat quiet.

Jordon’s presence made Herbert feel worse. Whatever advice he gave about how to make their way through the treacherous Fens, Jordon insisted on feeling his way along with a pole. As a prince, Herbert could accept Jordon’s caution, but as a frog he knew where to step and where not to. Whenever Herbert proved right, Jordon would glare at him. It was worse when they made camp. Jordon would start some flowery speech, then realize that Herbert was there listening. Herbert confined his conversation to suggestions about travel, or where to find clear water. It began to rain, quickly soaking Alexandra and Jordon. They didn’t have any fire, because after the first night they couldn’t find any dry wood. Jordon was becoming more and more authoritative, protecting Alexandra from imagined dangers and dishonor. Herbert withdrew even further into himself. When they sighted the ruins it was a relief.

The ruins were in the center of the most treacherous bit of bog that Herbert had seen yet. As much as it irritated him, he had to admire Prince Jordon’s ability to pick a path through the deadly pools and sinkholes, though he could have done it much faster. He was hopping beside the prince when Alexandra’s mare stumbled and threw her into a pond. Herbert felt the thump as her head struck a log. She sank out of sight before Jordon could turn in his saddle. The pool was flat and oily, Alexandra was gone. Jordon yelled her name. Herbert leapt into the pond as soon as she fell and found her sinking body almost immediately. But he was a frog. He could manage a golden ball perhaps, but not the princess. He kissed her lips, but to no avail. She needed to kiss him. So he swam to the surface.

“Here, she is here. If you love her, listen to me!” The words were barely out of the frog’s mouth before Jordon had jumped, rope in his teeth, into the muddy water. In short order he had found the princess’s limp body and brought her to the surface. Snarled orders to his horse got the beast to pull the pair out of the pool. Herbert watched helplessly as the prince pushed the water out of Alexandra’s lungs, and blew air into them. It

seemed to take forever before she began to cough and sputter. Jordon picked her up and carried her back to the nearest safe piece of land. She clung to him with all her strength, gasping and crying. Tenderly the prince wiped the mud from her face with his cloak then wrapped her in the cloak itself. He made camp in record time, even managing to light a fire, apparently by sheer willpower. As she gained enough strength Alexandra crawled into the tent to change into drier clothes. Dressed and clean she went back out.

“Thank you. You saved my life, again. You are a true prince.” Prince Jordon opened his mouth to say something, but she kissed him and whatever he was going to say was lost. She sat down beside him and leaned against him to keep warm. Soon she was asleep. Jordon picked her up and put her into the tent.

“Sleep well, my beauty.” And he kissed her cheek.

Herbert had sat at the rim of the light from the fire. Any closer hurt his eyes. He felt his heart plummet when Alexandra called Jordon her true prince and kissed him. His hopes were dashed completely. She had chosen Jordon, and rightly. Jordon was everything a prince should be: strong and handsome, and able to save his love from death. Herbert was useless. He was a frog. He was nothing. It was time he faced that fact and left Alexandra to get on with her life. When Prince Jordon came out of the tent, Herbert hopped inside and over to the sleeping princess. Kissing her cheek, he saw her arm come up and jumped away. He needed no better sign that she had rejected him. His frog eyes couldn't see that she smiled or that her hand was cupped to hold and not push.

“Farewell, my true love. Farewell.” Herbert turned and hopped away. He jumped into the nearly fatal pond and swam to the bottom. There in the darkness he let his sorrow fill his heart.

## Chapter 11

Alexandra

In the morning Princess Alexandra woke with a splitting headache and an upset stomach. Prince Jordon came in moments after she awoke carrying a steaming cup. The fragrant steam began clearing her head immediately. As she sipped at the tea Prince Jordon explained that it was an herbal recipe given to him by an aunt. Alexandra blessed that aunt as she felt herself returning to her normal self. That was when she noticed that Prince Jordon was leaning over her with a proprietary air. The tent was small, and the princess had no room to move away. Whatever it was that the prince was thinking it was making Alexandra more and more uncomfortable. Snatches of the previous evening were coming back to her, and she could see where the shift in Jordon's attitude was coming from, and she could see where it could lead to trouble. She sighed; as long as Herbert was around that would keep Jordon at a distance. That, of course, would cause its own problems.

"What is the problem, dearest?" Jordon leaned closer to Alexandra. "Do you need more tea?"

"Tea?" Alexandra jumped at the chance to get Jordon out of the suddenly stifling tent. "Yes, I would like more tea." Jordon backed out, and went to the fire to pour more of his aunt's herbal mix. When he turned back to the tent Alexandra was crawling out into the morning sun. She squinted and shaded her eyes. Prince Jordon brushed off a log for her and wrapped his cloak around her. With the sunlight her headache had returned full force. She let the prince fuss over her for a minute before she asked.

"Where's Herbert?" Her question had the effect of a cold bucket of water on the Prince of Charmant. He had welcomed the absence of the Frog Prince. The mention of Herbert's name made the sun feel less bright, but he joined her in calling his name. After some time without any response, Prince Jordon was feeling both pleased and guilty at his pleasure. He put an arm around Alexandra. It felt good being held and wanted. It felt



very good to be kissed with such energy. She began to tingle and feel things she had never thought possible.

“There is nothing else we can do, my princess. He is either lost or he has left us for some reason of his own.” The princess twisted out from under Jordon’s arm.

“I must look for him,” she said. “He would not hesitate to look for you.” They spent the next few hours calling for Herbert and looking in every pool they could see. Finally Alexandra stood heartsick in the center of their camp. While Jordon sent shivers up and down her spine and she hadn’t time to come to terms with the fact that he had saved her life, twice now, Herbert was comfortable and easy to be with, except for the last few days.

“Then we must prepare to move on,” she said. “There is still Princess Avi out here somewhere for us to rescue.” She was determined that she wouldn’t let Jordon see how upset she was over Herbert’s disappearance. Prince Jordon scowled. He wasn’t interested in adding a princess to the comfortable duo that the fates had given him, but to argue with Alexandra might lose him the regard of the princess. In silence the prince struck camp. By the time he had finished Alexandra had been done with her tea.

The pair set off again for the ruins, Prince Jordon in the lead and Alexandra on her mare. This time they managed to avoid the worst of the treacherous bog around the ruins. The sun warmed the air and the stench of the bog was thick. Alexandra, who had dressed quickly rather than carefully, found that her clothes did not permit her to dismount and help the prince scout out the ground around them. She could only grit her teeth and watch Jordon struggle to find a path through the bog that Herbert would have seen instantly. But she refused to say anything. Either the Frog Prince had deserted them, or something had happened to him. She didn’t want to think about either possibility.

The sun was just beginning to settle in the west and throw long shadows to make the uncertain ground even less clear, when they arrived at the ruins. They were the remains of an old hunting lodge. There were three walls and part of a roof. The

inside walls had long ago fallen into rubble. What drew their eyes, though, was the expanse of water beside the lodge. Unnoticed on the far side of a slight rise. It was the largest body of water Alexandra had yet seen in the Fens. Floating on the water, gilded by the setting sun were swans. Not just a dozen, or even hundreds, but thousands of swans. It was a scene that would haunt Alexandra for the rest of her life. The water was still as glass, and the swans reflected as in a mirror, white with just a hint of gold from the setting sun. Jordon jumped off his horse and stood looking stunned at the sight before him.

“PRINCESS AVI!” His bellow made Alexandra start. The swans took off in a great flapping of white wings; as they wheeled they cut off the light of the sun. The princess shuddered, half at the sudden chill, and half at a feeling that someone was laughing at them. She shook herself.

“I’m impressed.” Alexandra slid off her mare, and began to unpack their gear.

“What are you doing?” Jordon asked, coming over to take the bags from Alexandra.

“Unpacking. You had better look after your own horse. I will manage here.”

“But,” Jordon stood staring at her holding half the pack. “But, you are a princess!”

“And you are a prince. What difference does that make?” She pulled the pack away from Jordon. “Go take care of your horse.” They made camp in silence, Alexandra setting up the tent and placing stones for the fire. Jordon prepared a quick supper. So distracted was he that several times his fingers were at great risk. He served Alexandra her plate with a bow and sat on a log across the fire.

“It is proper that you be served as befits your rank. You should not be out here at all.”

“And where exactly should I be? Waiting in a castle for you to save the world for me? Or perhaps you would prefer that I was out there with poor Avi as a swan?”

Prince Jordon sat unable to think of what to say.

“All my life,” she continued, “everyone has told me that I was less than I should be because I was not enchanted. Every-

one but Herbert; he alone saw me simply as a friend, no more and no less." She bowed her head. "Now he is gone," she whispered. "And only now do I learn his worth."

The prince opened his mouth several times then closed it again. Finally they both stared into the fire and thought their own thoughts.

Alexandra woke early and got the fire burning again. She made tea, and began toasting bread. When Jordon woke and crawled out of his blanket, breakfast was waiting for him.

"When we left our kingdoms," she said as she passed him a cup of steaming tea, "we also left behind our rank and privilege. You may journey with me as a companion. I wish neither a prince nor a servant with me."

"I will endeavor to leave my sensibilities behind, Prin...Alexandra, and be your companion as long as I am allowed." Alexandra simply nodded and took a pot to the lake for more water.

They stayed where they were all that day, discussing how they could find Avi in the midst of thousands of swans. Neither could come up with any real idea.

"How can I be a prince if I don't protect those who are weaker than I?" Jordon finally asked.

"I have no problem with you protecting the weak," Alexandra said. "I do have a problem with you assuming that I am weak just because I am a princess." Jordon went away scratching his head.

The swans returned through the day, and though they watched carefully, neither of them could see one swan acting any different from the others. The sun set and the pure white of the swans faded into grey, then black.

They spent the next day and the next watching the lake of swans. Finally, Jordon noticed that most of the time the swans flew off in the same direction – to the northwest. The companions packed their horses and set off to the west to go around the lake to find where the swans went. They fought their way through tangled brush and picked their way through bog and marsh. The lake was larger than they thought and it took days for them to even begin traveling north. Each evening they would watch the swans and note that they most often flew to the

northwest. Jordon became more comfortable sharing the work with Alexandra. She barely noticed the change. She most often sat in silence and worried about Herbert.

They came at last to a river flowing down out of the mountains and saw the swans flying over their heads. The path along the river was easier than around the lake, except when they had to cross a smaller river or creek. They usually were able to walk the horses across the streams, but once or twice they had to swim them through the cold, swift mountain water. The river led them up into the foothills and the princess and prince celebrated leaving the Fens behind. The horses stepped more confidently now that they were sure of their footing. That evening they saw the swans circling up ahead before dropping out of sight.

In the morning Alexandra saw traces of ruins where they had seen the swans the night before.

"We should leave the horses here," Jordon said, "and try to sneak up on those ruins. There may only be swans, but then again there may be more." Alexandra just nodded and followed the prince toward the ruins. There wasn't a lot of cover for them, but Jordon made the most of every tree, bush, or even patch of tall grass. They were hot and dusty by the time they were able to look over the remains of the grey stone walls. They saw an overgrown courtyard with a small pond with twelve swans floating serenely on the surface. Jordon leapt over the wall and looked around.

"I don't see anyone." He waved to her. "I think it's safe." Alexandra clambered over the wall and the two of them moved quietly toward the pond. Nobody came out to challenge them, and gradually they straightened.

"How are we to break the enchantment?" asked Alexandra. "I don't think we have a prince handy who is about to swear undying love to Princess Avi." She looked sideways at Jordon and grinned wryly.

"Prince Michael, who was to rescue Avi, is sleeping in Sopo. He is a friend of mine. Michael wouldn't thank me for interfering; he and Avi are a true love match." He sighed and looked at Alexandra. "Those are rare enough without us throw-

ing a spanner in the works.” He sat back on the grass. “Do you remember if there are windows in Avi’s enchantment? We need to talk to her.”

“I think she is supposed to be herself when there is a full moon shining on her.” Alexandra sat beside him. “The moon is almost full now.”

“Then we just wait for the moon to rise and hope she is here, not on the lake,” he said. Alexandra just nodded. Together they watched the sun set, and then the moon rise. Its light moved closer and closer to the swans on the pond. Finally it lit them with an eerie white glow. One of them shifted into mist and floated across the water to stand before them. Then the laughter started. The mist didn’t turn into a princess, but darkened and spread. Alexandra felt pressure on her, trying to push her out of herself. It reminded her of her father’s magicians trying to remedy her lack of enchantment, but worse, much worse. She fought it with the same determination that she had fought the magicians. The laughter grew louder, but the princess thought she could hear more anger than merriment. She remembered what Herbert had said about the shadow that had laughed at him, and felt the hatred which drove the shadow. It pushed her down and down and down.

## Chapter 12

Herbert

Herbert gradually realized that he couldn't stay at the bottom of the pond forever. The frog that he was could remain under water indefinitely, but the prince wouldn't let him. His duty to the Magic Kingdoms drove him, but more than that his love for Alexandra was a goad. In spite of saying goodbye to the princess, he couldn't let go of his love for her. So his love and his duty forced him to the surface, and once on the surface to follow the trail of Jordon and Alexandra. He had no difficulty picking up their trail, but he couldn't come near to matching their speed. So he hopped and swam for days to reach the ruins on the shore of the lake of swans.

"Oh, great," he thought. "I only have to get past a lake full of thousands of birds who eat frogs, and one of them may just happen to be a princess as cursed as I am." He stayed in the grass and watched the beautiful birds doing what appeared to be a ponderous dance around a small group of swans on one side of the lake. The opposite side to where the other two went. Herbert began hopping through the grass, keeping a nervous eye on the predators on the lake. Fortunately there still seemed to be plenty to eat in the lake, and none of the swans came looking for frogs in the grass. In fact, Herbert saw swans swimming and swans flying, but no swans walking on the shore. It gave him a little more confidence, but the frog in him made him keep to the safety of the grass.

Days of travel are not normal for a frog. Before, Alexandra had carried him most of the way, now he had to hop each weary mile himself. He was exhausted and sore. So it wasn't surprising that he got careless. A large jay swooped down and picked him out of the grass and flew over the lake.

"Let go of me, you stupid bird. Ow." The jay had him by a back leg and fiery pain shot through his back. The swans were dive bombing the jay, beating great blasts of wind from wings to force the smaller bird down to the water. The jay wasn't about to give up though, and weaved through the slower flying swans.

Herbert took a deep breath and twisted himself up and grabbed at the jay's tail feathers. The bird squawked and dropped Herbert. The water felt as hard as rock. Only half conscious he sank into the lake. He barely noticed the hard grip on his leg which pulled him back to the surface.

"Hey, frog! Wake up. Hey!" Herbert looked blearily up at a swan bending down at him.

"Ouch!" Herbert tried to jump up but his leg still hurt from the abuse the jay had given it.

"Easy, easy, we are not going to hurt you. You must be Herbert. Our mistress would like to talk to you." Herbert forced himself to relax and look around. He was lying on a small rocky island surrounded by swans. As far as he could see, he could see the swans staring back at him. One swan sailed gracefully forward until Herbert could focus on her. She nodded her head to him. Herbert rolled to his feet, ignoring the pain in his leg and back. He bowed as best he could in his frog body.

"Princess Avi, I would say it was a pleasure to see you, but our circumstance, however, makes this meeting bitter. Nonetheless, it gladdens me to see you well, if not your true self."

"Herbert, you have learned to speak like a prince since we were at school." The princess's voice shook, and Herbert could hear the effort that went into her casual tone. His heart went out to her. He knew how horrible being in enchanted form was. It was only his determination to help his love that distracted him from his fear. Alone in the Fens it had to be many times worse for Princess Avi.

"I am afraid, Herbert. Michael was supposed to have come for me by now. I don't know what to do. I go to sleep afraid that I will forget that I am Princess Avi." She swam in a circle around Herbert's small island. Even as a swan Herbert could see that she needed desperately to collect herself.

"How do you manage, Prince Herbert? How can you be both a prince and a frog?"

"I manage only because to do otherwise is unthinkable. Alexandra may need me. If I give up I fail not only myself, but her as well."

"But what have I to do but wait for Michael to come and

rescue me?”

“Michael needs your help. Disaster has struck the Magic Kingdoms. There was a ball in Sopo—”

“What has happened? I was preparing to go when the enchantment came on me.”

“The enchantment came on Princess Anaeth early, her and all those in Sopo. Unfortunately most of the heirs of the Kingdoms were there, including Michael. He cannot rescue you, so you must rescue him.”

“I cannot leave this lake, Herbert. He told me that I would stay here until I forget everything that I am.”

“He? Who told you this?”

“I never saw him truly. I only saw a shadow. His voice was awful, it made me feel dirty.”

“Did he laugh?” The swan didn’t answer. She just ducked her head in the water, and shuddered. The pair sat in silence for a long time. As the sun set, Herbert shook himself.

“Prince Jordon and Alexandra came to this lake a few days ago. Did you see them?”

“They headed to the northwest, where all the swans but me and my maids must go.” Avi pointed with her head. “They may have reached the other ruins. He laid a trap for those who would try to rescue me. Those ruins are the bait.” She trumpeted to the swans around her. Herbert was almost deafened by their reply.

“My swans tell me they are there. They are in great danger. I cannot go. A barrier, like a glass wall, stops me, but one of my swans will carry you.” She trumpeted again and a swan swam up to him. Herbert climbed painfully onto his back.

“Though I am trapped here for the moment, I will send my swans as I am able to learn what is happening through the Kingdoms.” For the first time since Herbert had seen her, she looked like a princess. He knew that she was going to test the trap that held her every way that she could. Their mysterious enemy had not broken Princess Avi, but forged the young woman into a determined foe.

Herbert saluted her as best he could, then the swan took off, and he was occupied only with holding on. The swan circled



over the tiny island once then streaked toward the northwest. Herbert's frog vision couldn't make out the ground below him. For hours the swan flew. The sky grew dark then brightened with the rise of the full moon. Soon after moonrise they circled and landed on a small pond enclosed by a stone wall. No one was there. Only swans swam in the water.

Herbert leapt from his carrier's back into the tall grass. He hadn't come this far to be eaten by some swan as a snack. The cob that had flown him trumpeted to the others then pushed the frog toward the water. Herbert leapt into the blessedly cool wet of the pond. The swans came over to him and nodded their heads to him.

"Well, it is nice to see that Avi's authority extends to this place, but I wish one of you could talk to me. I need to know what has happened to Alexandra and Jordon."

"Herbert, I never thought I would ever be this glad to see you." A crow hopped out of the grass. The bird bowed its head. "He thought this a great joke, Herbert. He has taken all that I am and used it to mock me. I have failed, Herbert. I have failed. He took her away, and I could not stop him."

"Oh, Jordon, I would not have wished this on anyone, least of all you, my friend. Alexandra will be heartbroken to see you suffer so."

"No more than she suffered for you, Herbert. She mourned you as lost. What happened to you?"

"I thought that I was useless to her, and left her to a true prince. But I am still more prince than frog, and my heart wouldn't let me rest. I found Princess Avi and she sent me here on the swan, as you saw."

"Princess Avi? Is she well?"

"I believe I left her better than I found her. Her enchantment holds her, but she is no longer in despair. Michael will be proud of her when next they meet." He hopped up to the crow and put one frog foot on the crow's claw. "We must put aside our differences and seek out Princess Alexandra to rescue her from whatever foul enchantment our enemy has put her under."

Prince Jordon cocked his head to look at the Frog Prince.

"I agree that Alexandra is our first concern, but whoever our

enemy is, he has found a match in our princess. He carried her off, but she kept her own shape. She deserves whatever sacrifices we must make for her sake.”

“Which direction was she taken?”

“To the north. I saw that much, but I feared to follow.” The crow turned away. “I am afraid of heights,” he cawed. “Can you imagine, a bird that is afraid to fly?”

“When I became a frog, the instincts of my body drove me. If you can trust your body, you can fly in spite of your fear.” Herbert croaked with laughter. “Our enchantments are most complete. It is to our advantage that our enemy is so meticulous in his hate. We will rescue Alexandra then see about removing our enchantments. I have been a frog more than long enough.”

“Not all of his hate is to our advantage. He said he was tired of playing by rules that always gave mortals a way out. My enchantment cannot be removed, except by death. I am doomed to be a crow for all my life.”

“Prince Jordon, if Alexandra can resist his magic and remain herself then we can find a way to break your spell. Trust and hope.”

“Trust and hope then, frog. Let me try my wings.” The crow threw himself into the air. For a moment Herbert thought Jordon would fall back to the earth, but his wings caught the air and the crow soared on the night currents. Jordon quickly returned to the pond.

“I cannot fly safely at night, but come the morning we fly north.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The cell was cold and damp. Alexandra sneezed at the mold in the straw pallet. The only light was weak sunlight from a small barred window high in one wall. The cell door was just bars separating her from more cold and damp. She couldn't see the stairs from the corridor outside her cell. She knew there were stairs down to this place because she could hear boots on the steps when he brought her food and water. The keys to her cell hung on a hook on the wall across from her cell. A sneer at her

helplessness she was sure.

She remembered nothing between being attacked at the pond and waking in the cell. She had no idea how long she had been in the cell, but she begrudged every minute. First she had lost Herbert, and now Jordon. Alexandra was sure that the loss of both princes was her fault. Somehow she could have been more understanding, or more like a princess. Somehow she should have been able to make it work, yet here she was without either prince.

The princess paced around her cell as she had every few minutes since waking. Three stone walls and one of rough iron bars. The stones were cut and fitted as closely as she had ever seen. Her hands stung from trying to bend the bars. She was well and truly trapped. Her jailer kept to no rhythm or schedule. Her only clue to the passage of time was the light from the window, but even the sun seemed unreliable. Alexandra froze as she heard footsteps on the stairs. A figure cloaked in shadow stopped in front of the bars to her cell.

“Trying to bend iron, Princess?” The voice was musical, but on a key that made her ears itch. “I would have thought you would have seen the futility of that immediately. Perhaps you are not as smart as I have been led to believe.” The shadow laughed, and Alexandra shuddered. “No matter, you only need to be smart enough to cooperate with me, and you will soon be free and heading back to your comfortable palace.” Alexandra bit her tongue to keep from responding to her enemy’s taunts. “Cat got your tongue, my dear? I can fix that. I can fix anything. I can solve all your problems, if you would just help me.” She turned and looked up at her little window. The light went out, and she was left in darkness with the shadow. “If you don’t cooperate I will turn you into a cat, and throw you in with my dogs.”

“Try,” Alexandra’s fury escaped her control. “Just try. You have before, and you failed then. You will fail now.” The darkness made her skin crawl, as she waited for the onslaught of magic. But it didn’t come.

“No, I fear you are too strong, for now. But I will be back. Let your will slip just the tiniest bit, and you will be lapping

cream from a saucer.” There was silence for so long that Alexandra thought her tormentor had left. But just as she was ready to feel her way back to the moldy straw in the corner of her cell, the voice hissed out of the darkness.

“There will be no way back. No kiss from a prince, no vow, no magic will save you. I am changing the rules, Princess. I am tired of being forgotten and you will suffer for it. You all will suffer.” This time she heard the footsteps retreating away from the cell. She sat down where she was and tried to stop shaking. If she couldn’t stop the shaking then she was lost.

Forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

At first light Herbert climbed onto Jordon’s back. His leg wasn’t nearly as sore this morning. Jordon had to struggle to get off the ground with the extra weight, but once in the air he could use the air currents to help him along.

“Where to, frog?” he asked.

“North, as the crow flies. We will have to stop and investigate any ruins or buildings that we see.” The pair flew north and watched the ground grow rougher beneath them. Jordon could see the causeway away in the distance, but no one traveled it this morning.

By noon they were well into the mountains, and keeping a careful watch for giants. Jordon flew slowly, gliding to rest his wings, and scanning the ground below with great care. He saw no more ruins, or buildings either. Finally, he landed on an old tree.

“I need a rest. My wings are aching.”

“We need to think a while anyway. It is easier to do that on the ground.” Herbert looked over the edge of the branch, “Well, close to the ground. I was hoping that he wouldn’t have taken her far, but either we have missed something or he has gone farther and faster than we can.”

“Are you sure we should be looking for a building?” the crow flapped his wings to loosen stiff muscles. “He could be hiding anywhere.”

"You said he carried her off in her own shape." The Frog Prince ducked. "If he is going to hold her then he needs a building with a tower or a cellar to lock her in. Anything else she is likely to escape."

"The only buildings that are complete are over north of the causeway. There is the border fort in the pass."

"Isn't that fort part of the Northern Kingdoms?"

"I think so? What of it?"

"I remember when we first studied the transformation curses at school. We were told how the magic only holds in the Magic Kingdoms. I asked why the spelled royalty weren't just taken north until the magic quit. I was told there were two possibilities; one was that the enchanted one would come up against a magical barrier, like the one holding Princess Avi to her lake." Herbert paused.

"Well, the other possibility?" prompted Jordon.

"The other chance was that the spell would be broken, but the wrong way. I, for instance, would become a frog in truth, with no memory of being human, and no way of returning. Ever. The teacher said it was a way of enforcing the rules."

"The rules? Didn't he mean the law?"

"She, and no she didn't. She was talking about something quite different from the law, but the bell rang and somehow I never had a chance to ask anymore about it."

"Why rules other than the law? The Council sets the laws of succession, what else is there?" Jordon hopped from one leg to the other.

"I wonder. What if the law governed the succession, but the rules governed the enchantments?" Herbert tried to rub his head but his arm was too short.

"But aren't they the same thing?"

"No. No, they aren't. But I don't know how this is helping us. What we need to decide is how close to the border we are willing to risk going." Jordon shook himself again.

"Time to go. We'll think about it on the way. I'll make sure we stop on this side of the border." Herbert clambered awkwardly onto the crow.

"Jordon."

“Yes, Herbert?”

“Next time we stop at a pond.”

Cawing with laughter Jordon threw himself off the branch and flew toward the causeway.

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Alexandra was hungry and thirsty. She was sure that it had only been hours since the voice in the shadow had last visited her, but it felt like days. It was light again outside her little window, but she had less trust than ever that it was actually sunlight that she was seeing. To occupy herself she ran the conversation with her captor over and over in her head. Something about it bothered her. She sat on the straw and forced herself to think.

He was angry, that was certain. Angry at her, but more than that, angry at all of us. All of who? She shook her head. All of who? She should be able to figure this out. She used to be good at this, but her thirst was raging at her making it hard to think. Who? People like her. But nobody else was like her. She was the only one who didn't have an enchantment. That was it! She almost stood up in her excitement. He was angry at the enchanted – the rulers of the Magic Kingdoms. Who did the enchanting? The fairies were the only ones with the power to enchant. He was angry because he had been forgotten. Forgotten, but that was the point. One had to 'forget' someone, or there would be no enchantment. But one of the fairies who was always forgotten? But who was he, and why was he forgotten? And why did he care? Why did he care so much that he was waging war on the whole of the Magic Kingdoms?

There was a clanging outside of her cell. The guards with her meal. She jumped up and went to the door. The guards, as always, acted like she didn't exist. They pushed her tray under the cell door, then turned and left. Eagerly she looked at the food on the tray, and screamed with frustration. The food was bad. She checked the water out of desperation, but it smelled odd. She threw the food and the water out of the cell. Then regretted it. The smell was horrible. Alexandra went to stand under the little window. Window to the sun or not, it provided

the only fresh air in her cell. After a while she went back to the straw in the corner, and tried to think. But she had lost her train of thought. She had been on the verge of something vitally important. It was gone. Alexandra pounded her fists in frustration. She went back to not shaking. She watched the window and breathed occasional drafts of fresh air. As she watched she realized that the patch of light on the floor never moved. The light wasn't sunlight. Of course, that was what she was trying to figure out. Pleased with herself at her discovery, the princess went to sleep.

## Chapter 13

Herbert

Well to the south of the tower was a tree. The crow and the frog sat at the foot of the tree. Herbert luxuriated in a small pool caught in the roots of the tree.

“Do you think it is worth scouting? I don’t think it is so much across the border as on the border. Unless we have missed something, or I am completely wrong about the direction he took, this is the first building he could have headed for.”

“There are those guards; he wouldn’t be able to hide her from them.”

“If it is close enough on the border, his magic would work well enough to control them.”

“And how do you plan testing your theory? We can’t just hop on over and hope that we hit a barrier instead of losing ourselves forever.”

“That, my friend, is why you are going to stay here while I do a fly over the tower.” Jordon spread his wings, but Herbert jumped out of his pool to hold the crow down.

“You can’t risk it. There must be another way. We don’t even know if Alexandra is in there.” Their argument would have continued for some time, except that they heard something. It was very faint, maybe even just the wind. But to the two princes it sounded like a scream.

“Stay here, I will do three circles around the tower, then come back. If I lose myself, you will see me meander off like any other crow.”

“Good luck, friend.” Herbert let go of the crow’s foot.

The Prince of Charmant took off and flew toward the tower. He was as terrified as he had ever been in his life. Fighting the assassin in Alexandra’s palace was easy compared to this. Then he would only have lost his life. Now he could lose himself, what made him Prince Jordon of Charmant. He was ready to lose all of that for the sake of the one person who made his life worth living. He cawed at the irony. The tower was close. He banked to make his first circle and saw a rabbit caught in a



guard's snare. It would make a pleasant snack. It wasn't often a crow found such a... What was he thinking? Jordon fought to regain control, but he was being pushed out of the crow's mind. He had to return to Herbert, the frog. Frog, good, harder to catch than rabbit, safer, human smell about...

With his heart in his mouth, Herbert watched Jordon fly toward the tower. After his experience in the swamp, Herbert was terrified at the prospect of losing himself again, but he would risk it for Alexandra. The crow was almost at the edge of Herbert's vision now and still he flew on. The tower was a grey blur, the crow a black speck. The frog could see him moving about the tower then he started back to the tree. Herbert didn't think he had circled three times. Jordon was lost. Herbert bowed his head. He hadn't wanted to think about what it would mean if his companion in the quest was lost. Now he had no choice.

The crow was circling over something then he headed straight back to Herbert. Hope burned in the Frog Prince. This didn't act like any other crow. It cawed several times as he landed right by the bush where Herbert waited.

"Almost lost, too close to the border. I can't do it again. I can't, but she is there. In the tower. I heard her crying at one of the windows. That was all that gave me the strength to come back."

"What was it that you circled part way back?"

"Old well. It was strange. I thought I could smell her. Must have been the wind from the tower."

"You had better rest, Jordon. It is my turn to scout out the territory. I am used to fighting off the frog, perhaps it will help."

"You have always been stronger than me, be careful." The crow hopped into the branches of the bush. "I will wait for you here. I need time to remember who I am." Herbert hopped out of the bush.

"Herbert." The frog stopped and turned around. "I am no coward, but I can't face that again. I can't."

"I never thought you were a coward. I still don't." He turned to hop away.

"Hey, frog!" Herbert waited again. "When you find her, let her kiss you. At least one of us should be free." Herbert hopped

away without replying. He could hear the crow talking to himself in the bush.

He headed toward where he remembered Jordon circling. Soon he could smell the water. He found the well easily and looked down the shaft. He couldn't see to the bottom, but that didn't mean a lot. The water didn't smell too far away. He could also very faintly smell something else. It reminded him of Alexandra, but it was coming from inside the well, not from the wind.

"Alexandra," he called. He wasn't sure if he heard a reply so he leaned farther over to call again, and slipped. The fall wasn't all that far, but it stunned him for a few minutes. He floated in the water and looked around. He saw what looked to be a window a couple of feet up the wall. He was sure he was wrong, because who put a window at the bottom of a well? Swimming to the wall, Herbert saw that the stones were rough with large cracks between them. He sighed, even if there was no window it was on the way up. It took him many painful tries before he reached the sill of what was in fact a barred window. He could definitely hear that someone was there, sleeping he thought. He set himself carefully and waited.

Alexandra was dreaming that Herbert had come to rescue her, only when she kissed him she turned into a frog. When she tried to scream all that came out was a croaking sound. Herbert was laughing at her, only it wasn't him. The laughter was too cruel to be her friend's. She woke with a start and looked around. She tried to sit up, but it took two tries before she was successful. A shadowed figure was watching her through the bars to the cell.

"I could almost admire you, if you weren't just a mortal." The voice caressed her with the promise of relief. A hand was holding a glass of water through the bars.

"A drink. Something to ease that thirst which must be torturing you." She shook her head, not trusting her voice. "Drink and be free of all that is keeping you here."

"Won't forget." Alexandra's voice was just a croak, like in her dream. She started to laugh, a wretched strangled laugh, but it galvanized her enemy. The hand shook, and she could see the knuckles turning white.

“Soon,” the shadow hissed. “Soon you will have no choice but to forget.” It placed the glass of water carefully on the floor, just out of reach of Alexandra’s arm. Then it left her alone, not hearing how the laughter became tears, and the tears wrenching sobs. She lay on the straw no longer caring that if she weakened then she was lost. She had no strength left. No strength at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Something thumped onto her back.

“Oof, that was higher than I thought.”

“Leave me alone.” She rolled over and whatever was on her back was gone.

“Alexandra, it’s me. It’s Herbert.”

“Herbert is gone,” she rasped. “I drove him off. I never told him how much he meant to me. Now he is gone. They’re all gone. Everyone I love is gone. There is just me. I’m almost gone.”

“Alexandra, it is me. I have come to rescue you.” Herbert jumped onto her stomach. “Look at me!”

She stared at the frog sitting square on her stomach.

“It’s a trick.” She looked around. “You’re trying to trick me. Herbert is lost in the Fens. I know it was my fault. I never told him. You won’t catch me this way.” She snatched at the frog, but it leapt away. Alexandra crawled out of the straw and went after it but it stayed just ahead of her. She was so intent on catching the frog that she banged her head on the bars to her cell. The frog was on the other side of the bars. It went and sniffed at the glass.

“Well, I’ll be...it doesn’t smell drugged.” It pushed at the glass, and it slid a few inches. Pushed again and it was probably within reach. “Once more for good luck.” Alexandra grabbed the frog and held it tightly. Using her other hand she pulled herself to her knees. She leaned on the bars and stared at her captive through them.

“Remember the night you graduated. I came down to congratulate you. The only one to be there to see you go. You kiss-

ed me. Grabbed me by the ears and kissed me right on the lips. If I hadn't already been in love with you, I would have fallen in love right there and then." Alexandra could feel her eyes trying to let tears run down her cheeks, but she felt dry as a bone. "Please kiss me again, my love. Free us both."

"I remember you turned red as a beet." She brought the frog to her lips. "I have loved you since you walked into my home and dared to be my friend. I should have told you long before now."

Herbert went limp and thought only about drinking in the kiss of the woman he loved. His whole body tingled and twitched. If becoming a frog was being squeezed and unable to breathe, then this was taking one long eternal breath in. He felt the magic break like glass all over his skin. The world spun and danced about him so he had to catch the bars with his hands to hold himself steady. His hands! He had hands again. He was human again. Herbert knelt with his head against the cool, rough iron of the bars and wept. He felt Alexandra holding his face. And he lifted his head to look at her.

"Princess Alexandra, will you consent to be my wife?"

"Don't you need to ask my father and your father too?" She was staring back at him willing an answer from him.

"Yours is the only answer that matters." Her smiling dirty, tear streaked face was the most beautiful thing in all the world.

"Yes, I will marry you, Herbert."

"We had better figure out how to get you out of here then." Alexandra smiled again.

"The keys are on the wall behind you." It was only a moment's work to unlock the cell door and let Alexandra out. Herbert then carefully relocked the door and hung the keys back on the wall.

"Confusion to our enemies."

The princess said nothing but threw her arms around Herbert and kissed him thoroughly.

"You are blushing again, my prince."

"I just remembered I am not a frog anymore." He looked at himself. "I will need some clothes." Alexandra peeled off a layer of clothes.

“One advantage of being a princess: I am always overdressed. I can go in my shift and underskirt for a while.” She giggled as Herbert struggled into her dress. “We will find you some more suitable attire, after we are well away from this place.”

Hand in hand they crept up the stairs.

# **BOOK 2**

## **Rapunzel and the Crow**

## Chapter 14

Jordon

Jordon hopped about under the tree and despised himself thoroughly. For the first time in his life, his courage had utterly deserted him, and the prince had no way of dealing with his lack. No matter how he cudged himself, somehow his wings refused to lift him toward that tower standing in the afternoon sun. It had been some time since Herbert had left him shaking and gasping under the bush, and had hopped away into the grass. The Frog Prince's courage shamed Prince Jordon. In spite of everything that had happened between them, he found himself admiring the frog. Herbert was an enigma, almost as much of a puzzle as Alexandra herself. He left behind his sword and his princely honor. Yet he had survived alone in the wilderness, brought comfort to Princess Avi, and demonstrated determination and courage second to none. He was a true prince. He was able to help Alexandra while Jordon could only stand and curse his impotence. There was nothing more Jordon could offer Alexandra, or anyone else. It was time that he left. The crow took to wing, his traitorous muscles obeying the impulse to flee this place.

The sun warmed his black feathers while the moving air cooled them. It was almost worth being a crow to experience the bliss of flight. He barrel rolled for the sheer joy of flying. He was free, Prince Jordon was dead. Others would have to solve the problems of this world. He could see amazingly well from up here. He would watch until Herbert and Alexandra came out. The crow had no doubts that the Frog Prince would succeed where he had failed. Sure enough he saw two figures coming out of the tower and running hand in hand toward the tree. Even at this distance he recognized the princess, and Herbert, human again, also in a dress! There was a strange feeling in his chest as he realized that she must have kissed her prince. There really was nothing left for him. Nothing at all. He heard shouts from the tower, and armed men poured out of the tower in pursuit of the pair. They were too close. They were going to

catch the prince and princess. Jordon screamed his rage and stooped like a hawk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Herbert fell and cursed the dress, which had tangled in his legs. They weren't going to make it to the forest where they could hide.

"Run, my love, I will hold them off. Jordon is by the tree. He can guide you if I am captured." He turned and gathered his dignity to face his pursuers. He felt, rather than saw, Alexandra stop and seek desperately for anything that could be used as a weapon. She had made her choice, he needed to concentrate on giving both of them the time to escape. It looked like an army coming after them, but once he stopped and looked back he saw that it was actually only six men. In their condition it might as well have been an army. They were spread out in a line, the fastest almost on top of him. A black streak flashed between Herbert and the nearest guard. The guard flinched and Herbert leaped forward twisting the sword away from him. He slammed the hilt into the side of the guard's head. One down, five to go. The next man was on top of the prince, and he had to jump to one side. Herbert spun on one foot and locked swords with the third attacker. He heard a harsh caw and snarled curses and knew that Jordon was attacking the second guard.

With a shout Herbert threw his opponent to the ground and ran forward to the next man, but instead of engaging the guard's sword he ducked inside the point and threw him into the one getting up behind him. They both fell to the ground with a grunt. He spared a glance for Jordon in time to see Alexandra fell the guard with a broken branch to the back of the head. She ran forward to the two on the ground and gave each of them a whack on the head. Herbert turned to face the last two. The slowest guard had stopped and looked like he was about to run back to the tower for reinforcements. Jordon swooped around the fellow's head. The man swung around trying to hit the crow. Jordon raked his talons down the man's face. Alexandra was



hefting her stick and eying guard number five.

"Help Jordon," Herbert called and turned to the last guard. He was the biggest of the six guards. The man hefted his sword and grinned at the prince.

"Let's see what you're made of, girly boy." Herbert simply stood and waited. The other man circled, looking for an opening.

"Don't think that you can break a prisoner out of my tower without me breaking a few of your bones. I'm the one who has to explain her escape to short stuff."

"Not much of a guard are you if you never saw us." The prince laughed. "Perhaps you are better with the sword." The guard lunged forward and swung a deadly blow at Herbert's head. The prince stepped aside and tapped the guard's arm with his blade. It rang on chain mail. The guard growled and lunged again. Again Herbert danced aside.

"You aren't bad. You got that girl down the stairs past me, and you know a thing or two about that sword you are holding." Another lunge and once again Herbert tapped the big man's arm.

Herbert heard Alexandra gasp behind him and felt the heavy branch brush by his ear. It crunched into the guard's helmet and he staggered. Herbert kicked his feet out from beneath him. The prince had his sword point at the guard's throat before the big man hit the ground.

"Hold!" Herbert tried to look in command and deadly. The big guard lay still.

"I wish I had you in my squad, lad. You have guts and talent." For the first time the guard got a good look at Alexandra. "But who is she? She isn't my prisoner. After all this you rescued the wrong girl." Herbert looked at Alexandra who gave a shrug.

"I didn't see any other women. But I was in that basement."

Jordon circled and landed on Herbert's shoulder.

"Whoever it is we can't just leave her a prisoner," Jordon said. "Not without at least talking to her."

"Hey, wait a minute." The guard started to sit up. Herbert's sword point didn't budge and Alexandra hefted her stick. He lay

down and sighed. "Do any of you know where I can get work? My job won't be worth spit after this."

"Talk to my father in Poond, tell him that his son is alive and well."

"Who are you? The Guardmaster's son?"

"In a sense." Herbert bowed. "I am Prince Herbert of Poond, and the heir to the throne. Give the King my name and my message and I assure you that he will reward you."

"Well, I suppose if I am to be tossed on my back by some youngster it might as well be by a prince." The man held his hands out flat. "As your prisoner I will do your bidding, and not knowingly work against you in any way until such time as you release me." He grinned. "This way I have good reason not to be present when those idiots try to explain to short stuff how they lost both prisoners." The man's face went sober. "There is something wrong with that one, I tell you. He gives me the shivers."

"What is this man's name?" asked Alexandra.

"I have no idea, he never told me. With your permission?" Herbert stepped back warily, but the big guard simply picked up the sword by the blade and offered it to Herbert. Herbert took it and handed it back.

"You will need it. It is no short road to Poond." The big man simply nodded and walked away, sheathing his sword casually. Alexandra shook her head then looked at the guards.

"You may as well help yourself to some better clothes. Though, you do look cute in a dress." She giggled as Herbert blushed. It didn't take long for Herbert to strip down all the men and tie them securely. He felt a lot more comfortable in the guard uniform, even if it was a little baggy. The trio set out back to the tower since Jordon refused to stay behind again. He rode on Herbert's shoulder and hopped nervously from one foot to the other. The three walked up to the tower and quickly found the stairs. They realized that the entire complement of guards had chased them. No one else was here. Alexandra and Herbert split up and started trying doors. Finally a small door on the top landing of the stairs yielded a cry from inside. Herbert found the key on the wall and unlocked the door.

Inside they found a young woman about their own age, dressed in rags and with her hair cut short. She was standing in the middle of the floor holding a tray ready to throw.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I am Herbert of Poond, this is the Princess Alexandra, and the crow is Jordon of Charmant." He bowed gracefully.

"Jordon of Charmant is a strange name for a crow, Herbert."

"He is a prince under enchantment."

"I suppose that he wants me to kiss him to break the enchantment?"

Jordon flapped over to her and landed on her shoulder.

"It would be a great privilege to be kissed by you, but unfortunately no kiss but that of death itself can release this spell." The young woman started at Jordon's voice coming from a crow. She tentatively stroked his head with her finger.

"Why, your feathers are as soft as silk. I would hate to think that I didn't at least attempt to break your curse." She turned to Jordon and kissed his beak. "Ah, me, at least the attempt was made." She looked around the room. "There is nothing in this room that I desire to take with me. My friends, let us leave this place."

Herbert and Alexandra looked at each other then Alexandra extended her hand to the young woman. She looked at Herbert and smiled fondly.

"My prince and my love rescued me." The young woman smiled and curtsied to Herbert.

"I did not realize that I had been rescued by a man of such distinction. I am flattered."

"Let's go. This tower is run by an evil being that held me prisoner in a deep dungeon. I don't know where he is, but I don't want to wait until he returns."

She took Alexandra's hand and followed the princess out the door and out of the tower. Once out in field they took a wide swing around the guards tied on the grass. Except Herbert who left a knife within reach of one of them. The four of them then headed south toward the causeway.

"I suppose I should introduce myself, friends," the young

woman said. "My name is Rapunzel. I was on an excursion to your land when I found myself locked up in that tower."

"I thought," said Alexandra, "that there was no magic in the north."

"It is forbidden." Rapunzel shook her head. "I don't know how you tolerate it."

"Most down here don't just tolerate the enchantments but take pride in them. I was seen as outrageous because I had no enchantment though I was a princess." Alexandra shook her head. Then grinned at Herbert. "Though my prince here dared to value me for who I was. Jordon, too, is a good and true friend. Now I must ask you where you wish us to take you, for we are on a quest to free the Magic Kingdoms from a malevolent being. The very one who enchanted both Jordon and my love."

"I will accompany you on your quest if you will allow. I think that your captor may be the same as mine." She brushed Jordon's head. "Besides, I believe I have fallen for this brave crow." Herbert and Alexandra grinned at each other and Jordon cawed his approval. The four of them started down the causeway toward the Council Village.

## Chapter 15

Rapunzel

The Council Village was even busier than usual. The Council of Rulers had been meeting longer than any time in living memory. Messengers rode at break-neck speed back and forth across the Kingdoms. People quietly searched for the missing heirs. Others searched not so quietly for alternate solutions to the enchantments that were threatening the stability of the Magic Kingdoms.

Then a stranger from the north had sauntered into town and inquired the way to Poond. The guards rushed him into the presence of the King of Poond. After five minutes with the stranger, the King's shouts roused the Council. A corps of riders rode north on the causeway. The villagers gathered in the square to speculate about the cause of these proceedings. Some said that the northern kingdoms were invading, others that civil war was breaking out. Few said wait and be patient. As the day wore on, they wandered back to their work.

Early in the morning the riders rode back into the village before anyone was awake to hear them. Alexandra, Herbert and Rapunzel with Jordon on her shoulder were whisked unceremoniously into the Council Chamber. In spite of the early hour all the rulers of the Magic Kingdoms were there; King Albert of Poond smiled broadly at his son and nodded to Alexandra. The others glared at the young people. King Charmant waved them to seats on one side of the table.

"Young woman, I do not have the pleasure of your acquaintance, but may I introduce the rulers of the Magic Kingdoms. I am King Charmant of the Charming Kingdom and these are King Albert of Poond, King Orthin of Avienne, King John of the Aliarne, Queen Jeela of the White Mountains, Duke Hans of the Enchanted Forest, King Janes of Mirage, and Queen Lacey of the Realm de Verre. We also have with us Mr. Smith from the School Kingdom. Unfortunately we have no one of rank from Sopo."

"I am Rapunzel, Sire. A daughter of the kingdoms north of

the mountains." She stood up and curtsied to the assembled council. Her mother would never have believed it, thought Rapunzel.

"You are not a princess?" asked Queen Jeela.

"No, I am the child of merchants."

"I am not sure we need to keep you from your rest, Rapunzel." King Charmant nodded kindly and turned to Herbert and Alexandra.

A black crow flew over to King Charmant, and pecked the King on the head.

"Don't be rude, Father." The crow hopped down to the table. Charmant stared blankly at the crow. "You have no idea of what we are up against. Rapunzel was held captive by the same being that enchanted me into this crow form. This person tried to hold Princess Alexandra captive, brought on Prince Herbert's enchantment early, and I suspect, had a hand in the early arrival of the Sleep of Sopo."

A deep silence greeted the crow's outburst.

"It must be a trick. No Charmant has ever been enchanted. How dare you show up in this uncouth form and claim to be my son! You, Princess, what are you trying to prove, bringing in this impostor?" King Charmant stood up and turned away from the crow and the table.

"Sire," replied Herbert, "it is no hoax. It is the work of a cunning and evil adversary."

"If it is not a hoax," roared the King, "then why do you and this so called princess stand before me whole of mind and body, claiming that my son is bespelled?" He turned to face the shocked rulers of the Council. "I would rather believe that you are all liars than that my son would be so foolish as to allow himself to be enchanted!"

"Your Majesty," Alexandra said, "I fear that you are proving a theory that I have been considering for some time."

"I will not be spoken back to by some upstart young girl!" The King of Charmant was red and gasping with rage. He leaned over as if he intended to strike the princess, but she looked him in the eye and refused to cower.

"Then you are already lost. Your enemy will overcome

these lands and darkness will reign while you roar and bicker about your royal honor.” Herbert stood and took her hand, Rapunzel moved to stand on her other side with Jordon perched once again on her shoulder.

“I wish to hear them speak,” the King of Poond stood up at his place and glared at King Charmant.

“I, too, wish to hear what they have to say,” said Alexandra’s father, also standing.

“If they have news of my daughter, I want to hear it,” said King Orthin, standing as well.

“Whatever they have to say will be better than listening to more of our arguments,” said the young Duke Hans. The other rulers shrugged and nodded their agreement. The King of Charmant visibly deflated and sat slowly back in his chair. The other rulers also sat back and looked at Alexandra with expressions ranging from encouraging to challenging.

“The enchantments were not intended to be an expedient way of deciding who will marry who. In school we learned the nature and some of the history of each enchantment, but nothing about their purpose. We have assumed that they have always been an integral part of our culture. They are just there. That is why my parents were so upset when I failed to be given an enchantment. But there must be more to it than that. The person who enchanted Jordon stated that they were no longer playing by the rules. Rules mean some agreement about purpose, and an agreement that it is to everyone’s advantage to obey the rules.”

“Our adversary is breaking the rules because he is angry. He has been forgotten. While we traveled south I realized that if the rule he was breaking was that of limiting his spells and leaving a loophole—a method for breaking the enchantment—then there had to be a rule which states that all enchantments must be able to be broken. Or, to state it in another way, there must always be an answer. The enchantments are to be a test. A test of a prince or princess’s ability to deal with pressure and the unknown. Because we have been simply taking the enchantments for granted we have been bypassing the test. For generations we have been failing the test.”

The room erupted into a confusion of shouting.

Mr. Smith looked at Alexandra and beamed.

“Quiet, please.” His voice, though soft, quieted the Council and left everyone staring at him. “She is quite correct. I find it a remarkable achievement that Alexandra has been able to recreate the purpose behind the enchantments from so little information.” He looked around at the stunned faces and shook his head sadly. “When you people moved into our land, we realized that we could not stop you or control you without severe cost to ourselves. So we struck a bargain with the rulers of that time. They would leave us to live our lives in peace, and in return we would help them determine the fitness of their future rulers, and equip their future leaders with what they needed to rule justly and well. Over time you forgot about the test, and now you begin to forget about ruling justly as well. You have become dependent on us for the enchantments which are now little more than status symbols. Just around the time that Alexandra was born we decided to try an experiment and not provide an enchantment for the new princess. She has done better than we had ever hoped. The rest of you have done less well, but I expect you will do better with time. Think of this crisis as your final exam. It is not completely of our making, but it is a fitting end.” He began to shimmer and grow transparent. He raised his hand to still the questions ready to burst from all those present. Just before he disappeared he looked at Alexandra. “Your opponent is no longer following the rules, but be assured that the rest of us shall keep the Rules to the end of the game. Farewell, best of our pupils.” And he was gone.

“But who are you?” cried Duke Hans standing up and looking around wildly.

“We are those who you have called ‘fairy,’” said Mr. Smith’s voice. “You could say that we have been your collective fairy godmother for generations. It is time that both you and we leave the necessity behind. Again, farewell.” A quiet chuckle hung for a moment in the air. The silence lasted much longer.

“Farewell.” Alexandra broke the silence. She looked around the room. “It is time for you to hear our story.” One by one the rulers around the council table nodded. Alexandra, Herbert and



Jordon all told their stories. The pieces fit like a jigsaw puzzle, but the picture was incomplete. Their enemy was angry at the people of the Magic Kingdoms. Angry because they had forgotten him. He was a being of some power, enough to play havoc with the enchantments of the Kingdoms. All three had felt his malevolence. They had no idea of what he looked like, other than a guard who called him 'shorty.' Even Alexandra who had been his captive had little but vague impressions of darkness. The three were hoarse by the time they were finished with their tale, and answering all the questions which followed. Rapunzel sat quietly through the long day of question and answer. She listened carefully, clearly fascinated by the weaving of enchantment and rescue. Particularly, she was interested in how the disturbance of the enchantments was affecting the balance of the Magic Kingdoms. The sun slanted in the west windows when Alexandra sat down after yet one more repetition of her captivity in the tower basement, and after many hours silence once again ruled in the council chamber.

Rapunzel stood, though her knees shook. Her head still spun from the idea of fairies and enchantments being real instead of stories.

"I think it is time for me to add my story to what you have heard so far."

"It has been a long day, young woman," said the King of Charmant. "I think we have heard enough. I am not sure what you can add."

She would have sat down again, but Jordon came and sat on her shoulder.

"Go on, they need to hear you," he whispered.

"Sire, after hearing what I have heard today, I think you need to listen to my story." Heads around the table nodded in agreement.

"Very well, young woman, tell us of your experiences at the hand of this being."

## Chapter 16

### Rapunzel's Story:

My earliest memory is of playing in the dust with the little boy who lived next door. He had brought his toy horses through a missing board in the fence and we had made roads for them to travel in the warm, dry dust that covered the flagstones. The invisible riders of the horses fought all kinds of improbable and invisible enemies. They always won and were always given the princess's hand in marriage. Even at my young age I thought that this was unfair. Especially since the boy told me that since I was the girl, I had to be the princess and give him a kiss for each victory.

Grandmother caught me giving the boy his kiss. Her screech was heard up and down the street and scared the neighbor's boy into gathering up his precious horses and dashing back through the hole in the fence. Grandmother grabbed my arm and dragged me into the house, all the time yelling at me. My mother appeared and grabbed my other arm.

"She was kissing a boy," yelled Grandma.

"They were just playing," replied Mom. "There is no harm in it."

"No harm in it? Look where it brought you."

With each statement the women pulled on my arms until I felt they were going to be yanked right off my shoulders. I screamed in fear. The women were too caught up in their argument to notice, but my father heard.

"ENOUGH!" he shouted.

Mother and Grandmother both turned to him and let go of me.

"Whatever your differences, you sort them out between you, but Rapunzel is not a bone to be fought over."

He picked me up and wiped away my tears.

"If anything like this happens again, I will take Rapunzel and leave."

He carried me back into the house and comforted me until I slept. Even as I drifted off to sleep I heard the voices of my

mother and grandmother still arguing.

Life for me was one of charting a careful course between the two women in my house. Mother wanted me to meet everyone and experience everything. Grandmother wanted to keep me away from the world. The result was that I learned to avoid their notice. I floated through the house not doing anything that might cause either of them to notice me. The little boy had never returned through the fence, but he had forgotten one of his toy horses in the dust. I kept it hidden in the back of my wardrobe inside an old shoe. Occasionally I would take it out and try to recreate the game we had been playing, but it never felt quite right. So I started to pretend that I was riding the horse far away from the demands of living in my house.

The week before the first day of school, I won my first victory against my mother and grandmother. Each night my mother would show me an extravagantly decorated dress and tell me how I was going to look like a little princess at school. Each morning the dress was replaced by another that looked like it was made from a potato sack. I would put some old clothes on and try to avoid both my mother and grandmother. The dresses became more extreme as each woman tried to outdo the other. Finally the day before school started I was awakened early in the morning by arguing outside my door. The velvet dress with lace and frills and bows still hung in my wardrobe, but I was sure that Grandma had some old grey rag in her hand to put in its place. I took the velvet dress from its hanger and flung the door open.

"Let's ask Father which he would prefer," I said as I took the rags from Grandma's hands. I walked down the hall to my father's room, followed by the whispered argument between my mother and my grandmother. I knocked on the door.

"Which dress do you prefer?" I asked my father when he opened the door, still wiping the sleep from his eyes.

His eyes widened in shock as he took in the dresses being held in front of him.

"What is going on?"

"Mom and Grandma can't decide what I should wear to school tomorrow," I said. "I decided to ask you."

My father looked from the dresses to my mother and grandmother standing behind me. He frowned, then turned his attention back to me.

“Which do you like?”

“I don’t like either of them,” I said.

“Then I will take you shopping after breakfast and you will choose a dress that you do like,” my father said. “Go back to bed while I talk with your mother and grandmother.”

Later that day I went out with my father and found a dress that I could imagine wearing in front of other people. It was a warm brown color that set off my hair and brought out my eyes. It also had no bows or lace, no patches or holes. We bought a couple of other similar plain, sensible dresses then headed home.

“Your mother and grandmother mean well, Rapunzel,” said my father, “but they have a hard time seeing past their own ideas. You will understand when you are older.”

The first day of school I put on my new dress and went down for breakfast. Mother put a large bowl of porridge in front of me.

“Eat,” said Grandmother. “You will need it.”

I wasn’t used to Mom and Grandma agreeing. Then the three of us walked down the hill to the school. Other children ran playing and screaming through the yard. Some wore fancier clothes than me and some plainer. None wore ribbon and lace and bows, and none wore rags.

“Go play, have fun,” said my mother.

“Be careful, listen to the teachers,” said my grandmother.

School was not at all what I had expected. I walked into the schoolyard and watched the other children. A woman came out and rang the bell. Immediately all the children stopped and lined up in front of the door. I went over and joined the line. They walked silently into the school and put their bags on hooks. I found an empty hook and hung my lunch on it. Then a woman came over to me.

“You are new?” she asked, and I nodded. “You will be in my class.”

The woman led me down to the end of the hall and into a

room full of children the same age as me. I sat at a desk with a boy who looked familiar. He had red hair and freckles. When he saw me, his eyes widened.

"You are the girl with the crazy grandmother," he said. "I used to live next door to you."

"Horses," I said. "You had toy horses. I still have one in my wardrobe. It is in a shoe."

"Keep it," said the boy. "I have a real one now."

All year I sat beside George and listened to him talk about his pony. I didn't say much, but George didn't seem to notice. We learned to read and count. Some days were more fun than others, but I didn't mind. I found being at school much easier than being at home trying to please the opposite demands of my mother and grandmother. I learned to distract them with stories of what the teacher had taught that day, and I was fascinated by what I understood of their discussion of whether the teacher was right or wrong. Father would listen to me read and help me with my numbers. The year passed, and the next ones in much the same fashion. I realized that the constant background of argument was as much habit as anything else. I just let it wash over me.

The one thing that stood out in those years was the argument over my hair. Grandma wanted it cut short, and Mother wanted it trimmed and curled. I liked my long, straight hair, and I found myself arguing directly with mother and grandmother for the first time. Father had gone away on a trip to find new markets to buy and sell goods, so I couldn't run to his office as I had before to let him decide. The three way fight raged for days, until I caught my grandmother sneaking into my room one night with a pair of scissors. The resulting shouting match brought Mother to the room. Finally I had enough and began throwing clothes and shoes into my school bag.

"What are you doing?" asked Mother.

"I am going down to George's house until Father gets home," I replied. "I am tired of being fought over like a bone between two dogs."

There was a long silence. Then Mother knelt down beside me.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I will let you decide for yourself.”

Grandmother looked at the scissors in her hand as if she had just realized they were there.

“It is only hair,” she said, more to herself than to me, and left the room. Mother helped me return my belongings to their proper places then she, too, left the room after giving me a final hug.

I had found a ladder in a closet that led up to the attic. I rearranged the boxes and swept up the worst of the dust to make a little hiding place by a round window that overlooked the city. I would sit and brush my hair while I watched the traffic on the streets. The little toy horse sat on the windowsill beside a book of fairy tales that my father had given me. As time passed more treasures joined them. I grew from little girl to young woman in that attic hideaway.

The year before I was to finish school, my grandmother died. I came home from school to find my mother sitting white faced and silent in the kitchen. My father was standing behind her rubbing her back. They explained that they had found Grandma in her bed. The old woman had been sleeping later and later in the last year, so it wasn’t until noon that my mother had gone to check on her.

The funeral was strange. There were people there that I had never seen before. They looked at me and seemed to be finding me wanting in some way, but they didn’t speak to me and soon left me alone with my mother and father.

My mother seemed lost without her own mother to argue against. She wandered from room to room carrying on her half of the perpetual discussion that had been the background in the house since before I was born. Yet, just as I began to worry that my mother would never recover, I came home to find her waiting for me.

“We are going to go shopping,” Mother said. “It is time you wore some proper clothes.”

We walked down the road to the dressmaker that I visited once a year with my father to buy the dresses for the next year of school. The shop owner smiled and welcomed us, but we

had barely made it in the door before my mother started snapping out orders. The owner's smile vanished and she began fetching in ever more expensive material and lace. My heart sank as each new bolt of fabric was added to the pile. The dressmaker pulled out a knotted string and began measuring me, muttering under her breath. She jotted some notes on a scrap of paper.

My mother began ordering dresses so quickly that my head was spinning.

"Stop!" I said. "I don't need all this stuff."

"You are a young lady now, and you need to be dressed properly," my mother responded.

"Mother, I am not Grandma," I said desperately. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life arguing with you."

Mother looked at me and her eyes narrowed.

"Let's just buy one dress for now," I said. "I like this green fabric, and it will go nicely with this bit of lace..."

"OK," said Mother after a long silence. "Let's start with the green."

After that it was a discussion of style and what would suit or not suit my figure and looks. The dressmaker's smile even returned. I hung back a moment at the door to thank the dressmaker.

"I'm sorry about my mom; her mother just died and she doesn't know what to do with herself without someone to argue with."

"I understand. You need to talk to her more. Then she won't need to argue so much."

I thought about the dressmaker's advice and decided it was worth a try. So I began to tell Mother more about school and the other kids.

When the new dress was finished, I wore it to school, hiding my unease behind a smile. But it wasn't so bad. It wasn't even the fanciest dress in the class. Now that they were senior students, some of the other girls were wearing clothes that made the boys' heads turn, and even some of the teachers. George just stared at me for a moment, then told me I looked good. When I mentioned George's comment to Mother, she suggest-

ed I invite him back after school.

George looked around nervously when he first stepped in the door, but soon relaxed and was chatting with my mother about his beloved horses. It became a pattern that George would drop in about once a week. I noticed that my mother seemed to smile more after one of his visits. I also noticed that I wasn't the only project that she had. I noticed that my father was wearing more new clothes, and better quality. He just shrugged when I asked him about it.

"It makes your mother happy," was all he would say, though I thought he looked a little more worried than before.

The year passed, and my closet filled with dresses. Some were so fancy that I didn't dare wear them to school. All the furniture in the house was replaced, and even more brought in until it was difficult to walk. Father's business trips became longer and riskier as he tried to keep up with the purchases. He would bring me little keepsakes from the exotic places he had visited and I would put them on the shelf in my attic hideaway. The book of fairy tales was joined by dozens of other books, some from my father and some from my mother. Father tended to give me adventure stories, or actual histories. Mother gave me romances. I read them all, over and over.

The month before school ended Mother suggested that we have a little party to celebrate my graduation. I didn't want to explain that other than George, there were very few students at school that I talked to. The girls all seemed to have gone crazy trying to catch the eyes of the boys, and the boys weren't much better, spending their time trying to impress the girls. But I decided a party was a harmless enough thing to keep Mother happy.

Soon the party grew completely out of control. Mother sent invitations to all the students in my class and to the teachers as well. She had people coming in at all hours taking orders for enough food to feed the city. Father's face grew more and more lined with each new order. As I listened to Mother, I realized with dismay that she thought that George and I were a lot more serious than we were. George appreciated a pretty girl as quickly as the next boy in my class, but his goal was to go with



his father to trade horses. Mother's hope that he would marry me was doomed to disappointment. Yet I also knew that Mother would try to set it up so George would feel forced to propose. I wanted to save my friend from that embarrassment, and I was fairly certain that I didn't want to get married yet.

I went to find Father in his office. He hadn't been around as much since Grandma had died. I thought it was to avoid my mother's efforts to dress him better. For some reason beyond my understanding Mother seemed to think that we had a position to uphold. I was content just to be the daughter of a merchant. Father's office had always been a refuge for me. It was where I went when I couldn't manage Mother and Grandmother's fights over me. Since Grandmother's death I had been concentrating on building a new relationship with my mother. I realized with a shock that I hadn't visited Father in his office since before the funeral.

I knocked and walked in, as I always had. Instead of the tidy desk and the welcoming smile I expected, I saw a mass of papers strewn across the desk and Father staring at them with his head in his hands. He looked up when I said 'hello.'

"Hello, dear," he said straightening. "I didn't hear you come in." He waved his hands at the mess on his desk. "Business is keeping me busy."

"Are things that bad?" I asked.

"No," Father laughed. "Business is good. Better than it has ever been, but your mother is spending money faster than I can make it. Maybe after this party, she will slow down for a while."

"I don't think so," I said. "I think she is planning a wedding next."

Father almost fell out of his seat.

"Ah, who is the lucky guy?" he finally managed to say.

"Unlucky might be the better description," I said, and told him my fears about Mother's plans.

"Leave it to me," he said. "I will try to talk with her."

The talk didn't seem to go very well. I heard shouting that night, and in the morning my parents barely acknowledged me. If Father couldn't talk sense into my mother then things were much further out of hand than I had thought. I went to school

that day distracted. I was reprimanded twice by my teachers for daydreaming. To make matters worse, George had just been told that his father was delaying their next journey so that George could come along and learn the business. He talked of little else all day. I had a headache by the end of the day.

I walked home and went up to the attic and sat there staring out the window and wishing I were anywhere else. George's little horse seemed to stare back at me and mock me. George was leaving, why couldn't I? I picked up the book I was reading: a romance set in the Magic Kingdoms. It was an unlikely tale of magic and love, with princesses, princes and evil stepmothers. Even their troubles seemed small compared to what I was feeling. That is when the idea came to me. It would solve all my problems, and help my father too. I went to find Father to tell him that I wanted to go south to scout out trade possibilities.

The fight lasted a week. First Mother, then Father, even both of them together tried to convince me that it would never work. They had different reasons; Mother was upset that it wasn't proper, Father that it wasn't safe. I finally ended the argument by threatening to run away. My parents weren't happy, but they gave in. The party became a graduation and going away party. I took riding lessons from George and his father and spent long evenings talking to Father about trade routes and what to look for. My morning conversations with Mother were about what men would think of me, a single young woman, and what to do to stay safe.

The party was a huge success, but I barely noticed. I was too focused on getting ready for my adventure. By now I was as comfortable on a horse as walking, and I knew how to put the saddle on and off the quiet mare I was taking. I also met the person that Father was sending to keep me safe.

Ginger was the most unpleasant man that I had ever met. I decided that it was probably because he was so short. He had to be making up for it by being rude. Even so, he knew what he was doing. He managed his horse with a casual expertise that impressed even George. He also said that he had been to the south before and knew the route. Father certainly thought he was the man to keep me safe. He told me it was travel with

Ginger, or be locked in my room. I decided that Ginger was the lesser evil.

Ginger and I joined the caravan early one morning a month after the end of school. The caravan leader seemed to know Ginger. Once assured that I was under the little man's care, the leader ignored me completely. We rode out of the city heading south, and I gaped and stared at each new sight. Ginger mocked me for my interest, but begrudgingly explained what I was seeing. I soon learned to ignore the sarcastic edge of Ginger's tongue. I wasn't the only victim. Anyone who came into his sight was fair game for his acid comments. We rode through farmlands, then through pastures filled with cattle or sheep. I learned that riding an hour a day was very different from spending all day in the saddle, but I soon became comfortable, even sleeping in the saddle on occasion. For all that I was surrounded by people I didn't talk much with the other travelers. Each group kept to themselves, and the only people who wanted to talk to me were rough men who fit all the warnings that Mother had given me. I kept careful notes for Father and forced myself to talk to merchants and crafts folk in the towns we passed.

People dropped out and joined the caravan at each stop. Twice we stayed in a town for an extra day to take part in a market fair. We arrived at Gateway, the last town before the mountains, after a couple of weeks of slow travel.

"Why do they call it Gateway if it is the last town to the south?" I asked Ginger.

"It isn't the last town. It is just the last town in this kingdom." He snorted and turned away.

"So, what is south of the mountains?"

"The Magic Kingdoms," he said over his shoulder. "You can't go there."

"Why not?" I was more than ready to leave the caravan behind and head into the mountains.

"Too dangerous for a girl like you."

It took the rest of the day, but I convinced Ginger that I could handle the risk. My father had never talked about going to the Magic Kingdoms. I would find something there to really make him proud.

Ginger banged on my door while it was still dark out. I dragged myself from my bed and went downstairs. We ate a quick breakfast, then saddled and loaded our horses to head into the mountains.

I found riding in the mountains a very different experience than traveling through the countryside with the caravan. It was quiet. There wasn't the constant background of creaking wagons and talking people or the open views of farmland either. We were surrounded by dense forest that closed us in. Ginger pointed out the weathered rocks that marked our way. There was no road or even path to follow. I had the feeling that the mountains didn't want me there. There was a hostility in the air that made my skin crawl. It didn't appear to bother Ginger. In fact, the opposite was true. The farther we got into the mountains the more relaxed he got. He even pointed out wildlife and flowers for me.

He didn't seem to sleep and always insisted on watching through the night. I thought it was very strange, but the mountain traveling had made me so tired that I just accepted the extra sleep. One night there must have been a stone under my bedroll because I couldn't get comfortable at all. I heard a strange sound from outside the tent. When I peeked out I saw Ginger capering around the campfire singing to himself.

"Run, run as fast as you can. You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man."

As soon as I tried to listen to the words I felt sleepy and barely managed to drag myself back to my bed. Even though I slept in very late the next morning, Ginger seemed very pleased with himself. He had even made tea and poured it out for me. It was almost noon by the time we got under way again.

Our trek through the mountains continued, and just as I got used to always leaning slightly forward to balance on my horse we started down and I had to learn to lean back. Yet even with the newly stiffened muscles I was getting more excited. Soon we would be in the Magic Kingdoms. It was almost as good an adventure as the ones in my books at home. One day we rode out of the woods onto a faint path that led us to a tower.

"I need to stop here for the day and check in with my peo-

ple,” Ginger announced.

I shrugged. I wouldn't mind a day to relax and get ready to meet the people of the Magic Kingdoms. I was led to a room where I could rest and change my clothes, but instead of the promised bath I found a tiny chamber. The door slammed and locked behind me and I heard Ginger laughing.

“You won't help them, Rapunzel,” he shouted through the door. “They are mine. Run, run as fast as you can. But you won't run very fast now will you?”

I heard him stomping away and my heart sank. I peered out the window and watched the mountains change color as the sun set. The next morning I woke to find that my beloved long hair had been cut short and ragged. I thought of Grandmother with her scissors and screamed in rage. Everything that I could move I threw against the door. By noon I had worn out my anger and just felt helpless. I was sitting by the window weeping when the guard brought in my meal. He looked at the mess and shrugged, putting the tray on the floor. Eating helped me feel better, but got me no closer to escape. Each day the guard brought me a meal and took the old tray away. I tidied the room just to have something to do. Occasionally Ginger would stand outside the door and taunt me, and I would scream at him.

“There is nothing you can do to escape. I am off to tell your father how much fun you are having.”

I shouted curses at him, but he just laughed. Shortly after that a large crow flew by the window and startled me. I heard shouting and banging. A little while later I heard footsteps outside the door. Snatching the tray I got as ready as I could to defend myself.

When the door opened a woman and man about my age walked in. The man had a crow on his shoulder. I was sure there was something special about the crow even before he was introduced as an enchanted prince, just like in my mother's books. He flew over to me and I kissed his head. He stayed a crow, but I felt something inside me shift. His feathers were the softest things I had ever touched.

## Chapter 17

Rapunzel

“And so, here I am, your Majesties,” Rapunzel concluded.

King Orthin coughed and shifted in his chair.

“You say that this man’s name is Ginger?”

“Oh, no,” replied Rapunzel. “He wouldn’t tell anyone his name; people called him Ginger because of his red hair and his temper. He just laughed and said it was as good as any other name.”

Rapunzel shook her head. “I don’t understand why he hated me so.”

“I don’t think it was you he hated, my dear one, but us.” Jordon nibbled on her ear. His father sat bolt upright and looked disapprovingly at Jordon and Rapunzel, then sat back with a thoughtful look on his face. “He was preparing to declare his war on us and throw the Magic Kingdoms into chaos. He couldn’t allow you and your father to come offering trade which would allow us to make order out of the chaos. It wasn’t that he hated you, Rapunzel, but you were in his way. I am sorry that you were caught this way in our struggle.”

“But I do not regret it, not at all,” Rapunzel said. “I have learned more these past weeks about myself and the world, than in my whole life before. And I have met this dear prince, and you and your prince.” She shook her head. “I regret none of it. I am here, and I will stay with you to the end.” Again she stroked the crow with her finger, and smiled at him. King Charmant sighed to himself.

“Rapunzel,” he said, “I hope you will forgive me my earlier rudeness, and you, too, my brave son. I can see that fate has brought you together for whatever reason. I need to talk to you now, before others take it on themselves to speak for me. It is customary in our kingdoms for those of royal blood to seek the agreement of this council as to the suitability of a match. Unfortunately, a merchant’s daughter, however brave, is not a suitable match for a prince of the realm.” He held up his hand to stop the protests that he could see on the lips of the young

people.

“I shall have to peck you on the head again, Father,” said Jordon flapping over to stand on the table in front of the King. King Charmant stroked Jordon’s head with his finger, and smiled at him. “I hope that will not be necessary.” He looked back at Rapunzel. “A small estate just outside the capital is vacant because the marquis had no heirs to pass it on to. A marquess is quite a suitable match for a younger prince. If you and Jordon become a match I will grant it to you as an engagement gift. Not because it will make you any more delightful, but simply because it will silence any possible criticism. I am afraid that I have got set in my ways. I must admit that I, too, will sleep better knowing that you are, even in this insignificant way, a most appropriate match for my son.” Rapunzel was blushing deep red by the end of King Charmant’s speech, but she was looking at the crow on the table, not at the King. Jordon bobbed his head at his father then flew back to Rapunzel’s shoulder.

“You never fail to be more gracious than I can possibly hope, Father.”

“There is another match that I would ask be approved.” Herbert stepped forward and blushed momentarily. “Sire, I would ask you for your blessing on my marriage to your daughter Alexandra.”

Alexandra’s father snorted.

“It is customary, young Prince, to ask permission first.”

“Alexandra’s permission is the only one I need, but I do desire your blessing.” There was a long pause as Alexandra’s father glared at Herbert, then he looked at his daughter, and then at Rapunzel and Jordon. He sighed dramatically.

“You are a credit to your kingdom, young man. I give my blessing to your union, and heaven knows that Alexandra’s mother will be ecstatic.” He grinned suddenly at Alexandra. “I can just imagine your mother planning the wedding. You may find that you will have met your match there.”

“Mother may plan to her heart’s content. Herbert and I must go to the school.”

“What?” Half of the Council was standing staring at Alexandra.

“We have barely made a start at winning this struggle. The school is the one place where we may learn more about our enemy.”

“We have people who we can send to learn whatever we need. They can report to us here,” King Charmant spoke firmly to the young people.

“I think that the Kingdoms have been without their rulers for long enough already. And no one you could send would have our experience with this ‘Ginger.’ I am not sure what we are looking for. We will know when we find it.”

“But the fairies have left. Who will you talk to?”

“The fairies may indeed have left, but I doubt they took the library with them. I suggest that you have your scholars look in your own libraries for whatever they can find. It is time that you went back to your kingdoms. Leave some councilors here to compare notes if you must.”

The King of Charmant opened his mouth, then shut it and shook his head.

“Once again, you are right. If there are no objections, this meeting is adjourned.” He looked around the table, but no one spoke. He stood and walked out of the room. He turned at the door.

“For all our sakes I hope you are as successful as you are confident.”

“Tell Mother, as long as Marta sews the wedding dress, she has carte blanche. Marta knows my tastes, and more important she has recent measurements.” Alexandra held up two blouses then shrugged and folded both into her already bulging bag.

Her father sighed. He knew Alexandra’s mind was not on weddings.

“I will tell her. Just be sure you are there for the ceremony. Did I ever tell you that I am proud of you? I am very glad that you are my daughter.” He gave her a quick hug and left before she could see the tears swelling in his eyes. Alexandra just gave him a stunned look.

“Me too,” Alexandra whispered to her father’s back. She picked up her pack and headed down the stairs to meet her fiancé. The princess was once again dressed in tough traveling



clothes, looking very capable and not terribly princess like. Herbert was waiting for her outside with his gear, chatting with Rapunzel and Jordon. When he saw her he beamed and planted a firm kiss on her lips.

"I am not sure if it is a good thing or a bad thing," he whispered in her ear, "that we have two such honorable chaperones with us." To his delight Alexandra blushed at him, then kissed him resoundingly to hide her blush. They stood grinning at each other until Rapunzel cleared her throat.

"At this rate you will miss your own wedding. Let's hit the road." The three mounted their horses as the big guard Herbert had bested at the tower loaded the gear on the pack horse. Then Jock, as they had learned his name was, mounted a fourth horse. Jordon, as usual, perched on Rapunzel's shoulder. Somehow in all the rush she had found time to put extra padding on her shoulder.

"Ready when you are," Jock said, then shook his head. "Your Highnesses."

"That is only necessary when there is someone nearby to whom it matters," Herbert grimaced at him. "None of us care much anymore for the formalities. I am Herbert, this is Alexandra, and this is Rapunzel and Jordon." He dug his heels in and they started off. The school was close by the Council Village, just east on the road. So Herbert set an easy pace. Somehow it had fallen out that Herbert would lead the quest. Mostly, he suspected, because Alexandra didn't want to be bothered with deciding all the little details, and Rapunzel and Jordon were constantly deep in conversation, almost oblivious to what was happening around them.

The ride to the school was an easy one and they arrived that afternoon to find the school in confusion. None of them had thought about the effect of the fairies' disappearance on the others at the school. The whole Board of Governors and all the senior teachers and administrators had gone. The one junior teacher was frantically trying to reorganize the school. Though many of the major enchantments had been in Alexandra's class, there were all the younger sons and daughters, and some minor enchantments still at the school. The twenty or so

young people seemed to be determined to take every advantage of the senior teachers' absence. Alexandra took one look at the confusion and waded into the fray.

She sent Jock riding back to the Council Village to ask for the assistance of some of the council scholars. The oldest students knew her well and resigned themselves to being organized once again into a school environment. To the youngest children she was already legendary, and they flocked around her pestering her with questions. The solitary remaining teacher was too relieved at his rescue to be upset at a former student usurping his authority, and just sighed with relief. By supper the school was functioning as close to normal as it could given the circumstances.

The next morning each of the young people were drafted as instructors. Even Jordon found himself talking to an awed batch of youngsters about what it was really like to be under an enchantment. When Jock arrived back the next day he, too, found himself teaching what he described as 'How to hold a sword without cutting off your foot.'

Later that week a gaggle of scholars appeared, complete with books and assistants. They disappeared in the teacher's lounge with the remaining teacher. They emerged some hours later looking somewhat disgruntled. He was flushed, but pleased with himself. The four drafted teachers headed for the library as soon as the teachers emerged from the lounge.

The main library was the one part of the school that even Alexandra had never seen. The students had their own small library which occasionally was reinforced by books that appeared and disappeared according to the courses being taught. This library left them all gasping for breath. Books towered to the ceiling thirty feet over their heads. Ladders ran on tracks around the room to give access to the highest shelves. There were no windows on the walls, but sunlight poured in through huge skylights. The quartet's first impression was of light and knowledge.

"How are we ever going to find anything in here?" asked Jordon. "We can't possibly look at every book."

"We won't need to." Rapunzel found herself the center of

attention. "We have libraries in the north, some almost as large as this one. All of them have a cataloging system of one kind or another. Once we find the catalogs they will be our guides to the rest of the library."

"What will these catalogs look like?" asked Alexandra.

"They may be large books, off by themselves, but more likely they will be small cards in cabinets."

"Wait here." Jordon took wing and glided around the library. He was back in minutes.

"This place is even bigger than it looks. There is another wing of books over there. But I found the catalog, I think." He led them over to a long bank of gleaming wood cabinets. He perched on top of them and peered at the drawers beneath him. "I don't think I will be of much help here, so I will go and explore a little."

"Be careful." Rapunzel shrugged at the crow's offended look. "This is a fairy library. There is no telling what you may find in here." Jordon nodded thoughtfully and flew off again. Rapunzel looked at Alexandra. "Just what are we looking for anyway?"

"First, anything on enchantments in general, and second, anything which appears similar to 'Ginger.'" Rapunzel nodded and began studying the catalogs.

"I think that these are divided into title and author. With any luck we should be able to find a subject listing." She showed the pair how the cards were organized. "I will start here. I suggest you each pick a cabinet and look for drawers that have subject headings." Prince and princess nodded wordlessly and moved toward the cabinets.

Several hours later Herbert gave a shout, and the two others rushed over. Jordon, who had been flying around checking in occasionally, also wafted over to land on Rapunzel's shoulder. Herbert was holding a card.

"It isn't a subject index, but here is a book on enchantments. 'The History of Enchantments and their Relevance.' The author is no one I have ever heard of before." Alexandra looked at Rapunzel.

"How do we locate this book?" Rapunzel smiled at her and

took the card from Herbert.

“These numbers here probably indicate the section the book is in.” She held it up to Jordon, “Love, can you find the section with these numbers?” He took off with a caw and an arabesque. Herbert grinned and took Alexandra’s hand. He knew just how Jordon felt. The crow led them to the far wing of the library. Herbert pulled a ladder over and scrambled up to the shelf Jordon indicated. Carefully, he pulled out the book and started down. Partway down, on impulse, he grabbed another book and brought it down too. He handed one book to Alexandra and the second to Rapunzel.

“I thought that you and Jordon would be interested in this one – ‘The Rules of Enchantment.’” Rapunzel seized the book and kissed Herbert on the cheek.

“Thank you!” She and Jordon went a short ways to a table and began to read.

Herbert gave Alexandra a crooked grin and guided her over to another table. Alexandra gave him a kiss on his other cheek.

“You are a dear.” Then she sat down and began looking through the book. Herbert went up the ladder and scanned more titles. He brought the most interesting down with him and began to read.

Silence reigned in the library. None of the four noticed the skylights growing dark or the corresponding glow from the rest of the ceiling. Each was totally immersed in a new world. These were books that the fairies had written about enchantments, but from the viewpoint of the fairies. Spells were discussed with clinical detachment rather than with the awe and mystery of human texts.

It was Herbert who first heard Rapunzel’s tears. He quietly fetched Alexandra and went over to his new friend’s table. Jordon stood with his head under his wings while Rapunzel sat with tears pouring down her face. She pushed the book over to Alexandra and pointed to the chapter heading.

“‘On Etiquette.’ The subject of fair play between members of our race should not need to be delineated, but unfortunately it is necessary. First, and most important, no fairy should interfere with, change or duplicate, or break any enchantment other

than their own. This is unless such action is made necessary by the terms of the enchantment. Second, once an enchantment is laid, the enchanter must be scrupulous about following the terms of the enchantment themselves. No softhearted changing the rules is helpful to the learning of the one enchanted. Third, it should go without saying that ALL enchantments must have loopholes allowing them to be broken.”

The book continued on in the same vein for some time, but Alexandra dropped it on the table and put her arms around Rapunzel.

“Never give up hope.”

“But you read the rules. No one but the person laying the enchantment can break it, and they have to follow the rules themselves anyway, and Jordon said that his enchantment can only be broken by his death. And the fairy at the council said that they were still following the rules. I hate this place. I hate it. I hate it.”

No one said a thing for a long time.

## Chapter 18

Alexandra

By unspoken agreement the group split up and went to their own rooms. Jordon stayed with Rapunzel, because no one thought to assign a crow separate quarters. She sat on her bed and stroked the side of the crow's head.

"It is strange how I could fall so completely in love so quickly. I saw you three come into my cell, and thought, 'So this is how it feels to be rescued.' When you spoke that first time it was like I fell under a spell myself. I knew that you were special. As we talked, and you listened to me and took me seriously, I decided that I would follow you to the ends of the earth. I still will. I will, my love, whether you stay a crow or not. But it isn't fair!"

"Herbert said to me, when we first met as crow and frog, 'Never give up hope.' He taught me that it isn't my form which defines who I am. I am Jordon. Whether I am man or crow, I am Jordon first and foremost. It is Jordon who loves you, Rapunzel. I have loved you since that first kiss you granted me in that tower room, even then in your captivity thinking of others. Whatever it takes I will stay with you." Rapunzel planted a kiss on the crow's beak.

"I love you, Jordon, my prince."

"I love you, Rapunzel."

Then the two sat in silence until dawn lightened the sky.

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside Alexandra's room Herbert held her hand.

"I feel bad, because even in the midst of our friends' grief my heart is singing for the joy of loving you." Herbert hugged her. "I must bid you goodnight, now before my desire weakens my honor." Alexandra kissed him long and thoroughly.

"Goodnight, my prince."

"Goodnight, dear princess."

The next morning the four friends gathered in the library.

Rapunzel and Jordon once again read the 'Rules of Enchantment,' while Alexandra and Herbert continued their search. They broke briefly for lunch and to compare notes. Rapunzel hadn't found anything more helpful from the rules. Much of it was about what were appropriate enchantments in different situations, and what lessons they were intended to teach. The book Alexandra was reading wasn't much better. It was a very dry history of all the different enchantments and who had which enchantment, which were royal and which were minor. Alexandra was surprised to learn that not all the enchantments affected individuals. Some were objects like the Magic Mirror of the White Mountains which enflamed the viewer's vanity and jealousy each time it was used. It was all fascinating information written in the most boring manner possible. Every time she was ready to give up Alexandra would find some new tidbit of information to lead her on another chapter. Herbert had continued to run up and down the ladder pulling books that looked interesting from the shelves. As he put it, he had little to show for it but a great deal of exercise. They kept up their search for days. It was Herbert who found the first major new information. He was exploring the uppermost shelves in the wing, when he noticed a book without the ever present numbers on the spine. He pulled it out and brought it down to the table where Alexandra was still doggedly working her way through the dry history of enchantments. She smiled briefly at Herbert before returning to her book.

The book was a description of the turmoil that had ensued when the Snow White of the day had decided to forgo the dwarves' home and the work that was involved. Instead she had wandered out of the forest and had met a talking frog. Pretty soon the frog had convinced her to kiss it, and they headed off to Poond to get married. The problems were twofold said the author of the book. One was that this left the insanely vain Queen ruling the White Mountains. Second, it bypassed the Frog Prince's task because he didn't need to get into a castle. The Magic Kingdoms barely blinked, but the fairies involved on both sides were furious. It was so bad that they had to resort to the Fairy Council to resolve the issue. An action that

was rare, but not without precedent. Herbert's shout brought the other three quickly to his side.

"This book talks about something called the Fairy Council. The fairies used it to resolve disputes about enchantments that arose among the fairies."

"The fairies took this enchantment stuff pretty seriously," said Rapunzel. "It must have been hard for them to give it up. After all, it made them pretty important to the Magic Kingdoms. What was it that Ginger said, that he was tired of being forgotten? Maybe not all the fairies were ready to give up feeling important. I think Ginger is a fairy who is angry about losing his importance in the world."

"And if he is a fairy, and he is no longer following the rules, he could be challenged in the Council!" Alexandra finished. "Does it say where the Council is in that book, Herbert?"

"No, it seems that it just meets wherever the fairies are, as long as there is someone to call for a judgment."

"We need to find the fairies." Jordon hopped from one foot to the other. "We could convince them to break this enchantment, because it doesn't follow their rules!"

"Then you and Rapunzel must go and find them," Alexandra stated.

Rapunzel stared at her.

"Are you sure?" She looked around the library. "Don't you need our help here?"

"I think you have showed us well enough how this library works. We will manage."

Herbert looked Jordon in the eye.

"My friend, good luck on your quest. If you don't mind a piece of advice, I would start by visiting Princess Avi in the north. When I left she was sending out her swans to spy on the Magic Kingdoms. If anyone knows where to look for the fairies it will be her. If you go to her, bring her my greetings."

"I will." The crow bowed on Rapunzel's shoulder.

"Goodbye. You are both true friends." Rapunzel hugged Herbert and Alexandra, then turned and ran out to pack for their journey. Jordon landed briefly on Herbert's shoulder.

"You once gave me your sword and your honor to hold for



you. Somewhere along the way I lost your sword, but I never held your honor. Be well.” He flapped over to Alexandra’s shoulder and whispered in her ear. “First love, I learned much from you. I will share your joy on your wedding day, whether I am present or not. Be well.” The Crow Prince flew off to join Rapunzel.

The huge library which had begun to feel familiar and comfortable once again was filled with magic and mystery. Herbert and Alexandra stood holding hands for a long while.

“I will miss them both.”

“Yes. Let’s get out of here for a while.” Herbert put his arm around his fiancé’s waist and guided her out of the room.

They walked around the school for the rest of the afternoon listening in on different classes. They walked arms around each other’s waist, needing to reassure themselves of their love’s presence. They found themselves just before the supper bell sitting at the back of the youngest class of children. The children sat open mouthed as the scholar told them story after story of enchantment and disenchantment. Some of the stories were as familiar as the Frog Prince or Sleeping Beauty, others Alexandra knew from her reading, though strange, were very old.

The next day the sun shone brightly through the skylights and lit the library. Herbert was continuing his search while Alexandra struggled through the dry history. According to it the enchantments had the fairies helping the occasional deserving adventurer with their adventures, but as the Kingdoms became more established the enchantments became more focused on the ruling class. As the interaction between the Kingdoms and the fairies increased, friction caused some of the enchantments to get progressively nastier. At the same time the small kingdoms began to consolidate into the larger kingdoms of the present day. Over time the enchantments became a regular and expected part of life for the royalty, and specific enchantments were passed down through particular families. One side effect of this progression was that some enchantments gradually disappeared. Alexandra learned that some of the early enchantments wouldn’t be recognized as enchantments by the modern people of the Magic Kingdoms. There were a lot of enchant-

ments that had been lost over time. If their enemy was, as they thought, a fairy whose enchantment had become outdated, they should concentrate on fairies that were both egotistical and bad tempered.

“Our fairy must be one whose enchantment disappeared recently, say in the last generation,” she mused out loud.

“Of course, he could have stewed a while before he decided to act,” added Herbert from the top of yet another ladder.

“I can’t imagine this fellow waiting too long. What was it that Rapunzel heard him singing?”

“Run, run, as fast as you can. You can’t catch me, I’m the Gingerbread man. I can’t make any sense of it unless he was making a deliberate play on the name that Rapunzel gave him.”

“Of course, the name! He wouldn’t give his name, and he tormented her with the name that she gave him. A name that had no power. I will concentrate on those fairies that made a particular thing about their names.”

“And what should I do in the meantime?” asked Herbert. “Rapunzel and Jordon are off looking for the fairies, but something is worrying me. We haven’t heard from Ginger for weeks. He can’t be done with us yet.”

“And he will know where the fairies have gone.” Alexandra went pale. “We may have sent Rapunzel and Jordon into a trap. They went north to see Princess Avi. That is where he set his trap before. Herbert, we must go after them and warn them!”

“I have a better idea, my love.” Herbert grinned humorlessly. “He attacked me because I was looking for you. He went after you because somehow you threatened his plans, and he imprisoned Rapunzel for the same reason. We need to do something to distract him.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I suggest that we take the battle to our friend. We have let him set the pace for too long.”

“You mean Sopo, don’t you?” Alexandra shook her head. “I don’t wish to have you fall asleep for a hundred years.”

“I do not wish to lose you for a hundred years either, but do you see another alternative?” When he saw Alexandra about to protest he added, “We need something dramatic to catch his

attention.”

“We will leave in the morning for the borders of Sopo.” Alexandra took a deep breath.

“I think it would be a good idea for there to be a fuss about our plans when we leave.”

“The louder, the better,” said Alexandra. “There were some swans on the river yesterday. We had better send a message to Princess Avi.”

The next day the whole school was roused by a loud argument at the gates to the school courtyard.

“I tell you, I forbid it. It is vainglorious foolishness to try to enter Sopo!”

“I will do what I see fit, scholar. Be sure to remember who I am.” The princess and Jock shouted at each other at the top of their lungs. Just before a large enough crowd had gathered to slow down their exit, Herbert and Alexandra mounted their horses and galloped off down the road. No one noticed the princess wink at Jock.

After they rounded the bend the pair rode slower as to not tire the horses. They rode all day, alternating walking with cantering. They made camp in silence. As it grew dark, Alexandra leaned up against Herbert and stared into the fire.

“Did I ever tell you how happy I was to see you walk into the hall of my castle that first day of the tournament?” She sighed and snuggled closer under Herbert’s arms. “I was feeling like a slab of meat surrounded by hungry dogs.”

“I had to blackmail your parents into letting me stay.”

“No!”

“Yes, then I made a fool of myself over you with Prince Jordon.”

“What a long time ago that seems. Now you and Jordon are fast friends, and he has found his own true love.”

“And we have found each other at last. I have adored you since we were at school. Do you remember the night you graduated? I still remember how you grabbed my ears and kissed me.” Alexandra twisted around and grabbed his ears. There was a long silence in the glen. It was broken by a snap of a breaking stick. Herbert was up with his sword drawn before

Alexandra had time to draw a quick breath.

"It's all right, your Highness." Jock stepped into the firelight. He chuckled. "I thought it was time I made my entrance." Both Alexandra and Herbert blushed red. "I remember what it was like the first time I was in love. I think, though, if we are going to Sopo, all of us had better have our minds on the task."

"He is right. It is time we got some sleep." Alexandra kissed her love again then rolled up in her blanket.

Herbert looked across at Jock.

"Odd or even for first watch." The two men grinned at each other across the fire.

The young people woke to the smell of bacon cooking.

"When I served in the north, I always cooked breakfast for my commanders. It put them in a good mood for the day." He slipped the food onto plates and handed them to the young people. They ate hungrily and gratefully. Then the three of them mounted up and headed on toward Sopo. All the next day Herbert looked wistfully across the fields of Poond. He insisted that they camp on the east side of the road just to be closer to home.

Late in the day they arrived at the border of Sopo. The three could see people slumped in the fields asleep. There was a guard at the border put there to stop the very kind of thing they were about to attempt. Herbert led them off the road away from the guards. Jock pulled a couple of chains out of his pocket.

"I used to use this trick when I had to stand a late watch. These chains are barbed. No way I can sleep with these around my ankles." Herbert looked thoughtful then picked up a couple of stones and dropped them into his shoes. He looked across the border, and took Alexandra's hand.

"Let's go."

## Chapter 19

Rapunzel

Rapunzel went to her room to pack as soon as Alexandra had suggested she and Jordon seek out the Fairy Council. Jordon sat on the headboard and watched her.

“At least as a crow, I don’t have to pack anything,” he said. Rapunzel tossed a cushion at him and picked up the pack.

“I travel light as well, dear crow, but walking will be slow. I have some experience with riding; do you think the school will give us a horse?” She hefted the pack, “I would rather the horse carry it all.”

They headed to the kitchen to gather some food for the journey. The cooks were happy to help out, so Rapunzel carried tow packs to the stable. Jordon talked the bemused stable hand into choosing a quiet, strong mount for their quest. Soon they were riding north to see Princess Avi. As they rode, Rapunzel talked to Jordon about her life before arriving in the Magic Kingdoms.

“I grew up being pulled two ways between my mother and my grandmother. I have often wondered what deep wounds my grandmother carried. My mother, in her turn, tried to shape me into her idea of what I should be. Ginger, in a strange way, freed me by taking me prisoner. I had no one telling me who I should be. I had to start figuring it out for myself. In our own way it is like the enchantments that define you, only we have no one but ourselves to blame for the mess we create.” She reached up and stroked Jordon’s feathers. “Then you came and I found a reason to be myself.” Jordon just nibbled her ear in response.

They were a day north of the Council Village on the causeway when they were met by a swan.

“My mistress bids me to warn you that our enemy may be watching for you to search for the Fairy Council. I, and others like me, will search for news of the fairies. She asks that you search for Princess Neje. They were childhood friends and Princess Avi grows concerned that she has heard no word of

her friend in some time.”

Jordon hopped down to the saddle horn so he could see Rapunzel.

“Since we came to get Avi’s advice, I would suggest that we take on this task. One direction is as good as another.” Rapunzel sighed and turned the horse around. They would head east around the Fens to the White Mountains.

“Tell me about the White Mountains,” she asked that evening, after they had made it back to the forest to camp. “Queen Jeela is supposed to be insanely jealous and vain, but I just found her slightly patronizing.”

“In her case, the enchantment is in a mirror at her castle. The farther away from the mirror she is the more normal she appears. She tries to spend a lot of time out of her kingdom. I guess an absent ruler is better than an insane one. Most of her energy when she is home is spent tormenting poor Neje. It has been that way for generations. No one has found a way to end the cycle. If it hadn’t been for this crisis they might have reached the final act of the enchantment by now. Jeela fights the mirror and that only speeds the whole thing up. Princesses of the White Mountains have died before. I would guess that is why Avi is so worried.”

The next day Jordon and Rapunzel rode along the back roads of Aliarne. The people they met seemed content enough, and not at all worried about the crisis that had their rulers so concerned. Most were of the opinion that Alexandra was going to fix everything. Jordon hoped that they were right.

They were almost to the border of the White Mountains when a swan came to them in the evening.

“Queen Jeela has returned home. She is afraid that you will try to help Princess Neje. The border has been closed to you. Her illness is worse. Beware.” The great bird took flight before they could ask any questions.

“Let’s head north in the morning. There is a smaller pass into the White Mountains there. Neje won’t be at the capital in any case.”

“I don’t know this country as you do,” Rapunzel said, “I will follow your lead.”

“The White Mountains have been tortured by this enchantment for far too many years, I wonder if there is a way to end the curse for good.”

“Now you are thinking like Alexandra,” Rapunzel said, rubbing his beak. “Keep it up and our enemies will truly be confused.”

As they headed north, the countryside became rougher and less populated. Villages had walls to keep out wild animals and worse things. One evening they came to a rough homestead at the end of the road they traveled. It was nestled right into the foothills. Strangely there were no walls around the farm; instead the windows were opened wide. A man was hoeing the garden. He looked oddly familiar.

“Welcome,” the man said when he noticed them coming up the path. “I don’t get many visitors here. Just let me wash my hands and we can go inside.” He led them around to a pump where he splashed water on his face and head. “John was hoping you would come this way. I don’t know why he thought you would.” Shaking his head the man opened the door to his house and gestured them in.

“You’re Jack the Giant Killer. Alexandra’s uncle.”

“Well, being a bird hasn’t hurt your brain any,” the man sat at the pine table in the kitchen. “Yes, I am Jack, though I don’t kill giants anymore, not unless they force me to. Now, if you know that I am Alexandra’s uncle you will know that I am King John’s twin. We have our ways of keeping in touch. This disappearing act was to keep folks away who would want to make me King instead of my brother.” He shuddered, “He can have the job. You don’t think you could ride across the kingdom without the King hearing of it?”

Rapunzel settled into a chair across from Jack, while Jordan perched on another chair.

“Now,” said Jack, “tell me what you are up to.”

It took most of the evening, with a break for supper, for the whole tale to be told. Jack seemed to know a great deal about what was going on, yet he still insisted on hearing every detail of their adventures. When they got to the swan’s message on the causeway and the other message in the back country, he

rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“You might consider asking the swan to drop by here next time you see her. That Avi has a head on her shoulders, swan or not.” He looked at his guests. “You better stay here for the night, and I will fill you in on what I know about Neje in the morning. You are safe enough here, but don’t be getting up and wandering about in the night, there is no telling what might have come out of the mountains.” With that warning, he showed Rapunzel to a spare room and left Jordon on the back of the chair with his head tucked under his wing.

As soon as his guests were safely asleep, Jack went out into the night. His brother wasn’t his only source of information, but some preferred the dark of night. He returned for his own rest, and was up cooking breakfast before either Rapunzel or Jordon stirred. They ate breakfast in silence, then Jack leaned back and sighed.

“It’s time I filled you in on my own doings.” He stretched until his joints popped. “I am not as young as I think I should be.” He looked at them for a long moment. “Well, I’ll just start at the beginning. John and I had the whole switch planned for ages. I never wanted to be King. I didn’t have the mind or patience for ruling. He always did better at school, so we figured to let him take the job and I would go a wandering and be his secret ears and eyes among the people. Only thing was, I got tangled up with some of the giant folk and made this name for myself. Jack the Giant Killer.” He snorted, “Turns out the giants are in with the fairy folk; at least the smart ones are. I had a visit one night from a real quiet fellow who carried his head under his arm. He made it clear that I was to leave the giants alone. I finally convinced him that most of what I had been about had been accidental, at least from my side. We worked out a deal. I was to play up the Giant Killer bit with the humans, but in reality I was an unofficial ambassador to the giants.”

“Yes, I know what you are thinking; giants are smart enough. Some of them are plenty smart. If I had run into them first, I wouldn’t be here talking to you, or maybe I would. Who knows?” Jack shook his head. “John and I worked out a treaty with the giants. They would pretty much stay out of sight in the



mountains, and we would leave them alone. My reputation would be the reason for the change in the number of giants about so no one would go looking for them. It was the giants that told me the fairies were getting tired of babysitting us and there was going to be a change. They also told me to keep quiet or else. I didn't particularly want another visit from the Headless Horseman, so I did as I was told. That was just before Alexandra was born. Things were humming along with John making a right fool of himself over her, and me forced to keep my mouth shut. That was bad enough; then just this year the giants got really upset. It seems the entire Fairy Court had up and vanished. Poof, gone. Scared them silly. Scared me too. I couldn't think of anything that would scare away the fairies, and I didn't want to meet it. So of course I had to go out looking for it. Found nothing of course. They just didn't want to be found anymore. We are supposed to untangle this snarl on our own." He looked at Rapunzel who sat quietly with the tracks of tears glistening on her cheeks. "Don't take it so hard. The fairies have always admired the determination they saw in some humans. That's how they got pulled into the enchantment business in the first place. It was a huge game for them. They didn't think of how it would all pan out. Now they are trying to write an end to that story, but all real stories have loose threads. You're tangled in the loose ends. If you can hold on, it may work out yet. The fairies hate loose threads. In the meantime, you needn't worry about Neje. She is safe enough, but she'd be happy for a visit from you."

"You know where she is?" asked Jordon, then shook his head. "Of course you do. I am just too used to my friends disappearing mysteriously to think that Neje might not have been caught in the same trap."

"I do know where she is. I took her there myself. She is safe, but she isn't happy. You might be able to help her. She is worried about her mother. Jeela is falling deeper under the curse of that mirror every day. Even if she doesn't catch Neje, the strain is telling on her. Neje can't do anything but make things worse, but perhaps you can help."

"So where is Princess Neje?" asked Rapunzel.

“She’s with the giants,” answered Jack.

After they got over their shock at Jack’s announcement, Jordon and Rapunzel started talking at once. Jack just laughed and suggested that rather than answer their questions he would send them to see her. Rapunzel grabbed her pack and followed him out the door. Jordon cawed and flew after her.

Jack led them away to the north. The morning was bright and fresh and the late summer flowers were still out. Rapunzel would have enjoyed the walk more if she hadn’t known where they were heading. In spite of what Jack had said the thought of meeting giants made her nervous. Even in her country they had stories of the giants, and none of them were pleasant.

Jordon flew in broad circles above Jack and Rapunzel. He couldn’t see any buildings of any sort ahead of them, but he had no doubt the giants were close. According to the stories, it was all too easy to stumble upon them without warning. They didn’t stumble onto the giants, but there was little warning. Jack led them to the edge of a hill and suddenly there was a huge face staring at them.

“I will grind your bones to make my bread, little man,” the giant roared.

“My bones would make terrible bread, my friend,” Jack replied. The giant grinned and held out his hand.

“I will take you to my home,” the giant said, but Jack shook his head.

“I have much to do, but my friends here wish to visit the princess.” The giant looked at Rapunzel warily.

“Is she safe?”

“She will do you no harm and neither will her companion.” That seemed to reassure the giant, for he held out his hand again to Rapunzel. After a nervous glance at Jack, she stepped onto the hand and was whisked up to the giant’s shoulder. The huge man turned so swiftly that she squeaked and grabbed his ear to keep from falling off.

“That tickles!” the giant roared.

“Sorry, perhaps if you warned me.”

Without responding the giant set off north into the foothills of the White Mountains. They had traveled most of the morning

before the giant whispered to her.

"I'm not used to little folk 'cepting me." For such a large person he sounded very shy.

"That's OK," Rapunzel smiled. "My name is Rapunzel. I am pleased to meet you."

"Really?" asked the giant. "Most little folk run screaming when they meet me. My name is Bob."

Jordon had been listening to this conversation as he flew along beside Rapunzel.

"I am Jordon." The giant stopped dead in his tracks, almost throwing Rapunzel off his shoulder. He turned and peered at the crow.

"I never met a talking crow before. Are you the King Crow?"

"No, I am a prince made into a crow." Bob's face wrinkled in thought.

"I will take you to Ma. She'll know what to make of you."

"As long as it isn't a pie," Jordon said and Bob roared with laughter.

"You're almost as funny as him." He started off again, but this time Rapunzel had a good grip on his ear. "Ma will like you."

## Chapter 20

### Rapunzel

Another hour of walking took them well into the mountains. Bob followed a twisting path to a large valley. At the far end was a quaint little village. Jordon was wondering how they were going to get past without starting a panic when he realized the village wasn't that little. The people he saw were giants. The valley was truly huge. They had arrived at the Giant's Village.

The other giants watched as Bob strode up the road to the village and banged on the door to a house facing the square. The door was opened by a giantess wearing a blue dress and a white apron. She looked like a regular housewife, except for being fifty feet tall. Bob ducked as he went through the door. Jordon followed only to be attacked by a giant broom wielded by the housewife.

"Wait, Ma. It's OK. He's a friend." Bob's words didn't seem to be getting through to his irate mother. Jordon ducked and dodged around and around. If it weren't that the broom could easily kill him, he would have enjoyed the game. Rapunzel stopped the broom by screaming.

"I could swear I heard a girl's voice," said Ma, looking around.

"You did. Mine," said Rapunzel as she clutched at Bob's collar. "Jack sent us to talk to the princess." Silence reigned in the room, then the huge woman cuffed at Bob's ear, almost upsetting the girl from her perch.

"What did I say about bringing little people and their pets here?" Now she swung the broom at her wayward son, though Rapunzel noticed she swung well clear. Bob barely flinched.

"Her name is Rapunzel, Ma, and the crow is Jordon. He talks."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," Jordon replied, landing on his sweetheart's shoulder.

"You should see the King Crow," she said as she stood the broom in the corner. "I'll put the kettle on. You go wash up, Bob,

and take the little ones to the princess.” She bustled over to the kitchen and began clattering about. Bob took Rapunzel and the crow to a dollhouse set on a table that was the right size for them. Standing in the door of the house was Princess Neje looking very upset.

“Come in, I guess,” she said and waved them into the house. The dollhouse was completely furnished, all of it in a size to make them feel normal again. Rapunzel thought that being carried around by giants gave you a whole new perspective on the world. Neje curled up in a large chair and Rapunzel sat on a couch.

“You shouldn’t use his name. Jack’s, I mean,” said Neje. “They sort of like him, but they never use his name. It bothers them, I think. He makes them nervous. His reputation isn’t completely fake after all. What are you doing here? Why is Jordon a crow? What is going on? Mother is going insane, there isn’t a dwarf for miles around, unless you count me, and nobody will tell me ANYTHING.” The princess burst into tears. Rapunzel looked at Jordon and shrugged. The only princess she had met before was Alexandra. Neje wasn’t the same at all. She went over to the weeping girl and patted her shoulder.

“I won’t tell you everything is OK, because it isn’t. But Jordon and I are here to help.”

“Who are you? Everything is backwards, and I don’t like it.” A giant hand lifted the roof of the house.

“Tea’s ready,” said Ma as Neje squealed.

“I HATE it when they do that.” The giantess placed a table loaded with food and a steaming teapot beside them. Neje took a deep breath and looked at Rapunzel.

“How do you like your tea?” Rapunzel nodded; maybe this princess was stronger than she thought.

After tea in the giant dollhouse, Rapunzel and Jordon brought Princess Neje up to date on events throughout the Magic Kingdoms. She was horrified at the news that so many of her friends were trapped in enchanted sleep, but still more worried that her mother had been possessed by insane jealousy.

Princess Neje explained how she had been whisked away in the middle of the night by Jack with help from castle retain-

ers. Her mother was increasingly unstable since she arrived home from the Council. People were being arrested and thrown in the dungeons in a constant stream. Fortunately, the castle servants were used to this and the prisoners were escorted out and told to lie low for the interim. It was far too much work to feed and manage all the inmates.

The only person that Queen Jeela had really fixated on was the princess. She didn't care about anyone else as long as they stayed out of her way. Neje was heartbroken by her mother's fast decline. She had known that the Magic Mirror always affected the Queen, but she wasn't prepared for the emotional devastation of fleeing from her own mother. At first she had all kinds of plans to rescue her mother, but Jack and the giants had pointed out that every one of them had been tried, and all had failed. The mirror was apparently unbreakable. If it was hidden away it would reappear on the Queen's wall. No matter how strong willed the Queen might be, every Queen who had ever looked into the mirror eventually lost her mind.

"I always knew it was going to happen someday. I just wasn't ready for it to be now."

The giants were kind, but Neje had thought she would spend her time hiding in the forest with some dwarves before being swept away by her handsome prince. The present reality was beyond her control and it terrified her. Jordon did his best to comfort her, but it was Rapunzel who did most of the talking.

Late in the evening, after Neje had gone to bed, Rapunzel and Jordon sat up and talked. They had found the princess but felt helpless. Her situation was even more horrible than Jordon's. He was in the shape of a crow, but he was still himself. Neje's mother had become a monster who wanted to kill her daughter. It made Rapunzel want to be held and comforted, but she had to be content with Jordon rubbing his head against hers. The moon rose in the giant window and shone through the dollhouse window to make everything sharp black and white. If only life were that simple, wished Rapunzel. She fell asleep curled up on the couch with Jordon standing guard on the back.

The morning sun woke them, and as Rapunzel walked out

the kinks in her back, they heard the giants beginning their day. The ordinary sounds made their situation seem less impossible. Princess Neje wandered in rubbing her eyes.

“G’morning,” she mumbled. She went to the door and watched Ma at work. “They really are nice people; I am sure I am as much trouble for them as I would be for the dwarves. I just wish I could help cook. I had a lot of recipes I wanted to try.” She turned to her guests, “We need to do something about my mom.” Neje jumped as the giantess lifted the roof of the dollhouse and put a table of steaming food in front of them. This morning the princess smiled and curtsied, which made Ma roar with laughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

After breakfast Jordon flew out around the kitchen to stretch his wings, but he also wanted to talk to Bob.

“Hey, Bob,” called Jordon.

“Morning, crow,” said Bob between sips of tea.

“You mentioned the King Crow yesterday. Where would I find him?”

“I don’t rightly know, you really need him to want to find you,” he shrugged his shoulders. “I’ll ask Ma, she might know.”

Thanking Bob, Jordon flew back to the others. He found them in deep discussion of pastry, lard and butter. Feeling left out, since all he knew of baking was the eating of it, he took off to explore.

The Giant’s Village was a strange place. The houses were like small mountains covered with normal size plants. Where others might have a daisy in a pot, the giants had apple trees. In an apple tree in a pot on the sill of a house two doors down Jordon saw a crow. He had seen other crows from a distance, but he was too busy, and admittedly a little scared to seek out their company. Today he flew over and landed beside it.

“Good morning,” he cawed. The other crow looked at him and continued to bang the snail in its beak against the tree. Jordon just sat quietly and waited. Finally the shell cracked and the crow ate the snail.

“Nothing like a snail to start your day,” it said, or rather Jordon realized, she said. “Want one?” She pointed to another snail crawling up the branch. Jordon hopped over and caught it with his foot. He smacked it with his beak and cracked the shell, but he had to shake his head to dispel the stars. He ate it quickly before he could think of what he was eating.

“Not bad.”

“You are a funny crow. You’d think you were a woodpecker.”

“Well, I haven’t always been a crow,” Jordon admitted. His companion hopped over and peered at him closely.

“Quack, quack, and call me a duck, you aren’t really a crow at all.” She leaped off the branch and flew away. Jordon shrugged and helped himself to another snail.

That evening a pair of crows flew through the kitchen dodging Ma’s broom and laughing. They came into the dollhouse and settled on the back of the couch. Each of them peered at Jordon, then at each other.

“You are hereby...”

“...summoned...”

“...to appear before...”

“...the King Crow...”

“...to answer the charge...”

“...of not being a crow.”

Rapunzel looked at the two crows.

“How are we to find the King Crow?”

“You aren’t a...”

“...crow either...”

“...but for you...”

“...it isn’t a crime.”

“Are you twins?” asked Princess Neje.

“No, we...”

“...are crows.”

“So, how are we to find the King Crow?” asked Jordon.

“Be a crow...”

“...and you will know.” Then the pair laughed again and flew off taking special care to circle Ma’s head at least twice before leaving the kitchen.



"I don't want to be a crow," said Jordon into the silence.

The next morning Princess Neje argued with Jordon and Rapunzel that she should go with them on their search for the King Crow. She didn't want to be left alone with the giants again. It wasn't that they weren't pleasant, but Jordon and Rapunzel were her own age and size. Finally Jordon was convinced that she would be as safe with them as with the giants. Then it was only a matter of convincing Ma and packing to be off.

Bob invited himself to be a part of the excursion. The whole thing was a source of endless amusement for him. They headed off away from the village with Jordon circling high above. He was still troubled by the crows' message to be a crow. He didn't want to forget himself. But he knew no other way to find the King Crow. They meandered through the evening and made camp in a pleasant field. The next morning a swan waited on the green for them.

"I have a message for Prince Jordon."

"Are you a prince too?" asked Bob.

"No, but my Queen is a princess," answered the swan. "Princess Alexandra sends you this message..." the swan filled them in on the happenings in the rest of the Kingdoms. They alternated between joy and despair as they listened to the story of their friends' adventures. The good news, especially for Jordon, was that the swan had flown past the King Crow's roost and that he was not far away. They set off with the swan's directions to meet this King that had commanded Jordon's presence.

The first sign that they were approaching the King was a huge black spinning cloud. As they got closer they saw that the cloud was an immense flock of crows. It was enough to subdue even Bob. Soon they were stopped by a pair of crows.

"No..."

"...farther..."

"...unless..."

"....a crow you are..."

"....or would be."

"A crow I am, though I wouldn't be," said Jordon leaping off

Rapunzel's shoulder. "I will see this King Crow." The crows flew after him cawing and pecking at him.

"I guess we wait here," said Rapunzel.

Jordon flew as fast as he could, occasionally dodging when one of the sentries came too close. He noticed that they seemed more interested in driving him forward than in driving him off. Soon he was deep in the shadow of the gigantic flock. More and more crows flew in his path, forcing him to duck and weave. Whenever he tried to fly higher, he was pushed down again. The prince was getting angry. He didn't have time for these games. He suddenly folded his wings and dropped down below his tormentors, but with his extra speed he looped up behind them. Suddenly he had the higher position, each time a crow tried to climb it pushed Jordon higher in the flock. Still more crows joined the jostling, but Jordon slipped through, leaving confusion and anger in his wake. All at once the air-space was clear and Jordon found himself in front of the largest crow he had ever seen. Without asking permission he perched on the branch beside the huge glossy bird.

"Make yourself at home, not-crow," the King Crow said. "What is it you wish of me?"

"I am not a crow, I don't want to be a crow, but I am trapped in this crow shape."

"Bring me the stepmother's mirror and we will talk."

"But..." the prince was interrupted by the King Crow's cry and suddenly the space around them was filled with hurtling black bodies.

"Interloper..."

"Fraud..."

"Not-crow..."

"Human..."

Jordon folded his wings and plummeted through their midst, then flew as fast as he ever had toward Rapunzel and the others. The entire flock followed him shrieking and cawing. He landed on Rapunzel's shoulder while Bob was already putting her and Neje on his shoulders and striding off, leaving the funnel of crows far behind. When he had caught his breath he told them what the King Crow had said.

“We must go and rescue my mother,” cried Neje.

“Now just wait a minute,” bellowed Bob. “Ma said you could come along and visit the crows. She said nothing about going home and rescuing evil Queens.”

“She isn’t evil,” Neje shouted, stamping her foot. “She is bewitched by that mirror. If we take the mirror away, it will free her from the spell. Won’t it?”

“We can only try,” said Rapunzel. “Maybe the King Crow will be able to hold on to it. One less evil in this land would be a good thing.”

“Ma won’t like it,” said Bob.

“Ma may be a giant and a terror to those who cross her, but she is your mother, not mine. My mother has locked herself in her castle with an evil enchanted mirror. I will rescue her, with or without your help.”

“Just tell Ma that we tied you up and left you,” said Jordon.

“I don’t know what Ma will say,” said Bob finally. “But if you are that determined, I can’t stop you.”

The giant carried them through the mountains and left them well inside the border of Neje’s home kingdom. He was still shaking his head as he watched them walk into the forest.

The forest was dark and quiet. Every twig that snapped sounded like it could be heard all the way to the Queen’s castle. As they walked they whispered plans. Neje wanted to walk in and confront her mother. She was sure she could talk the Queen around. Jordon wasn’t so sure. He favored trying to sneak in and snatch the mirror. Rapunzel limited herself to refereeing the argument when it began to get too heated.

Rapunzel found herself with a lot of refereeing to do. The capital was three days walk from where Bob had left them. Neje and Jordon spent every step discussing what they should do when they arrived. When they finally did arrive, Rapunzel plunked the startled crow down on Neje’s shoulder and told them both to stay put. She strolled into the city, leaving them both speechless.

When she first arrived in the Magic Kingdoms, Rapunzel had expected to see magic around every corner. She was disappointed to find that most of the people lived the same as they

did in her home. They worked with muscle and tools. The influence of magic was very subtle. So it was something of a shock to see little mirrors at every major corner with people surreptitiously turning their faces away from them. She found herself doing the same thing. At each corner she expected a heavy hand to land on her shoulder and haul her off for questioning. It was obvious that she wasn't alone in her feelings. No one would talk to her; it was like no one wanted to even see her. By the time she made her way back to Neje and Jordon, she was almost in tears.

"Sorry," said Jordon, as he landed on her shoulder and ran his beak through her hair.

"What should we do?" Neje asked Rapunzel, giving her a hug.

"We need to disguise you. There are mirrors everywhere, and people act like they are being watched through them." Rapunzel sat down against a tree. "We are going to need some help."

"I know some people who could help," said Neje. "But you will have to go back into the city to ask them. They may say no if they feel it is too dangerous."

She gave Rapunzel careful directions and reluctantly Rapunzel walked back into the city. The second time through the mirror strewn streets was worse. Now that Rapunzel had something to do besides letting her anger cool off, the feeling of being watched was even stronger. She nerved herself to be as casual as possible going by the mirrors. Eventually she found herself in a shabby but clean part of the city up against the castle walls. Following Neje's directions she located a little white house with a neat garden. Slipping through the gate, she knocked on the door. The door barely opened a crack before a hand reached out and yanked her into the house.

## Chapter 21

Alexandra

As soon as they crossed the border the three felt the weight of sleep strike them. It was all that they could do to keep their eyes open. The horses dropped their heads immediately and began sleeping peacefully. Nothing they could do would wake them.

“Back!” Herbert gasped and they stumbled back across the border.

“How far is it to the Castle Sopo?” asked Jock.

“Almost a day’s ride,” she said, shaking the last of the sleep spell from her head. “I think we were already too tired when we crossed the border. We must wait until morning to try again.”

“I should get our gear from the horses. It isn’t that far,” said Jock.

“No,” Herbert answered. “It is too risky.”

“I don’t think we will be able to walk all day in any case,” Alexandra said. “I felt just as sleepy as you did. It may have been because I was already tired or because the spell was directed at something I am accustomed to doing, but I don’t seem to be as immune to the sleep as to other enchantments.”

“We will try again in the morning,” Herbert said, and the three settled down for the night as best they could without any food or blankets.

The next day their attempt was little more successful. They did manage to rescue the packs from their horses, but they almost didn’t make it back to the border.

“We need to think of something else. How is the prince supposed to rescue ‘Sleeping Beauty’ if he falls asleep himself?”

“Maybe Ginger messed with this spell like he did with the others and made the sleep stronger.”

“Other spells! What other spells has he affected?” Alexandra asked.

“Well, mine he made come early. Princess Avi he limited to the confines of that lake so she couldn’t seek out Prince Michael. The sleep came early, and perhaps it is stronger than

usual. We haven't heard anything from the Enchanted Forest, but they aren't due for a major enchantment for another ten years. The Magic Mirror seems to be working just fine according to Queen Jeela. That leaves the Glass Mountain. No one at Council said anything about Princess Ariel, but she is almost due."

"The magic saddle would get us to Castle Sopo fast enough that we would not fall asleep," Alexandra said. "We aren't that far from Realm de Verre, if we travel across country."

"Well, let's go," Jock stood up and picked up his pack.

"I can't think of a better idea," Herbert helped Alexandra to her feet. "But we have a long walk ahead of us."

On the way east, Alexandra and Herbert reviewed everything they knew about the magic saddle. It was a very old enchantment with the fairies coming to the aid of a wandering adventurer.

"Mr. Smith said that they were still playing by the rules. If we can find the magic saddle, we will have a fighting chance."

"Do you think Ginger is in the Enchanted Forest, or the Realm de Verre?" asked Herbert.

"Realm de Verre. It is almost time for the princess to be abducted." Alexandra frowned. "I expect that she will disappear sooner rather than later, and I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't go to the Glass Mountain."

"Why?"

"What better place to lay a trap for some sap who says, 'take me to the top of the mountain instead of to the princess'?"

They hiked through the day crossing the green pastures of Poond. The next day in the afternoon the trio entered the forests of the Realm de Verre. The trees closed over their heads and cut off the sunlight. The trees were mostly oak and maple. Most of the trunks looked large enough to hide a small army behind. The ground was covered with dead leaves. No underbrush broke the space between the trees. The three felt a strange combination of being closed in, yet having nowhere to hide. The only thing to break the monotony of the forested landscape was the occasional fallen giant tree which had ripped a hole in the canopy above creating small magical clearings in

the dark woods.

These clearings were bright oases of sunlight in the dark woods. They were filled with bright flowers and butterflies. Many of them had tiny springs in them, which made them perfect campsites. It was in one of these clearings that they found the tiny little hut. The occupant was the smallest, most wrinkled person that any of them had ever seen. She was dressed in dusty black with a white apron. The old woman welcomed them with a toothless grin.

"Hello, dearies," she said. "Come and have a sip of water with me. I can tell you are tired and thirsty." Indeed, as she spoke the three felt such exhaustion they could hardly remain standing, and their throats were parched and dry. Alexandra held up a hand to stop her companions from rushing for the water dipper.

"Wait." She dropped her pack and fumbled a moment. "We haven't much to offer in response to your hospitality, ma'am, but the last of our bread." She held out a crust to the old woman, and hoped that she remembered the history book correctly.

"My, you are a polite girl." Alexandra wasn't sure if it was anger or pleasure on that wrinkled face. "Thank you, dearie. I will enjoy your bread. You are welcome to my water without obligation." The pressure of exhaustion and thirst faded. The cold clear water banished the last of it.

"Perhaps you would care to share my fire for the night?" asked their host. "And work the rumples out." She winked at the trio.

"I have nothing to offer in exchange for your hospitality," said Herbert, following Alexandra's cue. "Is there some small chore I could do to help you out?"

The wrinkled old woman made what Herbert was sure was a pretense of thinking about his question.

"Well, aren't you a dear. There is a wee bit of wood out back which could use some splitting. You can have at that. Only, be sure that you finish it all before sundown." Herbert nodded and headed around the back of the tiny hut. Alexandra watched him with a small frown on her face and her fingers crossed. If she was right, the prince was in for a shock. The old

woman was all the gracious host now as she waved the remaining two into her hut.

Herbert rounded the corner of the house to be faced with the largest pile of wood that he had ever seen. The axe was a monster that he could barely lift. Stifling a groan, he hefted the axe and began splitting the logs. Fortunately, he thought, she hadn't asked him to stack the wood as well. The logs were oak and heavy as iron. Still, Herbert kept at his task until his hands were blistered and raw from the unaccustomed labor. When the sky had started turning dark as the sun lowered toward the horizon he had barely made a dent in the immense pile. The prince was moving only by dogged determination. Just as he was ready to despair, he heard a tiny voice calling for help. Throwing down the axe he looked around. A huge black cat had caught a mouse and was playing with it. It was the mouse who was calling for help. Herbert snatched the mouse up and held it away from the cat who hissed at the prince and slashed his leg. It then turned as if nothing had happened and stalked off.

"Thank you," squeaked the mouse. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Unless you can split all this wood, I don't think so," Herbert said.

"Why don't you go get a drink, and I will see what I can do." The prince shrugged and staggered around front to the well. As soon as he rounded the corner he heard a sound like a thousand axes chopping. He dipped out some water and took a long drink. The water was the most wonderful thing he had ever tasted. It coursed cool and wet down his throat, soothing and refreshing him. He splashed some on his hands and they immediately stopped their burning. When the sound stopped he limped back to the wood pile and stopped in amazement. All the wood had been split and stacked neatly.

"I don't know how to thank you," Herbert said.

"It's a small thing in return for my life," replied the mouse who darted into the wood pile. Herbert picked up the axe and leaned it against the house.

"I do like to see a good worker," said the old woman. "Come into the house and have a bite to eat. You have earned it." The



prince followed her into the house. Alexandra gasped as she saw Herbert's legs covered with blood. He just gaped down at them in surprise. They began burn.

"Oh, dear, my cat must have split your stilts." She winked at him. "Come here, and I will wrap them up." As he hesitated she laughed. "Tis free boy; I don't play games in blood." She carefully wrapped his legs in clean white linen. As the cloth touched him it drained the pain away. The four of them ate supper in silence.

"Well, my dears, it is time for bed. I need my beauty sleep." She laughed madly at her own humor.

"Surely, gran," said Jock rubbing his ankle, "there is some small chore I can do. I feel quite left out. I am the only one who hasn't made some small return for your hospitality." The old woman gazed at the big man for a moment then she smiled.

"You can bring in my cat."

Jock looked doubtfully at Herbert's legs, but pushed himself to his feet, and went outside. He expected to have to search for the beast, but it was waiting for him, lying on the huge splitting block. Carefully Jock approached the cat, ready to leap away from striking claws. But the great black cat just flopped over and lay bonelessly on the stump. When he tried to lift it, Jock grunted in surprise. He couldn't budge it in the least.

"Don't take all night, boy. Just bring him in." Jock growled at the cat and tried to lift it again. The cat just purred. Gasping, he leaned on the block and almost fell when it rocked under him.

"Don't play with him, now." The old woman's voice was sharp and angry. Jock didn't know if she was talking to him or the cat. He didn't care. No cat was going to best him. He bent and put his arms around the massive block and lifted it with a roar. He swore later that the cat looked shocked. Turning around, his joints popping, Jock carried the block and the cat into the house. He carefully put the block down beside the fire.

"I thought you might need a bit of wood for the fire, seeing as bringing in the cat was such a small thing."

The hut rang with the old woman's bell like laughter.

"Such a heroic thing. Be careful you don't get too big for your skin." She winked at him. "I haven't had such fun in ages.

I'll give you a little gift before you go. Mind you, it is old. You may only use it three times, but you may find it a help." She waved them up to the loft.

"Do you know a short little fellow with red hair and a bad temper?" asked Alexandra, holding her breath.

"Surely I do, and a scoundrel he is," the old woman answered.

"Do you know his name?"

"Ah! That would be telling," said the old woman with a wink. Alexandra kissed her wrinkled cheek.

"Thank you." And she followed the other two up to the loft.

## Chapter 22

Alexandra

The next morning they woke from sleeping on sweet smelling grass feeling completely refreshed and alert. Beside Jock on the ground was an old, worn saddle. They gathered around it in excitement. Herbert was ready to leap on and fly directly to the Castle Sopo. But Alexandra stopped him.

"We need to plan what we are going to do. How are we going to wake Princess Anaeth, for one thing?"

"By kissing her, I suppose," replied Herbert. "Isn't that the usual thing?"

"Yes, and the prince who kisses her is expected to marry her. I will not lose you to that little snippet."

"What about the others who will be there?"

"How are we to wake them?" There was a long moment of silence.

"Does it have to be a prince?" They both looked at Jock.

"I don't know," admitted Alexandra. "It always has been, but I don't know if that is the enchantment or just custom."

"Let Jock try," Herbert said. "If it works, great, if it doesn't, then we can go looking for a prince." Alexandra started laughing.

"I can't wait to see her face when she sees Jock's face and finds out he isn't a prince." Herbert howled along with her until tears ran down both their faces.

"If you are quite ready," Jock said.

"Oh, dear, I didn't mean to upset you." Alexandra wiped her cheeks. "If you can wake her it will very likely be the best thing to happen to the kingdom in centuries. But Princess Anaeth is very beautiful, and very vain, and very empty headed."

"She is," said Herbert, "an old enemy."

Jock cracked a crooked grin. His nose had been broken several times and his face was scarred from battle. He would be a shock to wake up to.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" The three clambered carefully onto the saddle.

"Take us to the Princess Anaeth!" Alexandra commanded. Nothing happened. "That's right; she gave it to you, Jock." Jock shrugged and repeated the command. The saddle snatched them up and whirled them through space to a small chamber in the highest tower of Castle Sopo. It was full of cobwebs and dust. The princess lay in an ungainly heap beside the spinning wheel. She was snoring loudly.

"This is the princess?" asked Jock uncertainly. At the others' nod he knelt down beside her, obviously already fighting sleep. Alexandra and Herbert clutched each other's hands until the bones were popping. Jock bent over and planted a delicate kiss on the sleeping beauty's lips. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked at Jock. Then she saw Herbert and Alexandra.

"NO!" she screamed. "You've ruined everything." And she collapsed into tears.

Herbert and Alexandra looked at each other, horrified.

"You mean you planned this?" Her voice was ice cold.

"No, it wasn't supposed to happen like this. I was supposed to sleep for the hundred years. Then he was going to come and wake me and we would rule all the Magic Kingdoms."

"Who is he?" Herbert replied.

"You always took her side," Anaeth said. "I don't know who he is. He always talked to me from the shadows. It doesn't matter. He is going to fix you good. I'm glad now you didn't die at the tournament."

"You stand convicted by your own words of treason, and of attempted murder." Herbert drew his sword and put it point down in the floor in front of the weeping princess. "Your only chance for mercy is to tell us. WHO IS HE?!"

Anaeth shrunk back.

"I told you, I don't know, I don't care."

"Let's get out of here," Jock said. "This little viper is making me ill."

"You can't leave," Anaeth said. "This is the only room free of the spell. I told you. I am going to rule all the Magic Kingdoms."

"How could you do this?" asked Alexandra.

"You were always so selfish, thinking only of yourself. You

think you are going to take all the magic out of the Kingdoms? Just because you are an unenchanted freak?" Herbert's sword moved to Anaeth's throat.

"How do we raise the enchantment on Sopo?"

"You can't. They will sleep forever. At least he said it was as good as forever. They will wake when a royal first born child is named after him."

"NO!" There was a crash and a dark shadow entered the room. "You little fool!" The shadow bellowed.

"I told you, I would keep them here if they came," Anaeth simpered and winked at the shadow. "I knew she would try to interfere."

There was no answer, only the sudden onslaught of sleepiness. Anaeth slumped to the floor again. But Herbert felt the fire of his scratched legs and his eyes snapped open. Alexandra felt her throat parched and cracked, and fought off the sleep. Jock's muscles felt the burden of a terrible weight, and he straightened under it. The spell shifted and the three felt their shapes being torn from them. Again the pain of their trials saved them from the malevolent enchantment. Then the darkness became pain. They were being burned, broken, crushed under unbearable pain. They all had withstood pain before.

She planned this.

An awful shriek split the air. The shadow materialized into a short, red haired little man. His face was distorted with rage.

"I haven't finished with you yet!" he screamed and vanished in a puff of smoke. Anaeth was once again sleeping on the floor, but she groaned and twisted in her sleep. Alexandra shook her, but she would not awaken.

"There is nothing we can do for her," Alexandra said.

"You would help her?" asked Jock.

"I would not leave even her in this condition, but I have no choice. Look at her." As the three stared Anaeth's hair lost its golden shine, and flaws appeared in her perfect skin. She slept, but she was no longer Sleeping Beauty.

"The magic kingdom's justice," Herbert said. "I didn't need my sword." He left it stuck in the wood by the sleeping girl.

"Let's go," Jock said. "Where next?"

Herbert looked at Alexandra.

“To Princess Ariel,” she said. At Herbert’s inquiring look she shrugged. “We have the saddle. It is still the only way to rescue her.” The two men nodded. All three climbed onto the saddle.

“To Princess Ariel,” ordered Jock.

Again the saddle wrenched them to another place. They found themselves at Ariel’s breakfast table in the Realm Castle.

“Oh,” Ariel said. “If you are going to abduct me, please let me finish my milk.” Jock just stood with his mouth open. Then Ariel saw Alexandra and Herbert.

“What are you doing here?”

“We actually came to rescue you, but it appears that we have come just a little early for that,” Herbert said.

“But you are just in time for breakfast,” Ariel replied. “Please, do sit down.” She rang for the servants and asked them to bring more breakfast for her guests.

“I know you and Alexandra, but I don’t know this very interesting man at all.”

Jock turned red, while Herbert and Alexandra chuckled. After a couple of attempts Jock managed to find his voice.

“Your Highness, I am just a professional soldier.”

“First,” Ariel said, “at breakfast I am just Ariel. Second, I don’t know many soldiers, and I want to hear all about you.”

“Well,” Jock said taking a deep breath. “There are mountains in the north of what you call the Northern Kingdoms. I was born in the north of those mountains as the eleventh son of a man whose idea of prosperity was having five cows instead of three. As the youngest son, I had to fight my brothers, and my brothers’ friends for pretty near anything I wanted. When my father died there wasn’t close to enough to go around, and I didn’t feel like fighting my brothers while my father was still warm. I figured that what I was good at was fighting, so I became a soldier. I’ve been a soldier for about fifteen years now, I guess. Moving from one place to another. This is the first time I have worked in the Magic Kingdoms.”

“We need people who know how the rest of the world works,” Ariel said. “Maybe I should buy out your contract.”

“You would have to talk to my father,” said Herbert. “But we

had better get on our way. Could you loan us some horses to ride to the Council Village?"

"Sure thing." But as she went to ring for the servants again there was a puff of air and she disappeared. Herbert and Alexandra had hardly blinked when Jock leaped onto the saddle.

"Take me to Ariel!" he cried. Then he, too, was gone.

Herbert walked over to the bell and rang for the servants.

"Please inform Queen Lacey that Ariel has been abducted, but should be rescued in record time. A messenger should be sent to the Council. And, oh yes, bring some more tea please. This pot is cold."

## Chapter 23

Jock

Jock, for the third time, felt the dislocation of the magic saddle. He arrived at the Glass Mountain in time to hear Ariel's scream. He couldn't see a thing because of the shadows in the room.

"Ginger!" he bellowed.

"I am insulted," replied a high pitched voice out of the darkness. "That you could mistake me for that pompous windbag! I shall turn you into something especially nasty for that impertinence." As soon as Jock heard the voice he had started moving cautiously in that direction. He got his hands on soft skin and was rewarded by a slight gasp from Ariel. Putting his finger on her lips he began sliding away from the fairy. Suddenly the shadows disappeared, and Jock was looking at a fairy that was at least half again as tall, and as broad as Jock himself.

"You," he said to the fairy, "have an awfully prissy voice for such a big galoot."

The fairy shook his head. "You are interfering in matters of which you have no understanding." He loomed over the pair and grinned at Jock. "How would you like to be a frog, mortal?"

"It's been done." Jock jumped at the fairy and caught him in a wrestling hold. Ariel jumped back as the big man and the bigger fairy crashed about the room. Neither of them appeared to be gaining the upper hand. The fairy was stronger, but Jock was faster and more accustomed to physical combat. Soon there wasn't a whole piece of furniture left in the room. It seemed like hours before the pair gave up out of sheer exhaustion. They sat on the floor and stared at each other. The fairy rubbed his shoulder and grimaced.

"That is the first time," he groaned, "in all my centuries, that a mortal had the audacity to physically challenge me."

"You put up a pretty good fight for someone who has never been challenged." Jock rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"Here." They both looked at Ariel, and blinked. She sighed. "While you were getting acquainted I took a look around. I found an ice box. You will want to put these on the worst of



your bruises.” She handed each of them a lumpy cloth. They held the ice gingerly to their various wounds, wincing at the cold at the same time as they welcomed the relief. Jock looked at the huge fairy delicately putting ice on his black eye. He moved his cloth to the back of his head.

“Look at this place,” the fairy said. “The princess was supposed to live here in luxurious captivity. Now look at this mess.” He moved the cloth to his shoulder. “You will find a broom in the closet in the corner there, Princess Ariel.”

She gave the fairy a hard look and went over to the closet.

“Here.” The man and fairy looked up at her and blinked. “There were two brooms. One each.” She glared at them. “I am not cleaning up this mess.” She dropped the brooms beside the pair, crossing her arms. They looked at her sheepishly.

Jock moaned and pushed his way to his feet, using the broom to prop himself up. The fairy shrugged and staggered to his feet. Painfully stiff, they began sweeping the shards into piles on the floor. Ariel watched them ruefully. They really did look in bad shape. She picked up the discarded ice and went to the kitchen. Blessing her childhood days snooping in the kitchen, she put water on to boil and looked around for something to cook.

Back in the main room Jock looked over at the fairy.

“Why don’t you just wave your hand and put this mess back together?”

“It isn’t that easy.” The fairy leaned on his broom. “Magic takes just as much energy as doing it yourself. It is better to save it for the important things. Stiltski never learned that. He was always rushing about casting spells and showing off. It got so none of you mortals would fall for his tricks anymore. That made him furious. He loved being important.” He snorted. “We all loved being important, that’s how we got into this mess. I mean, look at us, a respectable tribe of magical beings, and what are we doing? We are dashing about playing games with you mortals, just so you will pay us a proper amount of attention. Stiltski is so desperate for you mortals to notice him that he has been trying for centuries to get one of your children for his own. He thinks it will make him ruler of the Magic Kingdoms.

No offense, but I can't imagine why he wants the job."

The room began to look respectable once again. Ariel came in carrying a pot and three bowls.

"This is soup, I think." She handed out the bowls. "I have never had to actually cook something before." The three ate in companionable silence. When they had finished, Jock picked up the dishes.

"You may not have had to cook, but in the army we did a lot of dishes."

When he returned from the kitchen he found Ariel and the big fairy laughing over some tale of Ariel's from school. He sat down and just watched her talking and laughing. There were a lot of strange things happening in the general location of his heart and he wanted to sort them out a bit before he went much farther.

"Look, the saddle is done, and you won't ever get down from this place without it." The fairy shrugged his shoulders. "Since this is the last time at the game, I will take you two down to the foot of the mountain. Then you are on your own."

Jock stood up and stretched his stiffening muscles.

"We would appreciate that," the princess said with a curtsy. Fog surrounded them briefly then they found themselves standing at the base of a shiny black cliff. The smell of pine tickled their noses.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone that I broke the rules. We aren't supposed to do that, even now. The Council can be very sticky about these things." The fairy nodded his head and began to fade away. "Give my regards to Princess Alexandra and the frog, and tell them they haven't seen the last of Stiltski yet." He disappeared completely just as Jock heard him mutter, "Better them than me."

Jock looked at Ariel. She smiled and took his hand.

"A lot of things will be changing. I don't think anyone will notice that I am marrying a foreign mercenary in all the confusion."

"Marrying?" whispered Jock.

"Well, yes. You are my rescuer, and I find you much more interesting than the princes." She looked at him square in the

eyes. "Don't you want to marry me?"

"Yes," said Jock, and found himself grinning foolishly.

"Let's get going, man of mine. I want to make the announcement at Alexandra and Herbert's wedding. Everyone will be there and we can get all the fuss over with at one go." She took his hand and pulled him along. "The road is this way."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jock walked beside the princess, concentrating on the warm feeling of her hand in his. He had never been affected by any woman like he was by this princess. He finally decided it was because she wasn't afraid of him. I like this, he thought. Ariel looked up at him and winked, and his brain ceased working. At least we are riding a wagon now, or I would be falling all over my own feet, he thought to himself.

The farmer had picked them up soon after they left the Glass Mountain. He had no objection to taking the pair north toward The Aliarne. They left the farmer at the market of one town and soon found a ride continuing north. At the junction they fell in with a merchant bringing goods to sell at the wedding. He and his wife were all too happy to have a prince and princess riding with them. The merchant obstinately refused to believe that Jock was 'just a mercenary.'

The whole trip passed in a gentle blur for the pair. They talked very little, but just sat getting used to the other being there. Mostly they let the merchant do all the talking.

They rolled into the capital of the Aliarne the day before the wedding was to take place. Herbert met them in the courtyard of the castle.

"I heard that a prince and princess were arriving in the company of a merchant. It was causing some considerable talk." He laughed. "I must thank you for saving me from the gossips. They have all been speculating on what prince you have found for yourself, Ariel. I see you have done somewhat better for yourself. Congratulations, Jock." Herbert saw a group of elderly men in long robes bearing down on him. "Excuse me, they want to rehearse my part with me again, and I have no intention of

allowing it." He slipped through the doors.

"Pardon me," said the oldest of the robed men. "I am the Archbishop's assistant and I am looking for the Prince of Poond. I need to discuss tomorrow's service with him."

"I don't see him," replied Jock.

"But he was just here."

"He isn't here now, but since you are here, perhaps you may help me." Jock looked at Princess Ariel and grinned. She nodded her head and began shaking as she tried to stifle her laughter.

"The princess here and I would like to get married as soon as possible. I would like your help in getting through the proper process."

"Yes, your Highness. I will take you to the Council now. They happen to be meeting to discuss some issues around the Kingdom of Sopo." He sent the other men off to track Prince Herbert down, and set out with Jock and Ariel.

By the time the three arrived at the meeting room, Jock was regretting his decision to jump right in, but Ariel was walking with her head up and her hand was dry and warm in his.

"How should I announce you?" asked the Archbishop's assistant.

"As Princess Ariel and her rescuer."

"Very good, your Highness." The old man knocked on the door and when it opened, whispered to the page who had answered the knock.

The page nodded and threw the door open.

"The Princess Ariel and her rescuer!"

The pair walked into the room filled with the rulers of the Magic Kingdoms. Kings and Queens and their councilors appraised the pair.

"I assume that you are requesting our permission to get married?" asked the King of Charmant, smiling at the pair. "I am sorry, sir, that I do not recognize you."

"My name is Jock, Sire. I am from the north. North even of what you call the Northern Kingdoms."

"And what is your lineage, Jock from the north?" asked Duke Hans.

"I am my father's eleventh son."

"You are that mercenary that Herbert sent down from the causeway," said King Albert.

"I am, Sire."

"And you think you are worthy to marry a princess of the Magic Kingdoms?"

"Princess Ariel thinks so, Sire."

Princess Ariel's father nodded.

"I support the petition. I have always trusted Ariel's judgment."

"I, too, support the petition; we could use someone with knowledge of the north on the Council."

"Any dissenters?" asked King Charmant. No one spoke. The King let the silence drag out much longer than Jock thought was necessary, but finally King Charmant rapped the table with his knuckles. "Petition granted. Congratulations." He leaned back until the chair creaked. "Sit down, Jock; as Princess Ariel's fiancé you are now welcome to sit with this council. I, for one, would like to hear more about the lands north of here. I think it is time we broadened our horizons."

\* \* \* \* \*

That night Herbert and Alexandra stole away to talk with Jock and Ariel. They shook their heads over Ariel's tale of the battle between Jock and the fairy.

"I think that King Charmant is right. We are going to need your experience of the world to help us adjust to the new way of doing things. I would never have thought of wrestling a fairy." Herbert shook his head in admiration. They listened carefully to the fairy's comments about their enemy.

"I think it would be a mistake to name a child for the fairy. Names have power. I would hate to land any child with the kind of trouble having some fairy's name would bring." Alexandra sighed. "We will just have to find another way to free Sopo."

They talked long into the night but could come up with no new ideas on Sopo.

"We will just have to trust Jordon and Rapunzel to find the

Fairy Council.” The four went to their separate rooms walking through deserted hallways lit only by the moonlight from the windows. Herbert stopped at Alexandra’s door.

“This is the last time we need to say goodnight outside the door. Until tomorrow, Alexandra.”

“Until tomorrow, Herbert.”

The cathedral was full with both the nobles and the common people. Herbert fidgeted at the front trying to remember his lines. The prince who was standing with him nudged him yet again. The Archbishop smiled sympathetically at the young man. The organ shifted tunes signaling that Princess Alexandra had arrived. Herbert craned his neck to look down the aisle, but the gathered crowd stood for the bride’s entrance, and he couldn’t see her. He saw Princess Ariel holding onto Jock’s arm. She smiled up at him, and Herbert swore that he could see the sparks fly between them. Jock swallowed, and looked up at Herbert. Next to Prince Jordon, who was off on his own quest with Rapunzel, Jock was the one who had been through the most with Herbert and Alexandra. The two grinned identical foolish grins. Then Herbert saw Alexandra and he forgot everything. He could think of nothing except how much he loved this woman who was walking down the aisle to join him. He remembered his despair as a frog at the bottom of a pond in the great Fens. He remembered flying with Jordon to find Alexandra. He thought again of that magical first kiss late at night at the school, and the kiss that freed him from his enchantment.

He stepped forward to meet Alexandra and bowed. Then, taking her hand, they faced the Archbishop. Herbert could never afterward remember anything about the service, though later everyone would compliment him on his good strong responses. He was lost in looking at Alexandra. Nothing else in the world mattered at that moment.

Alexandra had walked calmly down the aisle and taken Herbert’s hand. She was perfectly fine until she looked into Herbert’s eyes. His look of dumbfounded love undid her composure, and she could feel her eyes tearing up. She followed through the ceremony with only a fraction of her attention. They

exchanged their vows with words, but also with their eyes and their hearts. The rings were rings of fire on their hands burning with their love.

“You may kiss.” The Archbishop nudged the couple and repeated himself. “You may kiss.”

Herbert held Alexandra for a brief moment looking into her eyes then he kissed her. Once again he felt the magic run through his veins, and he knew that it was coursing through his bride as well. The light from the windows shone warm and golden on the couple.

Then they heard laughter. It was cold and cruel, and familiar. Herbert knew it from under the bridge near the Fens, Alexandra had felt its scorn while she was imprisoned. The laughing dimmed the sunlight and squeezed in on them. Herbert could feel Alexandra holding him tight. He knew who he was. No magic was going to change him. He gave his strength to Alexandra even as she loaned him hers. The darkness snapped and receded leaving in its passing the sound of hundreds of terrified frogs croaking and jumping in fear and panic. Herbert and Alexandra were the only two unaffected in the entire cathedral. Frogs leapt and crept. They croaked and peeped. They were green and brown and spotted and colored. Over the cacophony the laughter continued.

“Ginger!” Alexandra’s shout shook the cathedral and all the frogs were silent and still. “You want to be remembered. You want to be known. I will make you known. I will make your name familiar in the smallest cottage in the Kingdoms. You will be a laughing stock and joke for your pride. For all your magic, you are no more than a child crying for a toy. Begone, and bother us no more.”

“I will go, but I don’t promise to never come back.” The voice echoed petulantly in the cathedral. Then there was silence, broken only by the peep of a tiny frog sitting at the toe of the princess’s shoe. She picked up the frog and kissed it. With a poof the Archbishop stood before her, blushing furiously. Herbert also picked up a frog and kissed it and it, too, returned to human shape.

“Here, you try it.” Alexandra handed a bullfrog to the Arch-

bishop to kiss. He gave her a thunderous look, then shrugged and kissed the frog. With a poof it became a noblewoman who stared about her with wide eyes.

“Kiss frogs, and tell them to kiss frogs, until everyone is free of the spell.”

A circle of humanity spread from the wedding group at the front. Some frogs hopped toward the humans, and some hopped wildly in fear, almost impossible to catch.

King Albert found himself human once again after being kissed by his daughter-in-law. He in turn picked up a frog to kiss and found himself holding his Queen. She was trembling in horror. Albert looked in her eyes and kissed her again.

“Just because I want to, my love.” She smiled gratefully then turned to the frogs leaping about her feet.

Alexandra and Herbert stood watching for a moment as human and frog seemed to join in a dance of magic in the light of the cathedral windows.

“I have a feeling that life with me will never be normal,” said the Unenchanted Princess.

“So long as it is life with you,” replied the Frog Prince.

“Come,” said Alexandra, “we have a kingdom to kiss.”



# **BOOK 3**

## **The Final Enchantment**

## Chapter 24

Rapunzel

Rapunzel faced a woman in a grey dress. She also wore a grey apron and grey cap, even her hair was grey.

“Sorry, love, but you can’t be too careful these days. Ever since the princess, bless her heart, had to run away things have just gotten worse.”

“She’s back,” blurted Rapunzel. “I left her outside the city waiting for me.”

“George!” called the woman. “Go harness the cart. We need to go get something outside the city.”

“It ain’t safe,” said a man every bit as grey as his wife. Even his voice was grey.

“SHE’s back,” whispered the woman urgently. Without another word George turned and left the room. “You’ll have to wait here with me,” said the woman. “They will notice a stranger in the cart.”

It didn’t take long for George to harness a tiny pony to a cart piled with laundry. After getting directions from Rapunzel, he clucked to the pony and they started off.

It seemed like hours later the cart returned, still with its laundry. Rapunzel didn’t see Neje until the cart was parked in the shed. Jordon flew in through the door and took his usual perch nibbling Rapunzel’s ear. Then the princess burst red faced out of the bundle. She saw the grey woman and hugged her tight.

“Maisie, I was so afraid for you.”

“There, there, love. I have been through this before. It isn’t any fun, but it is the way of the world around here.”

“Well, that’s going to change,” Neje said firmly. “I am not going to lose my mother to a piece of evil glass.”

After a long silence, Maisie shook her head. “Let’s have some tea and talk this through.”

George brought in the tea and served them all. They drank tea and talked far into the night.

The next morning Rapunzel put on a grey dress, apron and

cap and followed Maisie out the door. Jordon flew overhead. As they entered the castle, he checked out the guards. As he feared, there were a lot more guards than Neje remembered. They looked alert and professional. The guards scanned the faces of everyone who passed the gates. Yet, even for these professionals, the servants were invisible. Maisie led Rapunzel up the stairs to the bedrooms. They spent the morning going through the rooms cleaning and tidying. Rapunzel had never thought cleaning would be such hard work.

Jordon circled above the castle and called insults to the crows. They flew up to mob him. The air was filled with tumbling and shrieking birds. But underneath the ruckus Jordon was enlisting the help of the castle crows. After a while he went and sat on a tree and waited for Rapunzel to be finished.

Some time after lunch, Rapunzel discovered that she had been separated from Maisie. She tried to find her, but soon got lost in the maze of the castle halls. A guard stopped her.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“I’m new,” Rapunzel said. “I got lost looking for my partner.”

“Grey servants aren’t allowed here.” The guard took her arm firmly, “This way, please.” He led her through the bewildering halls. Rapunzel was ready to heave a sigh of relief as they entered an area she recognized. She saw Maisie looking at her, then Queen Jeela stalked in.

“What are you doing?” she snapped at the guard.

“A new girl got lost, your Majesty.”

“We don’t have any new girls,” growled the Queen. She lifted Rapunzel’s face with her finger. “I know you.” For a moment Rapunzel could see the struggle deep inside Queen Jeela, but the Mirror’s influence won. “Take her to the dungeon. I will question her later.”

The guard looked apologetically at Rapunzel and dragged her off in a different direction. Rapunzel could hear the Queen berating the servants behind her. The way to the dungeon was short and direct. The guard led her out the door and across the courtyard to an older part of the castle. He knocked on the door. It was answered by another guard.

“The Queen’s going to be by later herself for this one.”

“Poor kid, what did she do?”

“The Queen knows her from somewhere.”

The guards shook their heads, then the new one took Rapunzel’s arm and led her down the steps. He locked her in a cell with a bit of straw on the floor.

“Stay out of the straw,” he said. “Fleas. Not that it will matter soon.” Sighing, he locked the cell door behind her and left Rapunzel standing alone.

Jordon watched the guard take Rapunzel into the castle and he knew she was in trouble. He flew off to find Princess Neje.

Neje was sitting in the house alone when Jordon swept in.

“Rapunzel has been taken,” he said. “We must help her. I have a plan, but we need to move quickly.”

Neje snatched up a cloak and left the house. Jordon sat on her shoulder and told her what to expect, then he flew off to find his reinforcements.

It wasn’t hard for Neje to sound young and scared. She said she needed to see Maisie, as George had taken a bad spell. The sympathetic servant at the door let her in and told her where to find Maisie. Neje scurried through the familiar halls of her home. She found Maisie still working.

“What are you doing here?” hissed the old woman.

“I need you to rush out to find George. Tell them I told you he’d taken a spell. Let it slip that it is over the excitement of me returning.”

“I can’t, the Queen will kill you when she finds you.”

“You must,” Neje stood straight. “It is your Princess that commands you. Please hurry.”

Maisie ran off. Neje didn’t wait to watch but slipped through the halls to find a secret panel that she had played with as a child. The passage led to the bottom of the stairs to her mother’s chambers. Neje waited and listened for the signal.

Jordon flew through the courtyard and called his challenge to the other crows. They had been waiting for him and immediately surrounded him. The prince led them through an open window in the castle then sent them off to cause whatever mischief they could. He hoped Neje was in place, because she

wasn't going to have much time.

The rumors of the princess's return and the pandemonium of the crow invasion reached the Queen at the same time. She screamed in rage and went running out of her rooms. She knew who was the cause of this. That snippet of a girl in the dungeon.

Neje heard the Queen run past and counted to thirty, then she opened the door and began climbing the stairs to the Queen's rooms.

Queen Jeela swept through the castle screaming at people to drive the crows away, but she didn't slow. She went straight to the door down to the dungeons and banged on the door.

"Take that girl to the questioning room right now," she ordered the guard. She descended the stairs planning her torture.

The guard followed at a slower pace. He went to Rapunzel's cell and reluctantly opened the door. Just as Rapunzel stepped out of the cell, Jordon attacked the guard. This was a far deadlier game than Ma with her broomstick. The guard had a sword and was quick.

"Run," screamed Jordon as he arabesqued desperately. She fled up the stairs and out the door into the courtyard. She slammed the door just as Jordon flew out. It didn't slow the guard for long, but it gave them a couple of seconds lead. Long enough for Jordon to recall his troops. By the time the guard had opened the door, the courtyard was full of wheeling and cawing birds. He couldn't see the prisoner, so he ran back down the stairs to warn his Queen.

Neje made it up the steps and opened the door to her mother's rooms. They had once been bright and airy. Now they were grim and full of shadows. She began looking for the mirror. Her mother had never let her see it when she was young, so Neje only had a vague description from old books. She overturned books and pulled covers off of frames on the wall with no luck. She heard steps outside the room and realized that she had run out of time. She hid behind a tapestry on the wall.

Her mother came into the room. Neje could see her past the edge of the wall hanging. The Queen pulled a mirror out from under the pillow on the bed.

"Show me my daughter," she snarled. When she saw Neje

in the mirror she screeched and lunged at the girl. Neje dodged and tried to talk to the Queen.

“Mom, it’s me, Neje.”

“Traitor, witch! You have come to kill me.”

“No, I have come to save you. I love you.”

“Love,” sneered the Queen. “There is no such thing as love.”

She snatched a spear from the wall and tried to stab her daughter, but she couldn’t manage mirror and spear at the same time. She put the mirror in her sash and took the spear in both hands. Rapunzel reached the room and screamed. She was sure that Neje was going to be killed right in front of her. Tears ran down Neje’s face as she begged and pleaded with the woman who was her mother. Rapunzel jumped on the Queen’s back. But with manic strength she threw the girl off and turned to stab her with the spear. Jordon flew at her face and she batted him against the wall.

“Die, you minx,” said the Queen and raised the spear.

“STOP!” screamed Neje. “Or I will break the mirror.” She held the mirror high over her head. Queen Jeela felt her sash and screamed. She threw the spear at her daughter. Neje tried to block the spear with the mirror, but the heavy spear smashed through the mirror and buried itself in the girl’s chest.

“Mother,” she whispered and fell to the floor. The Queen stared open mouthed at Princess Neje, then she wailed and ran forward. She stomped on the shards of the mirror, shattering them into ever smaller pieces. Then, heedless of her hands, she swept them out of the way and knelt over her fallen daughter.

“Mom,” whispered Neje. “I knew I could save you.”

Guards ran up to the door, then stood in stunned silence.

“You,” said Queen Jeela pointing to one at random. “Go fetch the doctor, tell him to bring a potion. The rest of you, go through the castle and smash every mirror you find. Send others through the city. By nightfall, I don’t want there to be a mirror left in my entire kingdom.” She turned back to Neje, who lay white faced, but smiling. “What have I done?”

The doctor arrived soon after the guards had rushed out.

He didn't try to talk, but just waved Rapunzel and Jordon out of the room as he pulled a tiny flask from his robes.

Later that evening, the Queen met with Rapunzel in her small study behind the throne room.

"How are you, Prince Jordon?"

"I am fine, your Majesty," he said while Rapunzel brushed his feathers. "I was just stunned, not hurt."

"How is Princess Neje?" asked Rapunzel.

"The doctor said it would be a long recovery, even with the potion. It will give us time to get reacquainted." The Queen shook her head in wonder. "Even now, I find it hard to believe that she can forgive me. If there is anything that I can do for you, anything at all, just ask."

"I need one of the pieces of the mirror," Jordon said.

"I have gathered every piece of that evil thing with my own hands and plan to crush it into sand. Then I will have it scattered through the mountains," said Queen Jeela. "What do you want with a piece of it?"

"The King Crow asked for the mirror in payment for his help," replied Jordon.

"I have given my word," sighed the Queen. "I will bring you a piece. Just promise me you will not look in it, not for the briefest second."

"I promise," said Jordon.

"As do I," added Rapunzel.

A few days later they said farewell to Neje, then were seen off by the Queen herself at the gates of the castle. They were accompanied by three of the castle guard with horses and supplies to speed their journey. Around Jordon's neck was a thin cord holding a tiny black bag. In it was the last remaining fragment of the Magic Mirror. With horses and guards to do the work, it only took a couple of days to reach the border. The guards waved and turned back, while Rapunzel and Jordon rode on. She rode a gentle mare and led a packhorse burdened with equipment and supplies.

The next day they saw the great cloud of crows in the distance. Once again a pair of crows met and challenged them when they got close. This time Jordon looked them in the eye

and told them to fetch the King Crow. The two looped in surprise and flew like black streaks into the center of the flock. Soon the entire flock boiled and churned in their direction. Rapunzel reassured her mare and waited nervously. The King Crow arrived in the company of another small crow. They settled on the packhorse.

“Well, not-crow, you have the mirror for me?”

Rapunzel lifted the loop off of Jordon and held it out to the King Crow, but Jordon hopped up on her arm.

“Are you sure you want it?” he asked. “It has caused heart-ache enough.”

“That’s mirror?” piped the little crow.

“All that is left,” answered Jordon. “The Queen smashed the rest.”

The King Crow took the bag from Rapunzel.

“Small piece, small power,” he chuckled. “I’m in no danger. What do you want from me?”

“I want to be not-crow in body as well as spirit,” Jordon answered.

“Why want to be not-crow?” asked the small crow. The King Crow bumped it gently.

“Pardon my son, he doesn’t have a name yet,” the King said. “But he does ask a good question.”

Jordon told the King and his son the whole story of their adventures and battles with the still unnamed fairy. At the end the King Crow was chortling and hopping from one foot to the other.

“Fairies, bah. They are all rules and discussion and meetings. The Fairy Council will talk your ear off. They will talk your whole life and still not make up their minds or answer your question. Just laugh at them and live your life and they can’t touch you.”

He flapped over and pecked Jordon on his back between his wings. He lost his balance and fell off Rapunzel’s arm. He landed hard on the ground and tried to fly back up, but his wings didn’t work properly. He stood up and staggered on legs that were suddenly human. Rapunzel jumped off the horse and hugged him, wonder in her eyes. She brushed her hand across



his head and touched feathers.

“Something to remember the crows by,” the King Crow bowed and jumped into the air.

“Wait, please,” cried Jordon.

“Changed your mind already?” laughed the King.

“Please tell us how to find the Fairy Council.” Jordon asked.

“Why would I know?” said the King.

“You are the King Crow. You hear from crows all across the land. If anyone knows it will be you.”

The King Crow looked at Jordon for a long time.

“It will do you no good,” he said finally.

“I must try anyway,” Jordon replied.

“My son will guide you,” the King Crow said. “And you will find a name for him.”

The little crow hopped up and down in excitement. Jordon reached out his hand to the small bird.

“Thank you,” he said. “I promise to find a name worthy of such a brave crow.”

“Go north,” said the Prince Crow. “Fairies in the mountains.”

## Chapter 25

Jordon

They headed north toward the Giant's Village. Rapunzel wanted to let Ma and Bob know what had happened in the White Mountains. She was also hoping to see one of Avi's swans to send a message to Alexandra. They arrived at the village late in the evening, tired and hungry. What had been a good supply of food for a woman and a crow did not last very long for two humans and a crow. Ma was delighted to see them. They stayed in the dollhouse and rested the next day while they told the story of their adventure to the giants. They were impressed that the mirror had been broken, but they couldn't agree on what it meant for the giants. Bob agreed to take the story to Jack to send to Alexandra.

The morning was cold and damp, but Jordon and Rapunzel were determined to start their search. The Prince Crow could barely contain his excitement and several times flew off to scout out the trail for them. Finally, with their gear in waterproof packs and oiled canvas cloaks to keep the rain off, Rapunzel and Jordon rode out of the village. Prince Crow swooped down on them and perched on Jordon's shoulder under the broad brim of his hat. The bird shook like a dog spraying Jordon with water. Jordon sighed and glanced over at Rapunzel who was trying hard not to laugh.

"Was I like this?" he asked.

"No, you were a mature and solemn crow," she replied. "He is young and on an adventure. Give him time."

The paths they followed wound through trees that were themselves like mountains. Jordon was sure that ten of him couldn't join hands around their massive trunks. Beneath the trees the ground was almost bare. Yet, even with no underbrush, they couldn't see very far ahead. Rapunzel quickly learned again to lean forward in the saddle as they road higher into the mountains. Each night they would put their backs to one of the trees and build a tiny fire from fallen branches. They didn't see any wildlife except for one huge buck that walked across

their path as if he owned the mountain. Even the birds were growing silent.

The massive trees gradually gave way to smaller trees that grew closer together. There was more underbrush for them to go around or fight their way through. They found a few berries that had not yet rotted or been eaten and enjoyed a break from the dried food they carried. As they rode higher into the mountains the rain became a drifting of snow. The nights were bitter cold, but Jordon and Rapunzel wrapped themselves together in their cloaks and stayed warm. Prince Crow would huddle on a nearby branch and mutter under his breath.

As Rapunzel had predicted, the young bird's exuberance had calmed somewhat. He was very serious about being their guide and constantly flew on brief excursions to check that they were still headed in the right direction. Jordon heard crows in the distance several times a day and knew they were being kept up to date. He appreciated the guidance. He had grown up near the mountains and heard stories about how easy it was to get lost. Without the little crow's help he knew that they had little chance of surviving, never mind finding the fairies.

The snow started in earnest as they topped a pass and began riding downhill. Jordon couldn't see the nose of the horse he was riding and had to trust the beast's senses. He passed a rope to Rapunzel and had her tie it to her saddle horn. Now they couldn't get separated. Prince Crow huddled in a miserable lump on Jordon's shoulder.

"Down, down, down," he muttered to himself.

The storm let up a moment and Jordon spotted a cave. He led them to the cave where they were able to get the horses and themselves out of the snow. With the heat from horse and human the cave soon warmed up. Even Prince Crow seemed more cheerful from his perch on the saddles. They had no fuel for a fire, but some melted snow gave them water to soften the jerky that was the only food they had left.

The grey light from the cave entrance became darker until it was merely a lighter shade of black. Rapunzel found the stub of a candle and managed to light it. In its warm light the cave seemed almost homey. The warmth was making them sleepy.

Their horses were already asleep with their heads hanging down.

A huge wolf walked into the cave and looked around at them. He sneezed.

“You must be from that magic land over the pass,” he growled. “Magic always makes me sneeze.”

“You are welcome to join us,” said Rapunzel.

“You aren’t afraid that I will eat you in the night?” asked the wolf, baring his teeth.

“I have teeth, too,” replied Jordon, stretching until his joints creaked. “And I don’t think you are that kind of wolf.”

The wolf circled a few times then lay on the floor out of the wind. Jordon tossed him a bit of their jerky which disappeared in a flash.

“My great grandpa left the magic place because he was tired of being ‘big, bad wolf.’ Here we are just ‘wolf,’ but we remember the old courtesies. I am your guest and will not harm you.” He tucked his nose under his tail and went to sleep.

Jordon and Rapunzel looked at each other then shrugged. They wrapped themselves up in their cloaks and soon slept too.

Only Prince Crow sat watching the sleepers until a gust of wind snuffed the candle.

In the morning the wind had died and the snow reflected bright light from the sun. The wolf was gone, but a freshly killed rabbit lay where he had been sleeping.

“I see our guest left us some breakfast,” said Jordon. “Let me see if I can find some wood to cook it on.”

He was back in a few minutes with enough wood to build a small fire. The roasted rabbit gave them extra energy to continue their trek. The snow thinned as they continued down the hill.

“Not far, not far,” said Prince Crow. Sure enough, by noon they were riding on a path that wound its way through the trees. By evening they saw the lights of a village shining from the bottom of a broad valley. Jordon and Rapunzel decided that they would rather face the fairies by daylight. They huddled under a tree and slept. When they woke in the morning there was no village in the valley below them. The little crow was crestfallen.

“Fairies run, fairies hide,” he said. “I go look.” He flew up

into the trees and was gone.

“Do you have any more of those meat sticks?” The wolf’s voice rumbled from the bushes.

“Sure,” said Jordon, pulling some out of his pack. “Thank you for the rabbit.”

The wolf came out of the bush and snapped up the meat that Jordon tossed him.

“So, why are you waiting here?” asked the wolf. “Why not go eat breakfast with them?”

“Them?” asked Rapunzel.

“In the village,” said the wolf. “They are having bacon and eggs. My nose is never wrong.”

Jordon looked at Rapunzel.

“They are fairies,” he said. “Of course they can hide themselves.”

The wolf sneezed.

“Thank you, friend,” said Jordon. They picked up their gear and walked down into the valley, leading their horses.

They found an old well sitting in the middle of a meadow. Jordon dropped his horse’s reins and looked in the well. He saw a rope and a bucket hanging on a hook on the inside. A moment later he was lowering the rope and pulling a bucket of water up. Suddenly he was burning with thirst. Even so, he held the bucket for his horse, then Rapunzel’s. Both animals immediately fell asleep on their feet.

“Tricky fairies indeed,” Jordon said. He looked around him at the meadow. It was a riot of color with flowers that were out of season. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He could smell the cold and wet of the melted snow on the ground. He caught a whiff of bacon and eggs. He couldn’t smell any flowers. He put the bucket on the ground, though his mouth felt dry and cracked. He could see that Rapunzel was feeling the same thing.

“Aren’t you going to welcome your guests?” he asked. “It seems rude to hide after we came all this way to see you.”

He was met by silence. The color of the flowers grew brighter, and his thirst deepened.

“We met a wolf, and shared shelter and a meal,” he called

again. "Surely the fairies are no less hospitable than a wolf?" In answer the flowers became a circle of flame. He took Rapunzel's hand and whispered to her to close her eyes. Even as the flames rose, he realized that there was no smell of fire.

Fantastic monsters stepped out of the fire baring tooth and claw. Still Jordon stood fast. The monsters and the fire vanished. He stood in a valley of dry ground, empty and dead, still he waited. Finally, there was just darkness. Only the warmth of Rapunzel's hand convinced him that he wasn't alone.

There was a growl behind him and he felt warmth breathe on his hand.

"Welcome, friend wolf," he said.

"Enough games," roared the wolf. Immediately the darkness vanished. Jordon and Rapunzel were standing beside a well in a village that might have been any village in the Magic Kingdoms.

The wolf sneezed and shook his head, then he sat beside Jordon and waited. After a few minutes a man came out of one of the closer houses. Jordon recognized him as Harold Smith, who had represented the school at the Council.

"I should welcome you," Smith said, "and congratulate you on your perseverance and bravery, but I am just not in the mood. What exactly do you want?"

"We want you to deal with the fairy who is threatening the Magic Kingdoms."

"After centuries of dealing with fairies, I am sure you can manage one more." Smith turned and started to walk away.

"He isn't going by the rules. He wants us to name a child after him, but we need to figure out the name. He is like a petulant child who smashes a toy because he can't make it work."

"They are ALL like children," Smith shouted. "I thought they would be happy to be free of babysitting you people. They are bored. They are scared. We don't know what to do with ourselves." Jordon heard a buzzing in the air. Magic sizzled around them; darkness surrounded them, cutting them off from the morning sun.

"You won't be free until you deal with this fairy."

"We will never be free. You will always run to us for help."

You are weak.” The voices surrounded them but Jordon could feel Rapunzel’s hand in his. She gave his hand a squeeze.

“What do you want to do?” she asked into the growing maelstrom of magic. “Who do you want to be? Find some good to do and do it.”

“Puny human, what do you know?”

“I know that anger is a chain that no magic will break. We will continue. Whatever you do here. We didn’t come here just to ask for your help, but to offer a chance for peace.” The magic faded until just Harold Smith stood with them in the sunlight.

“The one you seek wants to rule. A child with his name will give him power. I cannot help you defeat him, but I will watch and enforce the rules when I can.” He began to fade along with the entire village. “Go now, return home and fight your fight.”

Jordon and Rapunzel stood in the sun. The wolf shook himself.

“Fairies, they are always making life complicated. Time for me to go.” Without a backward glance he trotted up the hill and vanished into the forest.

Prince Crow circled above then floated down to land on Jordon’s shoulder.

“Snow come, pass closed. Not-crows can’t go home.”

“Can you guide us north out of the mountains?” asked Rapunzel.

The crow bobbed his head.

“Then maybe it is time I visited my home again,” she said. She picked up the reins of her horse. “Lead on, friend crow.”

## Chapter 26

King Orthin

King Orthin sat in his rooms fuming. He had spent another day trying to convince his councilors that they needed to take action to solve the problems they were facing. Orthin thought of his daughter Avi out on a cold lake alone, except for the thousands of swans that surrounded her. There was nothing he could do to help her. He wanted to march on the Council Village. He wanted to throw that Alexandra and her froggish prince into a dungeon and force them to tell him what they were up to. He wanted his daughter back.

The Queen was sympathetic, but she insisted that there was nothing they could do. She was sure that it wasn't Alexandra's fault, but King Orthin didn't agree. There were too many changes, too many things happening. Someone was behind it all, and Alexandra was in the middle of it all.

A knock on the window interrupted his thoughts. He looked up to see a swan at his window. Orthin ran over and let the bird in.

"My mistress asks that you come and see her," the swan said. "I am to guide you when you are ready to come." Orthin looked at the rain soaking his carpet through the open window. He snatched up a cloak and pulled on his boots.

"I am ready. Meet me at the stables." The swan bowed and flew out the window. Orthin walked out of his rooms yelling for the servants.

"Saddle my horse, and put some food and drink in a saddlebag. Let the Queen know that I have been summoned to meet with our daughter. I don't know how long I will be." People ran in all directions as King Orthin stormed toward the stable. His horse was saddled and ready as his Queen petted the gelding's nose.

"Let Avi know how much we love her," his Queen said as he mounted the horse.

"I will," the King replied. Then he kicked the horse into a gallop and rode out the gates of the castle. He saw the swan



flying just above him. He let his horse run for a few minutes, but soon reined him back and settled into the saddle for a long ride. The swan led him to an abandoned shed at nightfall, and stood watch while King Orthin tried to sleep.

In the morning the rain had stopped, but the air had turned bitter cold. Orthin walked for a while to warm up while the swan flew in lazy circles above him. Soon his impatience caught up with him again and he mounted and rode. Every stride of his horse was taking him closer to his daughter who needed him. Looking up at the swan, he wished he had wings and could be there already.

At midday he saw the lake full of swans. The beauty of the scene took his breath away. For a moment he just stared at the blue water covered with the great white birds. The swan above him trumpeted, and all the birds reared up then bowed to Orthin. He nodded back to them then called up to the bird above him.

“Let’s go.”

The swan led him south along the shore of the lake. The sun was dropping into the west by the time they reached a bay with a small island. Orthin saw a swan there that looked even more regal than the others. She nodded her head at the swans surrounding her and they swam off. She swam over to where the King stood on the shore.

“Father,” she said.

“Oh, Avi, what have they done to you?”

“They have done nothing to me,” she answered. “I hear about your rants to the Council. I hear that you blame Alexandra and my friends for what is happening. They are not at fault. We have an enemy who is cunning and cowardly. He is someone who spins lies and enchantment to break apart our home. You are helping him, Father. You and your plans are tearing the Kingdoms apart just at the time when we need to pull together.”

King Orthin stood stunned at his daughter’s words. He had expected pleas for help, cries of loneliness. He wasn’t prepared for this regal being who called him to a higher duty. For long moments he was frozen in place. Then he waded out into the lake and fell to his knees in front of his daughter.

“Forgive me, Avi,” he cried. “Forgive a foolish old man. I was so caught up in my pain that I forgot my duty.”

Avi swam to him and laid her head on his shoulder.

“Of course I forgive you. You are my father and my King.”

He looked at her and touched her feathers. They were softer than anything he had imagined.

He waded ashore and lit a fire on the lakeshore. King Orthin and his daughter talked far into the night.

The next morning he packed his gear.

“What can I do to help you?” he asked.

“We are all right now,” Avi responded. “But the deep winter may bring its own problems. I will send for you at need.” She reared and bowed to King Orthin. He bowed deeply to her in return.

“I will carry your greetings to your mother,” he said as he mounted. “If it is possible, I will bring her for a visit. I will come myself anyway. Look for me next month without fail.” He kicked the horse into a gallop and began the long ride home.

\* \* \* \* \*

The snow whirled around Rapunzel and Jordon as they trudged along the road. They had been forced to trade the horses for food and warmer clothing when they came out of the mountains. Rapunzel had stopped hoping to get home in time for solstice and was now just hoping to get home. Only the kindness of the villages they passed through kept them from freezing at night. She had never imagined that hay would be so warm, or itchy. Jordon was patient with her lack of knowledge about her own land. She had seen maps of the kingdom she called home, but she had no reference to tell her where she was. So each time they stopped, she would ask the people how to get to the King’s City then sort through the contradictory responses to decide on the direction of the next day’s journey.

Last night had been the first time that everyone had agreed.

“Just keep on this road, miss. It will take you to the East Gate.” The innkeeper had even laughed at her, since she had a city accent. Rapunzel had just told him that she had come the

long way around.

Now they walked through the snow and the deepening cold. Jordon thumped his arms against his side.

“We have some snow at home, but nothing like this.”

“Cold, cold crow,” complained the Prince Crow, from inside Jordon’s cloak.

“Maybe if you flew a bit you would warm up,” suggested Rapunzel.

“Can’t fly with ice on beak,” muttered the crow.

“I can’t blame him,” Jordon chuckled. “I wouldn’t want to fly in this either.”

“Do you miss it?” asked Rapunzel. “The flying?”

“Sometimes,” admitted Jordon. “I will see something up ahead and think that I should fly up and check it out. Then I remember I can’t fly anymore. I still dream about flying; that will have to do.” He gave Rapunzel a quick hug then went back to thumping his arms.

“We will stop at the next place we see,” said Rapunzel. “It is my fault we are out in this. We should have stopped at the last place.”

“How were you to know that a couple of hours walk would turn into several hours in a blizzard?”

“Because the old man told us it would.”

Jordon laughed.

“If I had been told I was only a couple of hours from home, I wouldn’t have waited either.”

They walked along in silence trying not to worry about the growing depth of snow on the road. Then suddenly the wind failed and they stood in front of a great black barrier.

“Oh, no,” cried Rapunzel. “The gates are closed.”

Jordon banged on the gates, but he couldn’t hear anything but a muffled thump. Then a small door opened and warm light spread across the snow.

“Come in, come in,” called a voice. “Get out of the storm.” Rapunzel and Jordon wasted no time obeying. They entered a small room with a roaring fire. The warmth was overwhelming and Rapunzel felt her knees buckling. Strong arms caught her and set her on a chair. “Jones, fetch the doctor. It may just be

the cold, but I want to be sure.” She tried to say something, but somehow the words got tangled up in her throat and came out as a rasping sob.

“What were you doing out in that storm?”

“She has been a long time away from home,” Jordon said, “and she was eager to see it again.”

“Well, if she grew up in the city, she wouldn’t know any better. Where are you from?”

“I’m from the Magic Kingdoms to the south. We crossed the mountains a far way east of here.”

“If you don’t mind a word of friendly advice, you don’t want to be spreading that around. Not everyone thinks kindly of the south these days.”

Jordon just nodded, and decided to leave the wool hat he was wearing firmly on his head.

By the time Jones returned with the doctor, Rapunzel was feeling better and sipped at a gloriously warm and sweet cup of tea. The doctor nodded in approval when he saw her, but checked her out thoroughly anyways.

“Sorry to bother you for nothing,” she said.

“No bother,” the doctor said. “I would rather you called and not needed me than need me and not call.” He bustled back out of the room leaving Rapunzel and Jordon with the guards.

“We have standard orders in this kind of weather to bring people inside to the warmth. We wouldn’t leave the city’s worst enemy out in a storm like this,” Jones said. “I suppose you introduced yourself, Bill?”

Bill laughed and shook his head. He poked at the fire.

“I don’t like giving my name until I know whether I will have to arrest folks or not. You’re harmless enough. So, what part of the city do you come from, miss?”

Rapunzel gave him her address and Bill nodded his head.

“You won’t be going tonight, I’m afraid. The weather’s too bad to just let you walk, and I can’t spare someone to take you. There’s a couch in the other room. I will make sure you get to your home first thing in the morning.” The guard took them through to the next room and Jordon made Rapunzel lie down on the couch.

“You need the rest. I will be well enough on the chair,” he said. “Besides, I don’t want to wake the Prince Crow. He must be warm, he has stopped shivering.”

Rapunzel slept as soon as her head hit the soft cushions of the couch. Jordon watched her until he, too, slept.

“Wake up, wake up,” piped the Prince Crow.

Weak sunlight came in through a window. Jordon sat up and groaned. He stretched and walked around the room.

“You may want to be careful when you talk,” whispered Jordon. “Not everyone here will be delighted with a talking crow.”

The door opened and Jones stuck his head in.

“I thought I heard someone awake in here.”

“My friend taught her pet crow to talk a bit,” said Jordon. “Now he is worse than a rooster.”

“Wake up, wake up,” said the Prince Crow on cue. He hopped over to Rapunzel’s shoulder. She moaned and sat up.

“When you are ready, come into the guard room for some more tea.”

In a matter of minutes Rapunzel and Jordon sat at the table in the guard room sipping strong, sweet tea. Even Prince Crow had a cup, much to Bill’s amusement. A knock on the door interrupted them.

“That will be the next shift,” said Bill. “Time to get you home.” Rapunzel stood up eagerly and followed him out.

“Come on,” said Jordon. “I’m sure Rapunzel will make you more tea.” The crow flapped over to Jordon’s shoulder and they followed her. They heard Jones explaining to the new pair of guards.

Bill was waiting for him at the reins of a wagon.

“Faster than walking, and I have some supplies to pick up that way in any case,” he said. Jordon didn’t argue and swung himself aboard.

The snow had stopped, but the air was cold. The little crow soon burrowed under Jordon’s cloak again. Rapunzel took Jordon’s hand and watched as the streets became more familiar. Finally they passed George’s stables at the bottom of the hill and began climbing toward her home. Her grip on Jordon had become almost painful, but he didn’t say anything. He knew

how she felt. It had been almost as long since he had seen his home.

"Here it is," whispered Rapunzel. Bill put the brakes on the wagon, and helped her down. Jordon tossed out their small packs and jumped out beside her.

"You OK, miss?" asked Bill.

"Yes," Rapunzel said, hugging him. "Thank you."

"Just doing my job," said Bill, but he looked pleased. He climbed back up and drove off.

"Let's go," said Rapunzel, clutching Jordon's hand again. She led him through the gate and up to the door. She raised her hand to knock on the door, but hesitated. "It's been so long." She squared her shoulders and knocked loudly. It seemed like it took forever before she heard footsteps. The door swung open and Rapunzel's mother stood there.

"What do you want at this time of the morning?" she asked, still rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"Hello, Mom," said Rapunzel. Her mother stared at her for a second, then screamed and fainted. Jordon caught her.

"Let's get her inside," he said, carrying her through the open door. Rapunzel carried the bags in and kicked the door shut behind her.

"This way," she said leading him to the parlor. She didn't recognize any of the furniture. Her mother was still keeping her father busy. He must be off on another trip.

They laid her on the couch, then Rapunzel told Jordon where to find the kitchen. He went to make tea.

Rapunzel rubbed her mother's hands and waited. Gradually her mother came to.

"Is it really you?" she said, touching Rapunzel's face. Then, satisfied that it was indeed her daughter, she clutched her in a tight embrace. "They told me you were dead," she said into Rapunzel's shoulder. "I thought you were dead." Tears soaked Rapunzel's shoulder.

By the time Jordon came out with the tea, Rapunzel's mother was holding her daughter's hand listening to the story of her adventures. She tried to struggle to her feet when Jordon entered.

“Rapunzel’s mother doesn’t need to curtsy to me,” he said as he put the tray down. “Treat me just as your daughter’s friend, not as a prince.”

“You are as kind as Rapunzel deserves,” said her mother. “Where is Father?” asked Rapunzel.

Her mother’s face went white and Rapunzel thought she was going to faint again.

“I blamed him for letting you go. When that awful Ginger man told us that you had been killed by those magic people, I sent him away,” her eyes filled with tears. “After all we went through together, I let a lie destroy us.”

“Tell me where he lives, and I will go get him,” Rapunzel said.

“He told me that if I sent him away, he would never come back. I don’t know where he is.”

“He will come back if I ask him,” Rapunzel said. “George’s father will know where he is. Jordon, will you stay with mom, while I am gone?”

Jordon nodded. Prince Crow stuck his head out from under Jordon’s cloak.

“Tea?” he said.

“Yes, you may have tea, you silly goose,” said Rapunzel.

“Not goose, crow,” said the little crow as he jumped to the table.

“What a darling bird,” said Rapunzel’s mother. “Take my fur cloak, it is warmer.”

Rapunzel left her mother to the care of Jordon and the crow. Wrapped in the warm fur she hurried down the street to George’s home. She knocked on the door, and George himself answered the door.

“Holy cow,” he said. “It’s Rapunzel.” He hugged her tight, then stepped back and looked at her. “You look good. Hey, Da, Rapunzel’s back!” His Da came out of the kitchen, mug in hand.

“Good to see you,” he said. “Didn’t like the look of that Ginger fellow. Shifty.”

“I need to find my father,” she said.

“Of course you do,” said George’s Da. “George will hitch up the team and we will take you to him.”

Soon they were in a wagon headed back down into the city. George kept up a string of commentary that brought Rapunzel up to date on happenings in her home, and started a knot of worry in her stomach. She set that aside for the moment as they arrived at her father's warehouse.

"He is staying in his office on the second floor," George said.

Rapunzel climbed the stairs carefully, then banged on the door.

Her father opened the door then enveloped her in a hug.

"You need to come home," she said. "Mom needs you."

Her father looked at her, then at George and his father waiting in the wagon.

"I'll be right out."

Jordon was desperately trying to keep Rapunzel's mother occupied, but she kept drifting off in the middle of sentences and staring at the door. It was a huge relief when Rapunzel came through the door, pulling her father in after her.

Her parents stared at each other for a long moment before they rushed together. Rapunzel could hear bits and pieces of whispered conversation.

"We will be down at George's for a while," she announced and pulled Jordon toward the door. "You come too, crow."

They were down at George's for most of the morning, telling stories and eating fresh baked bread. Rapunzel met George's bride to be, a girl she remembered from school. It was past noon when Rapunzel's parents came to find them, holding hands as if they were never going to let go of each other again.



## Chapter 27

### Rapunzel

The next week was almost enough to make Rapunzel forget the niggling worry she had felt through George's gossip. In the Magic Kingdoms she was one of the young people who were simultaneously saving the Kingdoms and turning them on their heads. Here she was just Rapunzel. She had gone to school down the street. Her mom and her father were just normal people. Jordon, too, seemed to relax and just enjoy himself. He wore a knitted cap everywhere but in Rapunzel's home. He explained that the cold air made his head ache. He wasn't ready to test Bill's warning that not everyone liked the idea of the Magic Kingdoms.

Rapunzel couldn't remember ever thinking of them as a child, other than as a setting for a book she was reading. Now it seemed that they were the source of endless speculation. Rapunzel's father said that it happened every so often. The last time was before Rapunzel was born. It was best just to let it be and it would fade away.

It didn't fade away. Rapunzel heard more and wilder rumors about the kingdoms to the south. Several times she had to bite her tongue to keep from correcting falsehoods. Her father had suggested that she be vague about where she had been for the last months, so only her family and George's family knew that she had been south and knew the truth behind the whispers. It was harder and harder not to speak up as the speculation took an ugly turn.

They were at the market when Rapunzel overheard two women arguing. One was wearing a peculiar necklace, it looked like a snake knotted and tangled on itself.

"That's why you been getting the best of all your bargains, Maddie," the one said. "It's that charm you wear on your neck."

"Tis no charm, Joan," Maddie said. "My mother had it before me, and it never did her any good."

"So where did she get it from, then?" Joan asked. "It isn't like anything from around here."

"I think it came from the North," Maddie said.

"I think it comes from that magic place and you've been using it to cheat on your bargains."

"It's only that I give a smile and 'please and thank you.' Folks will be generous if you are friendly."

"No, it's that charm," snarled Joan. "You've magicked them." She snatched the necklace from her companion's neck and threw it into the mud. She spat on it and crushed it under her heel. Then Joan stalked off to spatters of applause. Maddie crouched and tried to find the pieces of her necklace, but the muttering of the crowd soon sent her off. Several people came over and spat on the necklace and ground it further into the mud.

When Rapunzel asked Jordon about it later he sighed.

"There has been a gradual decline in magic for a long time. The fairies leaving is just the final straw. Magic used to be everywhere; you never knew what animal or oldster was a fairy in disguise that could bless or curse you. There were magic swords and helmets and even shoes. The last hundred years it has just been the royal enchantments. Everything else is done through plain hard work."

"They didn't get this idea about magic from nowhere. Someone has to be starting and feeding the rumors. What was your friend George chattering about? Something about a new influence at court?"

Rapunzel nodded.

"Ginger was up here before I went south. He didn't meet me until Father introduced us, so he had to have some other reason to be here. What if he was scouting out ways to influence the King? What would he gain from these horrible stories?"

"Isolation," Jordon replied. "If someone came across the mountains now and asked for help, what do you think the answer would be?"

"They would be mobbed. People are so afraid now, they will believe anything."

Jordon pulled his hat a little farther down around the feathers that covered his head.

The storm that they had walked through to reach the city

turned out to be the first of many. Many days they sat in the house listening to the wind howl outside. Rapunzel showed Jordon and the little Prince Crow her attic hideaway. They would sit and watch the snow fly, burying the street and everything else in white. The crow spent a lot of time there. There weren't many crows in the city and he was lonely.

When they weren't sitting quietly they were helping Rapunzel's mother plan a party for the solstice. She had changed while Rapunzel was away. She still wanted to make them look good, but now she was willing to listen to reason. There had been a great deal of discussion about the budget for the party, but once it was set Rapunzel's mother was determined not to go a penny over. Rapunzel helped with the shopping and the planning. She didn't know anyone but George's family, but her mother had a long list of people she wanted to invite. As the time got short she began to worry that it was going to be a huge disaster, but Rapunzel's father would just hold his wife's hand and smile at her until she calmed down again.

The evening came and the weather was clear. Rapunzel and her mother had gone upstairs to dress while Jordon and Rapunzel's father sat and waited. It was almost sundown when the women finally came down the stairs. The men stood with open mouths at the transformation. Rapunzel was wearing a simple dress, but it somehow changed her into a woman whose regal beauty left Jordon speechless. He bowed deeply and kissed her hand.

"I have been yours since the first time I saw you," he said. "You remind me how lucky I am."

"What he said just about sums it up, my dear," Rapunzel's father said, taking his wife's hand.

People started arriving at sunset dressed in their brightest colors to fight off the darkness. So the house was full of light and color and laughter. Rapunzel actually enjoyed being the center of attention, with Jordon always standing nearby. She avoided questions about the months she was gone and instead got her guests talking about what they had been doing. George and Marianne were officially husband and wife for the better part of a week. He had a silly grin on his face while she watch-

ed him with pride. Rapunzel was happy for her friends, but going to their wedding made her wish she had been there for Alexandra and Herbert's wedding. She wondered how her friends were doing, but there was nothing she could do by worrying so she smiled and enjoyed herself.

It was late after the last guest had left. The four of them were sitting in the parlor surrounded by the clutter of a successful party.

"So, Jordon," said Rapunzel's mother. "The year is almost finished. Do you have any plans for the new year?"

"Mother!" said Rapunzel. "That's none of your business."

"I don't know," said her father, "I would like to know how much I need to earn next year."

Jordon laughed as Rapunzel threw a cushion at her father.

"It is a fair question," he said. "I think my father would have a similar one." He looked at Rapunzel and felt his heart racing.

"I have told you that I was yours from that moment in the tower when you showed both kindness and bravery. Since then I have dragged you across mountain and plain. I think it is time to ask if you will be mine." He knelt in front of Rapunzel. "Will you marry this poor, besotted prince?"

"Yes," said Rapunzel through her tears. "You weren't the only one who lost their heart in that tower. You have been a wonderful companion. I don't know what I would do without you."

"I think this calls for a toast," Rapunzel's father went to the kitchen. They could hear him rummaging for clean glasses.

"Your father and I are both very happy for you," said her mother, but there was a wistfulness to her tone that Rapunzel decided she would think about later. Her father came back with glasses and a bottle of wine. He opened and poured.

"To my daughter and the man she loves," he said. "May you have as many wonderful years as I have."

Just as they drank there was a banging on the door. Her father went to open it. Jordon slipped a ring off his hand and slipped it onto Rapunzel's.

"It is my mother's. She gave it to me so I would think of her while I journeyed. It is the only ring I have to give you."

Rapunzel looked at the plain silver band and closed her hand.

"It is more than enough," she whispered and kissed him. She felt the fire of her love heat and she ran her fingers through the feathers on Jordon's head. "I love you."

"Now isn't that sweet," said a nasty voice. "The King's own family harboring spies from the Magic Kingdoms." Rapunzel stared in shock at Ginger's sneering face. "Arrest the spy, there is nothing we can do about these traitors, yet." Two big men in uniform stepped up and took Jordon's arms. They pulled him away from Rapunzel and dragged him toward the door. He opened his mouth to call to Rapunzel, but one of them punched him.

"No talking," the guard ordered.

"You didn't think you would be rid of me that easily did you?" Ginger asked quietly. "You have been a nuisance, nothing more. I am going to crush the Magic Kingdoms if I can't rule them." He turned away and followed the guards out the door.

Rapunzel felt the ring on her finger, and her anger blazed up until she thought she would explode. She tried to say something but no words were adequate. Then she felt her mother's arms around her, and the tears came. Her father, too, came and held her. The tears and the anger melded into something new.

She looked at her parents.

"No evil, no kingdom, no King, no dungeon will keep me from Jordon's side," she vowed.

Her parents looked back at her. They saw the strength and courage that had carried Rapunzel through everything to this point.

"I think it's time we told you our story," her mother said.

"You remember your grandmother. She was always protective of me. I thought too protective. She didn't quite lock me in a tower and throw away the key, but close enough. I met your father by accident one day when I had run away. I didn't know who he was until later. My mother never trusted him. She was always sure that he was going to just vanish one day like my father had. Even after we married and settled in this house,

she never quite believed in him.”

“My parents weren’t thrilled with the idea either,” added her father. “They insisted that I was marrying far below my station, but I wouldn’t give up. My father finally told me that I could leave your mother or make my own way in the world without his help. So I became a merchant and haven’t talked with my father since the day you were born.”

“The ‘King’s own family,’ he said,” Rapunzel whispered.

“Yes, the King is my father,” said her father. “Which may help or make things worse. Kings are a proud bunch and not inclined to admit they are wrong.”

“I have faced Kings before, Father. I will do what I must.”

“Then you will need to rest, tomorrow is going to be a long, hard day. My father is proud and stubborn. I doubt the years have done anything to change that.”

## Chapter 28

### Rapunzel

Early the next morning they rose and put on their best clothes. Rapunzel's father sent for a carriage which carried them to the door of the castle. Rapunzel had never been there before. It was all grey stone and white snow, making her feel that there was nothing alive but her and her parents. No one came to answer their knock on the outer gate for the longest time. When it finally opened a crack, the face that peered out was anything but friendly.

"You are not welcome here, Robert," the man in chancellor's robes said. "You gave up the privilege of using this door when you married her." The door was closed in their faces. Rapunzel banged on the door until her fists were sore.

"I will not give up. I will be back every day until you let me in."

They rode back to the house in silence. They found George waiting there for them.

"Is it true?" he asked. "Did they arrest Jordon?"

"Come inside," said Rapunzel's father. "It is not something to discuss out in the cold."

They went inside, though Rapunzel didn't feel any warmer. She went up to the attic while her parents talked with George.

The little crow stood watching out the window.

"Trouble, trouble," he said. "Nasty fairy was here."

Rapunzel explained to him that Jordon had been arrested.

"I need you to find out where he is," she asked. "I know it is cold and there aren't many crows around, but we need your help."

"You are not-crow friends," said the crow. "I help friends. Leave window open." Rapunzel wrenched the window open and watched the black bird fly out into the bright day. Then she went down to talk with George and her parents.

"This Ginger has some kind of hold on the King," said George. "He will start talking, then look at Ginger and stumble on his words. When he speaks next, it may be something com-

pletely different than what he started to say. I have friends who work in the castle and they have seen it. They don't know what to do about it."

"Then I need to get close to the King so I can see what is happening. He must be using magic."

"Magic is forbidden," said George looking at her father. "You know that."

"That it is forbidden won't help us if no one knows what he is doing," said her mother.

"I think it is time that people know the truth about where I have been and what I have been doing," said Rapunzel. "If there are rumors that Ginger has used magic before it may throw doubt on him. George, can you tell your friends and get Marianne to do the same? You know the story."

"What are you going to be doing?" asked George.

"I am going to be humbling a King," replied Rapunzel. "I'm going to need your help."

Within the hour, she had changed into warmer clothes and put her best dress on over top. Then she put on her mother's fur cloak. By then George had a horse waiting for her outside. Rapunzel mounted up side saddle and rode off toward the castle. When she arrived there was a fairly steady stream of people coming and going through the door. When she tried to enter the guards blocked her way.

"You aren't allowed here," they said brusquely.

"Then I will wait," Rapunzel said loudly enough for the people next to her to hear.

"For what?" asked the guard.

"For the King to come and talk to his granddaughter," she replied.

The people walked past her. Some pointed and whispered, but most ignored her. At sundown, Rapunzel mounted the horse and rode wearily home. Prince Crow told her how he had searched but learned nothing new.

"I look tomorrow," he announced.

That became her life. Whether it was sun or storm, she was at the door early in the morning. The guards would refuse her entry and she would make her pronouncement. All day she



would watch people coming and going through the door. She listened to their conversation and realized that most of them weren't meeting the King himself, but seeing the advisors and servants who did most of the work of running the kingdom. More and more looked over and whispered among themselves. At sundown she would ride home to eat and sleep and ready herself for the next day. Each day the little crow would describe his adventures in the city, but he couldn't find any bird who knew where Jordon was being kept. All he knew was that it wasn't anywhere in the usual cells.

In the meantime, there were two sets of rumors snaking their way through the markets. People still spoke with unease of the Magic Kingdoms to the south, but there were some who whispered that Ginger had been south with the same caravan that Rapunzel had traveled on. It was him who had said Rapunzel had been captured and killed by the treacherous magickers, yet there she was every day at the castle waiting for the King to recognize her as his own flesh and blood. There was a lie somewhere, and they knew where Rapunzel came from, what did they know of this Ginger?

The days became weeks. The whispers became louder. One day a daring soul gave her a warm cup of tea. The next week there was a storm that shed ice over the entire city. Two men brought a cloth shelter and held it over her throughout the day. The next day the ice had passed, but the shelter remained. Sometime during the night a small brazier had appeared and a chair covered with furs. People were openly nodding to her now. A couple bowed to her before they entered.

The chancellor who had refused her father admittance came out a day or two after the storm.

"You must forget this foolishness," he said, shivering in the cold air. "There is nothing you can do here. The King will not come out to see you. If he does not recognize his own son, why would he recognize you?"

"His people recognize me."

The chancellor looked at the tent and its furnishings then shook his head and went inside.

The next day he came out again, and the next. The follow-

ing day he told Rapunzel that she could enter and the King might give her an audience.

"I will wait here," she replied. "Until he comes out and talks to me." The chancellor threw his hands in the air and went back inside. He didn't come back, but the next day one of the people in line started talking to her.

"They say you have been to the Magic Kingdoms," he said. "What are they like?"

Rapunzel told him some of what she had seen, emphasizing the similarities between the Kingdoms. The next day there was another person, the day after that was a crowd. They were eager to hear from her that the Magic Kingdoms weren't a threat.

The next day's dawn saw the streets of the city filled with fog. The horse's hooves clopped eerily in the blank streets. There was no one waiting at the gate when she arrived. Rapunzel waited for the guard to come so she could make her announcement and begin her long day's wait.

A shadow appeared out of the fog.

"You are wasting your time," Ginger said. "I won't let the King do anything that will spoil my plan. You will never find your precious prince. I know all about your little crow spy. No bird will ever see him. He will curse you before long."

"You poor little man," laughed Rapunzel. "We drove you out of the Magic Kingdoms we will drive you out of my home."

Ginger swelled up with rage. Rapunzel could feel the magic building.

"You would use magic here, in front of my grandfather's home?" She could see the shadows of the day's first people, but Ginger got himself under control.

"Stay here, then, and rot. It won't matter soon." He contented himself with kicking over the brazier. "I will rule, or there will be nothing."

He stomped off into the fog, and several people came forward to set the brazier to rights, but then they avoided her. The chancellor they knew, but this strange small man who seemed to have power over their King scared them.

Rapunzel went home feeling chilled to the bone. The little

crow was hopping up and down with excitement.

“Found not-crow, found him,” he said as soon as Rapunzel came in.

“Tell me, please,” she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jordon’s heart broke when he saw the grief in Rapunzel’s eyes. He might have been able to fight free of the guards, but what then? He was just relieved that Ginger was leaving her alone.

They dragged him out to a closed carriage and threw him in. Shortly after, the carriage began to move. Jordon sat in the dark waiting to learn where they were taking him. They weaved through the streets, up hills and down, until Jordon heard the sound of the horse’s hooves change. They stopped. The guards dragged him out of the carriage into darkness that was hardly affected by the lamp that Ginger held.

“This way,” he ordered.

The guards took Jordon’s arms again and walked him along the dark hallway to a heavy door. Ginger waved at the door and it opened. Jordon was shoved roughly into the cell beyond it. He saw a small pile of straw and a bucket before the door closed behind him and left him in darkness.

“Don’t think about rescue,” Ginger called through the door. “This cell is too deep and dark for any bird to catch a glimpse. Even the King doesn’t know where it is. Think on that, Prince.”

Some time later, Ginger returned to taunt Jordon with the news that Rapunzel was sitting outside the castle waiting for the King to come to her. It had the opposite of the intended affect. Jordon imagined his love confronting even Kings in their castles and smiled. Food arrived at irregular intervals. There was a slot in the bottom of the door that the trays were pushed through with a tiny stub of candle so he could see to eat. Occasionally Ginger came to laugh at his prisoner, but usually he was left in the dark. He lay on the floor and listened to the rustling in the straw.

“It’s too bad that you aren’t magic mice,” he said. “You would be able to carry news to Rapunzel for me.” He took to saving little tidbits of food for them. They weren’t much, but they

were company.

Jordon tracked the time by the length of his beard. It grew in full and tangled. Ginger had stopped coming altogether. Only the trays of food let the prince know he hadn't been forgotten. He sat in the darkness and wondered at how his life had changed. Since he was born, Jordon had been told that, as a prince of the realm, he needed to be in control. He could ride, fight, live off the land, command armies. Yet he knew now that he was never truly in control of anything.

Alexandra had been the first crack in his certainty; being turned into a crow had caused more cracks. Oddly, being returned to human form had caused even more upheaval. He had put one foot in front of the other because life demanded it, and anything else would have meant losing Rapunzel. Jordon didn't care if he never regained control if he could only spend his days with his love. The fact that he was locked in a dungeon deep below the city did nothing to lessen his connection to Rapunzel. He knew that she would be out in the light doing what she could to make things right. If that included the rescue of one very ragged prince, then so be it. If not, well he hoped that she would live long and well.

Then one day he heard Ginger shouting in rage.

"How dare she? Doesn't she know that I am the last and greatest of all? With a royal child to command I will rule them all, or I will see them destroyed, crushed!" He banged on the door to Jordon's cell. "Princeling, princeling, are you listening? Your precious Rapunzel has signed your death warrant. Defy me? I will haul you before the King and prove you a spy. Your head will roll before the week is out, then the army will move and I will rule. I, who everyone laughed at, whose name is forgotten." He kicked the door a few times then ran off again.

"Oh, my love, even if you can't hear me, even if you never see me again, you have made me proud." With a strangely calm heart Jordon lay down and waited for the next thing to happen.

## Chapter 29

Alexandra

Alexandra was in a foul mood. The weather had been horrible for weeks on end. Everything was a sea of mud. She had thought that expecting their first child would be a cause for celebration. Instead it had become a subject for a constant wearying argument. This morning had ended like far too many mornings recently.

“Alexandra,” Herbert had said. “You can’t give some evil fairy’s name to our child just to break an enchantment.”

“We can’t let him win,” she replied. “We have to break the enchantment. This is the only way.”

“It is the only way that we know of,” Herbert said. “We need to rely on Jordon and Rapunzel.”

“But we haven’t heard from them in so long,” she said. “What if they are lost? We must do what we can.” She turned to the window and looked out at the rain. “Our child will be royalty, she will understand.”

“So she will have the enchantment that you never had?”

“I will do what I have to!” She never looked away from the window, and eventually she heard Herbert leave the room. Alexandra let the tears fall down her face. She hated being helpless. Even worse, she hated what she was doing to Herbert.

She still remembered the incredulous look on his face when she told him she was expecting. Even through her tears that brought a smile to her face. It wasn’t long after that the fighting had started. They had been fighting for months now. She didn’t want to, but she felt the entire future of the Magic Kingdoms on her shoulders. Leaving the magic sleep on Sopo would cause too much disruption. One last enchantment would bring it all to a close.

What made it worse was that nothing new had come from Avi and Orthin, even though a swan visited on a weekly basis. Even the constant stream of people coming to talk to her was beginning to pall. It didn’t help that everyone else seemed to agree with Herbert. No one would see that it was the only way.

Even though it was the dead of winter and most people were huddled in their homes waiting for spring, Alexandra was sure that Ginger hadn't stopped what he was doing. The lack of news was making her nervous. For all her research she hadn't found a clue to the name of their enemy. She knew the answer was there. If only Herbert would help her look instead of arguing with her. She had to awaken Sopo.

In the depth of winter she began dreaming about Rapunzel and Jordon. In some Jordon was himself, in some a crow, but they were always in terrible danger. Alexandra would try to warn them, but she couldn't speak. She would wake and heave herself out of bed to walk until she was calm enough to go back to sleep. Herbert listened to her worries, but there wasn't much he could do. The last they had heard of their friends they were walking into the mountains to look for fairies who didn't want to be found.

The dreams weren't about mountains. They took place in a city that was covered deep in snow. Alexandra was convinced that they were from the kingdom that Rapunzel called home. Herbert walked her out to the pond that was kept clear of ice for the swans. It was a day that was miraculously clear. She asked the swans to learn what they could of the kingdom to the north of the mountains then slightly reassured, she walked around the gardens once or twice before going back inside. That walk made Alexandra feel good enough that she took to walking outside when she could and inside when she had to. Her maids developed a system to keep track of her and pass messages as they needed.

She was out in the garden enjoying a brief moment of sunshine when they brought a visitor to see her. Alexandra was immensely cheered as soon as she saw the old woman.

"Hello, dear," said the Widow Black. "Walking is good for you and the baby, stay as active as you can."

Alexandra hugged her as best she could past her ever growing stomach.

"Miriam, what a surprise and a delight."

"That young husband of yours is a fair treat. He rode out last week in the rain to ask me to come and visit. He said some-

thing about you worrying too much, and needing a friend to talk to.”

“That Herbert, he worries a fair bit himself. I am just sitting here doing nothing, while an unnamed enemy is laughing at us.”

“You aren’t doing nothing, though it may feel like it. This babe is the next generation. The wee one will be born into a world that you help shape. Everything from how you work with the Council to how you greet an old lady will have its part in that world.”

“What if I’m not ready to be a mother?” blurted Alexandra.

“I don’t think any of us are ready, but we get on with it and do the best we can for our children anyway. They are the most precious treasures we have. That’s why in the old stories the fairies want our first born children.”

“Will you tell me some of those stories?”

“Gladly, but if you would permit, I would prefer to tell them from a comfortable chair in front of a fire.”

Alexandra laughed and led the way inside.

That night she kissed Herbert.

“Thank you for bringing Miriam to visit. She has a way of helping me look at things and see them clearly. She may have given me a clue to the name we are looking for.”

“I have no doubt that you will find the name we are all looking for,” said Herbert. “But I am very uncomfortable with naming our child after such a malevolent being as the fairy that we are battling.”

“But if we learn his name, we will defeat him.”

“Maybe you’re right, but it seems that he set a lot of this up to force us to name our child after him. That must mean that he will get some power out of it. I am not giving my first born to any fairy.”

“Miriam said something very similar,” Alexandra said. “Actually, she said it wasn’t fair to saddle a wee one with such a big burden. But if we can convince him that we are going to do exactly that, maybe we can get him out in the open where we can deal with him.”

“It sounds like my darling wife has a plan.”

“I do, but it will need your help.”

The next morning they began a running and public discussion on the possible names of their child. Alexandra argued that it was the unborn prince or princess's duty to bear the name that would free the Kingdom of Sopo. Herbert would say that duty was for those who chose it, not for babies and children. Soon everyone in the castle was familiar with both sides of the argument. People took sides and argued in markets and pubs. Slips of paper with possible names for the baby found their way to the castle door where they were collected in a basket and made available for the royal couple. Herbert and Alexandra were careful to keep their discussion polite and often walked hand in hand while they batted around names. As a result the people followed their example and laughed and joked about the possibilities.

Miriam became a frequent visitor at the castle to the delight of both Alexandra and Herbert. The months progressed and the rains slowed. A swan came from Avi with a report that Orthin had set a watch on the pass through the mountains. It was still closed, but would be open soon enough. Jock and Ariel came to visit looking deliriously happy.

“Maybe I should head across and see if Rapunzel and Jordon are there like you think,” Jock said.

“I can't help remembering that Ginger came across those mountains with Rapunzel,” Herbert said. “There had to be a reason he was up there. We need to know more about them in any case. They are our neighbors, after all.”

“I came from north of there,” Jock said. “I know the territory better than anyone else here. I think Ariel and I may pay Avi a visit. Ariel can stay and visit when I go north.”

They set off the next week and Alexandra asked a swan to let Avi know that they were coming. The next day Alexandra asked Herbert if he minded her going to visit her friend Miriam on her own.

“I want to talk about mother things,” she explained.

“The weather looks good for a couple of days,” Herbert said. “Take her greetings for me.”

The softest sprung carriage was made ready and it carried



Alexandra off into the beautiful sunny day.

It was a very different ride from her first trip to the little village Widow Black called home. As the carriage rolled through town the merchant's wife came out to meet it.

"We have rooms available and would be honored to have you visit."

"Perhaps another time," Alexandra said. "For now I have business with the Widow Black." The carriage rolled on and came to a stop in front of her friend's home. Miriam came to the door and welcomed the princess.

"I have just put on water for tea," she said.

"Perfect."

"Tell me what is bothering you so much that you had to come all the way here," Miriam said as she poured the fragrant tea into the cups that Alexandra remembered. "I could easily have come up to the castle."

"I wanted to talk to you as Alexandra the mother to be, not the princess." Alexandra waved at the table. "I thought it would be easier at this table."

Miriam didn't say anything, but pushed a plate of scones toward Alexandra. The princess nibbled at the scone and tried to put her thoughts in order.

"All my life, I have been trying to find my place in this world. I had to challenge everybody and force them to see me, not the princess who didn't get enchanted. I learned a lot about being a princess, but I don't think I learned anything about being a mother." She put the scone down. "What if I mess it up? I think about this new life coming into the world, and all of a sudden ruling a country seems simple in comparison. I look at my parents, and for all that they love me there were many times that my life was miserable. I don't want to make my child's life a misery."

Miriam poured more tea and sipped it in silence.

"I felt the same when my first born came," she said finally. "We had just barely set up our own home and suddenly there was this helpless little thing that depended on me. I just kept loving him and doing what I could. It didn't seem so long before he was a man and had his own children. I never really had the

time to worry too much about whether I was doing it right. I just did the best I could. I made my share of mistakes, but mistakes are for learning from so we don't make them again."

Alexandra picked up the scone and nibbled thoughtfully.

"I think it is time I had a talk with my mother," she said. Miriam just nodded.

Alexandra came home that night looking thoughtful, but more at peace than she had in a long time.

The next morning she went looking for her mother.

"How did you manage it?" she asked.

"Manage what, dear?"

"Being a Queen and a mother?"

"I always tried to be mother first. It was when I let the Queen make too many decisions that I made my worst mistakes." She shook her head. "You can't imagine how proud I am of how you turned out."

"But I didn't do anything you wanted me to!"

"Yes, that's true," admitted her mother, "but you were making your own way." She stood up. "Come with me, I have something to show you." The Queen led her daughter down a hallway to a door that Alexandra had never been through. She thought the door was just a closet, but when her mother opened it, she saw a tiny perfect room with a pedestal in the center. On the pedestal was a pair of glass slippers covered with dust.

"I never let the maids clean in here," the Queen said. "I was afraid they might break the slippers." She picked one up and polished it on her dress. "Beautiful, aren't they? Horribly impractical. I barely made it through the ball. I always wondered what would have happened if I had just kicked them off and stayed past midnight. Your father was already smitten. But I had to follow the rules, because that's what you're supposed to do." She put the slipper back on the pedestal and for a moment her hand hovered over the other slipper. "It wasn't until you came along and were so stubbornly unenchanted that I realized that the rules weren't as important as the people around me." She picked up the slippers and handed them to Alexandra. "Here, they're yours now."

"What do you want me to do with them?"

“Anything but put them on your daughter’s feet.”

So winter became spring and word came that the pass was open and Jock had headed north.

## Chapter 30

Rapunzel

The Prince Crow was so excited that he kept hopping from side to side of the windowsill.

“I found him. Me. Followed nasty fairy to dark, dark place. Hear voices. Hear not-crow Jordon.”

Rapunzel wanted to rush right out and rescue Jordon, but she knew that would be a mistake. She sat and thought for a long time, rubbing the crow’s head.

“Do you think you could guide someone to the dark place?” she asked.

“Yes, clever crow, tricky crow,” announced the Prince Crow.

“He may not be able to hear you talk,” Rapunzel added, “but I am sure you can do it.” She went downstairs with her news.

“Are you sure of this?” asked her father after he heard her plan. “Angering a King is a very dangerous business.”

“There is the Stone,” said her mother quietly.

“That could be even more dangerous.”

“But if she calls for the Test of the Stone, the King is required to respond,” her mother said. “It is the only way to compel the King to appear.”

“Then you can stay at home.”

“I will be at your side, where I belong,” Rapunzel’s mother stated.

“What is this ‘Stone’?” asked Rapunzel.

“Centuries ago, a wizard came across the mountains and bewitched the King. He did a tremendous amount of damage before one of the King’s sons escaped and went on a quest. He came back with the Stone. The stone absorbs magic. No spell can hold in its presence. Anyone with the slightest trace of magic ability who touches it will lose their magic forever. Being bewitched in the presence of the stone is also dangerous. If the spell is too strong, removing it may break the will of the victim. Both the wizard and the King died when the prince brought the stone into their presence.”

“Why should Mom stay home?”

“My mother had a bit of magic,” said Rapunzel’s mother. “The King thought she had bewitched your father, though in fact her spells had been cast on me. The Stone took her magic and left her the bitter old woman that you knew. He is afraid what the Stone might do to me if I inherited my mother’s magic.”

“So you should stay home,” said Rapunzel.

“The King will remember me. If he needs to be prodded into bringing out the stone, you will need me. And I will never again leave your side.”

Rapunzel walked down the road to talk to George.

“Sure, I’ll do it,” said George as soon as she explained her plan.

“It could be dangerous,” she warned.

“I will go with him,” said Marianne, coming into the room. “We need to pick up some furniture for our place; we can hide your friend underneath.”

“Thank you both for your help.”

“You’re George’s friend,” Marianne said. “You would do the same for us.”

Rapunzel went back up the hill to wait for morning.

She was up before the sun, and took special care with dressing. Then she hugged her parents.

“Give me some time to cause a scene before you come,” she said.

The ride through the streets felt longer than it ever had. The hollow sound of the hooves echoed off the walls and seemed to mock her. What was she doing challenging a King? Yet it was the only way to rescue Jordon and stop whatever Ginger was planning.

She finally arrived, but this time she didn’t just announce that she would wait for the King to come out to her. There were a few people already waiting.

“Hear me, King Alfred,” she called. “For months I have waited here for my grandfather to come out and speak to his own flesh and blood. No ruler would ignore such an easy burden unless he was spelled. I call for a trial by Stone to show that King Alfred neglects his family by his own will and no evil spell.”

There was pandemonium at Rapunzel's announcement. People gasped and pointed at her. As more people arrived the buzz of conversation almost drowned her out as she went through her challenge a second, then a third time. The buzzing grew even louder as Rapunzel's father and mother arrived.

The chancellor came out, his face red with anger.

"Foolish girl," he snapped. "You don't know what you are doing. Only a blood relative of the King can call for the Stone without going through Council."

"I am his granddaughter."

"His unacknowledged granddaughter," said the chancellor.

"His refusal to acknowledge me doesn't change the law."

"And how are we to know that you really are his granddaughter?"

"Do you doubt me?" Rapunzel's father's voice was iron. The chancellor went white and stammered.

"You people and your little games," sneered Ginger as he strolled out through the castle door. "Go home, the King doesn't want to play today." There was a gasp, and the muttering of the gathered crowd grew louder. The chancellor hung his head and walked back into the castle.

"Now we wait," said Rapunzel's father.

They didn't have to wait long. The chancellor returned followed by two guards carrying an iron bound box between them. Two other guards dragged the King between them. He was yelling and cursing at them, but faces set, they ignored him.

"What is this?" asked Ginger. "You can't treat your King this way."

"Can't treat me this way..." shouted the King.

"Open the box," ordered the chancellor ignoring them both. The guards put their burden down and lifted the lid on the box. Inside was a rough black stone. It seemed to suck the light out of the air. The King fought hard against the guards, but they forced him forward and placed his hands on the stone. He and Ginger screamed at the same moment, the same despairing cry. The fairy stepped back in horror from the stone. The crowd tried to hold him, but with surprising strength he pushed them away. He became a large, awkward bird and flapped away from

the crowd. As he gained height he seemed to gain strength until he arrowed away to the south. The King collapsed on the ground beside the stone. The chancellor closed the box.

“Carry his Majesty inside, and we will hope that he recovers,” he said. The people stirred but no one made any move to leave.

“Is my brother here?” asked Rapunzel’s father.

“No, he is with the army at Gateway.”

“Army?” gasped Rapunzel. “Why are they there?”

“They are there to protect against the invasion from the South. Our agents have word that the magickers are planning an invasion.”

“The agents reported through Ginger, didn’t they?”

The chancellor made no answer.

“You have to call them back!”

“I have no authority to do so,” said the chancellor. “I’m sorry.”

Rapunzel turned to her father. He shook his head.

“Only the King or his heir has the final authority over the army.”

“So you are going to war because of protocol?”

“They are just mustered at Gateway,” the chancellor assured Rapunzel. “They will not march without orders from the King. I will summon the Council and we will deliberate.” He walked back into the castle.

Rapunzel heard a wagon approaching with George at the reins. She ran to him.

“Did you find him?”

“We did, Rapunzel, and not a moment too soon. The whole place collapsed just after we got out.” He set the brake on the wagon. “Marianne is riding with him in the back.”

Rapunzel climbed into the wagon, disregarding dress and dignity both.

Jordon lay in the wagon looking weak and pale, yet he still smiled when he saw Rapunzel.

“I knew you would rescue me.”

“He needs rest and food,” announced Rapunzel’s mother, her voice sounding odd. Rapunzel looked at her to see grey

hairs that weren't there that morning.

"Oh, Mom," said Rapunzel.

"It is less than it might have been," her mother replied. "I swear that Ginger's hair was more white than red by the time he escaped."

George helped Rapunzel's mother into the wagon.

"You go ahead," said her father. "I have some things I must say to the Council."

George hopped back up on the wagon and drove off, leaving the crowd to murmur and wonder.

On the way down the hill, Rapunzel's mother stared at her hands then looked at Jordon. He had gone back to sleep with his head in Rapunzel's lap. Her mother held one of his hands and stroked it, concentrating fiercely. By the time they pulled up in front of the house, Jordon's color was almost normal, and Rapunzel's mother had a few more grey hairs.

Jordon was able to walk into the house without help, though Rapunzel kept her arm around him anyway. George helped her mother down and walked her into the house.

Later that evening, her father came home looking tired but satisfied.

"The Council has sent a rider to Gateway asking the Crown Prince to recall the army, explaining the situation. He will likely want to be with Father anyway. Hal was always closer to him than I was. It comes with being the heir. They have pigeons with them, so we will hear in a few days."

The next day Jordon was well enough to walk down to George's to thank him for his part in the rescue. The Prince Crow rode proudly on Jordon's shoulder.

As they walked back up the hill, they saw a royal coach parked in front of the house.

"The King requests your attendance," the chancellor said. "He is weakened, but he is himself."

Rapunzel climbed into the coach with Jordon to find her mother and father waiting there. They had barely seated themselves when the coach moved off.

The coach stopped by the door that Rapunzel had sat outside of through wind and snow all winter. Her tent was gone,



but a huge crowd of people had gathered.

"We keep telling them that the King is fine, but they are still coming." The chancellor helped Rapunzel down from the coach.

"Please, wait here," he said.

He hustled into the castle while Jordon and Rapunzel's parents climbed out of the coach. Jordon had just enough time to take her hand before a squad of guards came out of the door. They saluted Rapunzel then formed a double line. The King walked out and up to Rapunzel.

"I am here, granddaughter," he said simply. Anything else he might have said was drowned in the roar of the crowd. He let it go on for a few minutes before waving for silence.

"We had an enemy within our gates," he said. "And we allowed him to cloud our mind to our everlasting shame. Our son's daughter revealed the truth, and so we recognize her as Princess Rapunzel, third in line to the throne after her uncle and her cousin." The cheers were longer and louder.

"Robert," said the King, as the people cheered.

"Father," replied Rapunzel's father.

"You have done well. You won't reconsider your vow?"

"Hal will be a good King; he has a good son to secure the throne."

"Will I see you?"

"I have always been ready to serve as my King commands, with one exception."

"Stubborn as always," said the King with a smile. He turned to Rapunzel's mother. "Take care of him. I may be late, but I give you my blessing." He turned to Jordon. "Who is this fine young man and why does he have a crow on his shoulder?"

"Grandfather," said Rapunzel in a clear voice that carried into the sudden silence, "may I present Prince Jordon of Charmant, of the Magic Kingdoms." Jordon bowed low while the crowd muttered. "And the Prince Crow, also of the Magic Kingdoms."

"Your Majesty," he said. "I bear greetings from the Council of Rulers and their hopes for peace."

"Me too," piped the Prince Crow.

The crowd cheered again. Rapunzel saw a bird fly to a tower in the castle.

“That rider is either very fast, or there is some other message,” remarked the chancellor.

“Go find out,” ordered the King. The chancellor bowed and signaled a guard to go with him. They jogged into the castle.

“It is pleasant here, but we have much to discuss,” the King led the way into the castle with Rapunzel on his arm and Jordan behind. Rapunzel’s parents followed him. The door led into an atrium with large double doors straight across, but the King led them to a smaller door on the side. It let them into a comfortable office. Waving them into chairs the King sat with a sigh.

“I am still weary from that cursed spell,” he admitted. “But better weary than bewitched. Whatever you ask of me that I can give you by law is yours, my dear.”

“Call back the army,” said Rapunzel without hesitation.

“The Council told me of your concerns, and I will dispatch a rider immediately to end the muster.”

“Then I have all I could want other than your blessing on my marriage to Prince Jordan.”

“You have it. I can’t imagine a better way to start peace between our lands. That is unusual hair you have, Prince Jordan.”

“It is a long story,” replied Jordan.

“We have time.”

Jordan was well into the tale of their adventures when the chancellor burst into the room, his hands shaking and white faced. He just handed the tiny slip of paper to the King.

“What!?” the King roared. “Ready the rider immediately. He must ride all night and call them back.” He sat back in his chair as the chancellor scurried out.

“The General must be spelled, I sent no message.”

“What is happening?” asked Rapunzel.

“The army has marched on the Magic Kingdoms.”

“Then we will ride with the messenger,” said Jordan.

The King pulled a heavy ring from his finger.

“My personal signet ring; it will tell all who see it that you speak with my voice.” He handed it to Rapunzel. “The guard will take you to the stables.”

Rapunzel and Jordon ran out after the guard.

As soon as they were outside, Jordon lifted the Prince Crow from his shoulder.

“You must fly as straight and as fast as you can to the Magic Kingdoms. Find the army, then find their leader. They must draw no sword, bend no bow, except in direst need.” The little bird jumped into the air and flew like an arrow to the south.

## Chapter 31

Herbert

Herbert listened to the news from the swan in shock. It had only been days since Jock had set out across the mountains, but unless a swan could find him in the thick forest there was no way to warn him that he was walking into a trap. Herbert had to hope that his friend would be able to stay safe.

He walked quickly to the castle and went to find Alexandra.

"The Northern Kingdom is mustered for war," he said without preamble. "We need to summon the Council and muster our own people." Alexandra looked at him in shock then nodded her head.

"Ginger," she said. "That's why we haven't heard from him all winter."

"It won't matter who started it," said Herbert, "if we aren't able to stop it."

Within hours, riders rode off in all directions to call the Council together. Herbert collected his gear.

"I have to go," he said. "You need to stay here and keep our child safe, Rapunzel and Jordon are out there somewhere, Jock is in the mountains walking into an army. I am the only one left to speak for us." Alexandra looked at him for a long time.

"My love," Herbert said, "you are the bravest person I have ever met, but even you can't do everything. It is time for you to trust me."

"Go. I will wait for you here, and continue to bait the trap." Only after Herbert rode off to the west did she allow herself to cry. Then she sent a guard to ask the Widow Black to come to the castle. "If I must wait, I don't want to wait alone," her message said.

Herbert made good time to the Council Village and had the people make the meeting room ready. Then he rode out north across the causeway. He needed to talk to Avi and her father.

He found Orthin at his castle drilling his guard.

"Avi told me you were coming," he said. "I know you want

peace and trade with the north, but if we must fight, we must fight.”

Herbert nodded.

“Unfortunately you are right. I didn’t come to ask you to hold back, but to hurry forward. I think we need to have some people on the causeway as soon as possible. A small group could hold an army there for days, if not weeks.”

“They could march east around us.”

“They could, but it would be a long, hard march. Avi would warn us. The causeway leads to the heart of our lands.”

“I will go,” said Orthin. “We will set up within site of the tower and await the Council’s orders.”

Herbert rode back to the Council Village to find that King Charmant and his father were both there. The others arrived over the next couple of days to join the argument that boiled in the Council Chamber.

“It was presumptuous to send Orthin out without asking the Council.”

“Presumptuous, but perhaps wise,” suggested Duke Hans, who was the last to arrive. “I think we would have come to the same conclusion soon enough. So he is there and ready instead of just beginning to move.”

“So, then,” asked King Charmant, “who is to command? We cannot lead by Council. When the moment comes, there must be one person who takes responsibility.”

“I think we already have our commander,” Queen Jeela said. “It may have been presumption, but it was well thought. Prince Herbert must lead.”

“I have no experience leading armies!” said Herbert.

“Neither do we,” said King Albert. “We will advise, but I fear that Jeela is right and the burden of command is yours.”

To Herbert’s dismay all the heads around the table were nodding.

“We await your orders,” said King Charmant.

“OK,” said Herbert after a deep breath. “Orthin was concerned that the army might march east and through Avienne. At my command he has taken all his men to hold the causeway. Duke Hans, take your muster and my father’s, along with

Jeela's, and march up through Avienne. I want you to set up to watch the way east from the pass. King Charmant, your men will march west and guard the space between the Fens and the mountains. King John, I will take your men up the causeway to join with Orthin and his guard. The rest of the muster I want here at the Council Village. It is central enough that we can send support in any direction we need. We ride at sunrise."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alexandra walked in the gardens with her friend. She tried not to worry about Herbert, but her eyes kept looking to the west. A swan had come with a message that Herbert was on the causeway with the guard. Her dreams were dark and bloody. Far too often they ended with Herbert wounded and dying calling her name.

To distract herself she had Miriam tell her all the stories she knew. Alexandra knew some of them but many were told from a different angle or were completely new. In the Widow Black's tales the hero was as often a poor farmer's son as a prince. Cleverness and generosity were more important than strength. They were filled with magic tools and talking animals. Alexandra loved the idea that her world used to be as filled with wonder as in these tales.

"Oh, the world still has plenty of wonder in it," said the older woman. "We just need to look for it. Younger sons still go out into the world and surprise themselves, whether they talk with mice or not. We women have our children and marvel at the wisdom we are sure we didn't teach them. That isn't to say that we don't make mistakes or have our dark times, but that is in those stories as well. The biggest problem we have is when we expect someone to spin gold out of straw for us."

"I don't know that story," said Alexandra.

"A miller was a boastful man, and there was nothing that anyone could do that he couldn't do better, or, if not him, then his daughter. She was a quiet girl and kept to herself. She loved to spin, and would sit by the fire and listen to her father boast while she spun wool into thread. One day a King rode

through their village and stopped by the mill for a drink. Sure enough the miller filled the King's ears with boasting, but the King just ignored it all. Finally, desperate for a response from his royal guest, the miller claimed that his daughter could spin gold out of straw. That got the attention of the King, for who has ever known a King who didn't need more gold? He told the miller to send his daughter to the King's palace. He would give her a room full of straw. If she could spin it into gold, well and good he would make her his Queen. If she failed, then she and the miller would die."

"Full of fear for what he had done, the miller sent his weeping daughter off toward the King's home. She walked and walked until she was so tired that she fell asleep at the side of the road. Finally she arrived at the King's palace dusty and thirsty and afraid. The King ordered a bath and a dress for her, and they ate a fine meal. Then he showed her to a huge room that was filled to the ceiling with straw. A spinning wheel was set in the corner."

"'You have until nightfall tomorrow to spin all this straw into gold,' he said, and left her there weeping."

"The moon came up as the poor girl wept her heart out, and a voice asked her why she wept."

"The King has put me here, and if I don't spin all this straw into gold by sundown tomorrow, then I and my father will die."

"'Pish,' said the voice. 'Is that all? I can spin the straw into gold for you, but you must promise me one small thing.'"

"'Anything,' cried the girl. 'Anything you ask.'"

"'You must give me your first born child,' the voice said."

"It seemed heartless to promise her first born child away, but if the straw wasn't spun into gold there would be no child. The girl decided to worry about the child another day and she agreed. She went to sleep, and when she woke the straw had been spun into the finest gold."

"True to his word, the King made the girl his Queen. For a King, he wasn't a bad husband. Soon they had fallen in love, and not long after the girl was carrying his child. The child was born and was a darling little girl. The King was off so much ruling this and that that the wee baby became the girl's life and

love. She had forgotten the promise she had made. The first full moon after the child was born a little man appeared in her room."

"The child is mine,' the little man said. 'I spun your straw into gold. Now give her to me.'"

"I can't,' wept the girl and she begged so long and so hard that the little man relented."

"I will give you until the next full moon to guess my name,' he said. 'Do that and the child is yours. Fail, and she is mine.'"

"What could the girl do but agree? So every night the little man came to see her, and she guessed name after name, but none of them was the name of the little man. There was only a week before the next moon and the little man laughed and tormented her. She had black circles under her eyes from the lack of sleep."

"Don't come tonight,' she said two nights before the full moon. 'Let me sleep the night with my child to say goodbye.'"

"The little man agreed, but that day she packed herself and her babe up and ran off into the woods. It was dark under the trees, but she saw the light of a fire ahead. Thinking to sit in the light and warmth, she walked up to the fire, but before she could step into the light she sees that it is her very own little man. He is dancing around the fire with glee."

"She will never guess my name! Never, never, never,' he sang. 'It's...'"

Alexandra put her finger on Miriam's lips.

"I don't think it would be a good idea to speak that name just yet," she said. "Write it down for me, and I will keep it close."

"You aren't thinking of naming your wee one that awful name?"

"I hope it doesn't come to that, but I would rather know than not. Names have power and this one more than most."

"I have the last piece of the puzzle," she whispered to herself that night. "Now just come back to me, my prince."

Far away Herbert was thinking of Alexandra. The swans had told him that the Northern army was marching, hacking and cutting their way through the forest that covered the mountains.



They would arrive in days. Just at nightfall a tiny crow had flown through their camp before finally landing on Herbert's shoulder.

"Jordon say, 'No sword, no bow, they ride, ride, ride. Wait for them.'" The brave bird slept on the back of Herbert's chair while the prince wished that he could fly to meet his friend, or to see his love.

## Chapter 32

Rapunzel

They rode non-stop at a gallop out of the city. Stations were set along the road where they traded horses and grabbed a quick drink and some food.

“We must ride long and hard,” the messenger said. “You will slow us down if you are hungry or thirsty.”

The fields that the caravan had crawled past last summer flew past in a blur. Rapunzel and Jordon didn’t know how far they had come, only that they must ride faster, ever faster. They rode until Rapunzel was almost asleep in the saddle, then they stopped for a few hours to sleep. When they woke the Rider’s Station was full of confusion.

“Will someone tell me what is going on!?” a younger version of the King was shouting.

“The King has sent me to stop a war started by treachery and evil magic,” snapped Rapunzel, holding her fist with the King’s signet on her thumb.

“Who are you and what are you doing with Father’s ring?” demanded Prince Hal.

“We will talk as we ride,” said Rapunzel. She ran to where the horses were saddled and ready, and in a moment she was mounted and galloping down the road with Jordon beside her.

“Blast it! Wait for me,” bellowed Prince Hal. He grabbed a horse and rode after Rapunzel, another man looked at the messenger.

“I suggest we get more horses and catch up to them,” he said. In minutes he and the messenger rode out after the prince.

It didn’t take long for the prince to catch up to Rapunzel and Jordon, but none of them had breath for talking. She glanced over to see her uncle grinning furiously. Jordon shrugged and kept riding. At the next station they had their chance to talk. Prince Hal looked worried after her description of recent events.

“I never thought,” he said. “Somehow whatever that devil said seemed like perfect sense. If that Jock fellow hadn’t come

across the pass, I expect I would be there with the General eager for battle.”

“Herbert and the Council asked me to come across the pass,” said Jock once they were together, “and have a look at what was going on in the Northern Kingdom. It seemed like an easy enough thing. I knew the trail from crossing with Ginger now and again. I didn’t expect to walk into an armed encampment. They had me on the ground and tied up before I could blink. It’s a good thing that I didn’t think to bring a sword; it would have been a real mess. I was dragged in front of a succession of people in fancier uniforms. They were certain that I was a spy for the Magic Kingdoms. Only my northern accent and the fact that I walked openly into the camp kept them from just hanging me. I insisted that the Magic Kingdoms had no interest at all in crossing the mountains. They didn’t believe me, but they didn’t disbelieve me either so I was pushed along until I was dropped in front of Prince Hal here.”

“I recognized his accent right off,” the prince said. “My favorite whisky comes from just a little ways from where he grew up. A northerner being a spy for the Magic Kingdoms didn’t make any sense. But at the same time I had this certainty that the kingdoms to the south were a terrible threat. That Ginger fellow had us all pegged. The only thing I could think of was to leave the army with the General and bring Jock to the King.” He sighed, “I never dreamed that magic was involved.”

All too soon they were off and riding again. After two more days of hard travel they rode into Gateway to find the fields deserted and the army gone. They rested a few hours then set out under the moonlight. The path of the army was all too easy to follow. Where Rapunzel and Ginger had wound their way through the forest, the army slashed a straight line.

“Much of this we did during the winter so we could react quickly,” Prince Hal said. “I should have realized that this was wrong.”

They had to slow down now that they were in the mountains. There were no more stations with fresh horses, though they led a string of spares.

“He must be pushing them hard,” said Hal. “We should

have caught up with them by now.”

They reached the top of the pass and still found no army.

“It isn’t far from here to the tower,” said Rapunzel. “We rode it at an easy pace in just a few days.”

They rode on hoping to hear the tramp of marching feet. The path leveled out and they were just a short distance from the tower when they spotted the first stragglers staggering along. As they watched a soldier fell, and was dragged to his feet by his companions. The quartet rode past the stragglers and on toward the front of the long snaking march.

By the time they got to the front of the column, the army was already lining up for battle. Rapunzel could see the General riding up and down the lines screaming at his troops. There was no sign of the little man they called Ginger. Rapunzel heard the sound of a trumpet.

“You talk to the General. We will ride to get between the armies.”

Prince Hal just nodded and kicked his horse into a final gallop to where the General was haranguing his troops. Rapunzel, Jordon and Jock rode along the flank and out into the ground between the Northern army and the causeway where the Magic Kingdom waited.

“Stop!” she yelled. “You’re making a mistake. Your General is bewitched. Your King was spelled but is now free. I speak in his name. Stop.” Some of the soldiers ignored her, but others nudged their neighbors more and more looked to where the General was shouting at the army. There was a shouting match between General and Prince. The General grabbed a bow and sent off a single arrow before the prince tackled him.

\* \* \* \* \*

At dawn the scouts reported to Herbert that the Northern army was approaching fast.

“I don’t know how they expect to fight a battle,” the man said. “Half of them can barely stand.”

“Nonetheless, they are here and we will stop them,” Herbert replied. He looked at the commanders gathered around him. “If

we can stop them without bloodshed, we will, but we will not give up so much as a span of the causeway to this invasion. Line up the men and have them stand ready to battle formation.” The mood of the Magic Kingdom army was mixed. Herbert could hear joking and laughing, but he also watched as a guard dropped his pike and had to pick it up with shaking hands. Herbert shook his head and tried to settle his own stomach. There had been no real battles in the Kingdoms in generations.

Herbert watched the army pour out of the pass and line up in the field around the tower. The scout was right; many of the people across the field were staggering with exhaustion. There were more than he thought, but he looked at the bulwark they had made across the causeway. It would hold back even this army. He could hear the buzz of the General yelling something at his forces. Herbert wondered if he should say something to his men, but he couldn't think of anything to say. He didn't want to fight these people. They were Rapunzel's people; they should be friends not enemies. A trumpet sounded and the northern forces raised their shields.

“At the ready,” Herbert ordered with a sick heart.

Then he saw a disturbance in the Northern army. Someone was galloping toward the General and three others were dashing up the flank and into the space between the armies. He heard Rapunzel yelling and leaped onto a horse.

“Do nothing,” he ordered. “No swords, no bows.” He galloped his horse toward his friends just as the General let loose an arrow.

Both armies watched the arrow climb high into the sky until it vanished in the sun. Rapunzel was still calling out to the army in front of her and hadn't noticed the arrow's flight. Herbert watched it turn and begin its descent. He pushed the horse harder and shouted at his friends, but they didn't hear. He wasn't going to be fast enough. The horse stumbled and Herbert was thrown. He tumbled and rolled to see the arrow flying swift toward Rapunzel's heart. A black blur flew swifter. It collided with the arrow just feet above Rapunzel's head. The Prince Crow tumbled in the air and hit the ground with a thump. The

arrow fell in pieces beside Rapunzel.

She jumped from her horse and ran to the tiny bundle of feathers.

“Save you,” whispered the little crow. She picked him up and cradled him in her hands.

“Quickly,” said Herbert. “We have healing potions in my tent.”

Rapunzel handed the bird to Jordon.

“Go.”

Jordon kicked his horse into a gallop toward the barricade on the causeway. Hands were pulling it aside as he reached it and he rode straight up to the tent where Orthin had a bottle of healing water in his hands. He poured a few careful drops into the crow’s beak. Then the little crow shook itself and flew a mad arabesque over the two armies. Both armies cheered and kept cheering as Prince Hal and Prince Herbert met and shook hands beneath the joyous flight of the Prince Crow.

“I will oversee the withdrawal of the army,” said Prince Hal. “To our shame we were used by evil to bring war to your lands.”

“I see no shame today,” said Herbert. “Only battle averted and the beginning of a new friendship.”

“I will agree that the best battle is the one never fought,” said Hal. “I will leave you to my father’s ambassador in this matter.”

He turned and walked back to his cheering army and began giving the order to turn and march back home.

“Ambassador?” said Herbert.

“I think he means me,” said Rapunzel.

“I see that we have a lot to talk about,” said Herbert. “It might be best if we traveled toward the Council Village while we talk.”

“I didn’t think that becoming a princess would mean so much riding,” sighed Rapunzel.

“Princess?” asked Herbert, and then he looked at Jordon. “I haven’t had a chance to say how good it is to see you without feathers, mostly.”

They walked along the causeway to where the barrier was being further dismantled.

“Perhaps you could stay and offer any assistance that is needed for our guests to make their way home,” Herbert said to Orthin. He walked to the back where a couple of swans waited. “My compliments. And could you carry word to Duke Hans in the east and King Charmant’s troops in the west, then to Alexandra?” The swans bowed then took off, each flying in opposite directions.

“I see they made a good choice to command,” said Jordon.

The four friends rode along the causeway at the head of the celebrating army and exchanged stories. The next day they arrived at the Council Village to find that the swans had already brought the news and the army was dispersing. Herbert made a brief report to the Council and introduced Rapunzel as the ambassador from the Northern Kingdom. Jordon greeted his father to cheers all round.

Herbert was eager to get back to Alexandra, but every time he turned around someone had a question that only he could answer. At midday a swan flew into the village.

“Herbert, Alexandra calls for you,” it said then flew to the north.

“King Charmant,” said Herbert, “I will leave things in your hands.”

“Go, son,” said King Charmant. “Take care of your wife.”

Herbert rode out of the village with Rapunzel and Jordon and the Prince Crow on Jordon’s saddle. They rode long into the night and starting again at first light.

As soon as they got to the castle, Herbert was rushed off to the room where Alexandra waited. Jordon and Rapunzel followed at a slower pace.

Herbert got to the door and was going to knock when Miriam opened it.

“Shhhh,” she whispered. “You don’t want to wake them.”

Herbert walked into the room and saw Alexandra sleeping. In a cradle beside her was a bundle of cloth with a tiny fist poking out. He just stood and looked. He found he was grinning from ear to ear. Nothing had prepared him for this moment of pure joy.

“She is beautiful,” whispered Alexandra.

“As beautiful as her mother,” replied Herbert.

“And as brave as her father.”

He kissed Alexandra’s forehead and she woke long enough to see Herbert and smile. He brushed his daughter’s cheek with a finger then left them to sleep.

Alexandra’s father was waiting for Herbert outside the room.

“They are beautiful,” Herbert said.

“Indeed.”

“I think I am more scared than when I thought I was going into battle.”

The King just nodded.

“How long will this silly grin be pasted on my face?” Herbert massaged his cheeks.

“If you are lucky,” the King said, “for the rest of your life.” Herbert looked at his father-in-law to see an identical silly grin on his face.

Alexandra was up the next day and carrying her daughter around to meet her friends. Rapunzel and Ariel cooed over the new princess, while Jordon and Jock held her as if she might shatter at any moment.

“Now what?” Alexandra said when her daughter had been nursed and was sleeping contentedly. “We have to deal with Ginger and free Sopo.”

“I will not give that evil fairy’s name to our daughter,” Herbert said.

“I agree, but we need to do something,” Alexandra said.

“Anaeth said that a royal child needed to be given his name,” Jock said. “But we don’t know his name.”

“I do,” Alexandra said.

“I have an idea,” Rapunzel said.



## Chapter 33

Alexandra

The presentation of the newest princess of the Magic Kingdoms was taking place outside. There was no room in the castle to accommodate the huge crowd of guests, not to mention the swans that whitened the ponds and the crows that blackened the sky. All of the royalty who could make it was there, and Rapunzel was delighted to see Princess Neje in the company of her mother. Even Jack who hadn't openly visited his brother in twenty years was there. The giants had been invited, but had politely declined to the relief of the Major Domo.

It had been a month filled with great speculation as people tried to guess the name of the little princess. There had been other celebrations too. Rapunzel and Jordon were officially married to the delight of all. Her parents had visited along with Prince Hal. There was plenty of work done as well. Trade agreements were made; the road over the mountain that the army had started was being leveled and cleared. Already George had brought a caravan across the mountains with Marianne at his side.

When the day itself dawned Alexandra and Herbert walked out in the garden. Miriam had been thrilled to be asked to be their baby's nurse and she was bathing and dressing their daughter for her big day.

"It's hard to believe that we are here," Herbert said. "Just a year ago you were fuming at your parents over that crazy tournament. Now we are married and parents ourselves. I'm not sure I feel ready."

"Miriam told me that no one feels ready, but we do what we have to anyway."

"A wise woman," said Alexandra's father as he rounded the corner. "She is right. We have learned so much from you. I am so proud of how you turned out, in spite of all our mistakes."

Alexandra hugged her father then looked at Herbert.

"It is time."

They went back into the castle and dressed in their finest

clothes. Alexandra picked up her daughter and marveled again at her tiny perfection. Then she and Herbert walked out into the vast garden that was the scene for what she hoped was the final chapter in their battle against the angry fairy who had ravaged their lives for the past year.

The crowd had been waiting since sunrise. People of every station had been invited. Alexandra and Herbert's friends were standing to the side watching. A great cheer lifted up, mixed with the trumpeting of the swans and the cawing of the crows. The baby girl just stared wide eyed at her mother and smiled.

Herbert raised his hands for silence.

"Welcome, all," he said. "There is one person who has been waiting and plotting for this moment. He wasn't invited, but I am sure he is here. Rumpelstiltskin."

The little man puffed into sight on the stairs.

"At last, a royal child to carry my name, to hold my magic. With this child I will rule your land and the land across the mountain. People will tremble at the name of Rumpelstiltskin!"

"Well then, let me introduce you to your heir," Herbert said. He waved in Jordon's direction, "Meet Prince Rumpelstiltskin."

The crow flew over and landed on Rumpelstiltskin's shoulder and pecked at the fairy's greying hair.

"Hello," he said. The fairy swung his arms at the crow, but the bird easily avoided the blows. The crowd began laughing at the antics of the bird.

"I am Rumpelstiltskin," the crow called, "Prince of the Crows." The crows cawed in approval, drowning out the laughter.

"You can't mock me," shouted Rumpelstiltskin. He pointed at the baby that Alexandra held, "She is MINE." He started to swell and black clouds covered the sun. The people fell silent in fear. "I will have her." He began to climb the steps. Alexandra could feel the malevolent magic pulling at her.

"No, you will not," Alexandra said, holding her daughter firmly. "You attacked us, betrayed us. You have tried to enslave us and drive us to war. It is done, Rumpelstiltskin. Go and never come back."

"No, I will not," the little man shouted, stamping his foot.

The clouds thundered as wind whipped across the garden. The people screamed and huddled to the ground as lightning flashed above them. The swans winged their way to block Rumpelstiltskin, but the winds blew them back. The crows, too, tried to stop the fairy, but pounding rain pushed them to the ground. Herbert stepped between Alexandra and the fairy. Jordon and Rapunzel stood on one side while Jock and Ariel stood on the other.

"We have completed the task," Herbert said. "It is time for you to go." He put out a hand and stopped Rumpelstiltskin on the stairs.

"I don't care about tasks and rules," Rumpelstiltskin yelled. "I will turn you all into frogs, or crows."

"You tried that," Jordon said. "It failed." The wind grew and the rain fell so thick that it pushed them to the ground. The thunder made their bones shake.

"I will not be denied," Rumpelstiltskin shouted over the tumult. "Everything I've done, everything I've gone through was for this. With this child I will rule the Kingdoms."

Alexandra was huddled down between Herbert and the others. She protected her daughter as best she could. The rain on her back wasn't harder to bear than the years of insults and cruelty by Anaeth at the school. The noise wasn't louder than the doubt that had screamed that she was a fraud, a fake. She had resisted the pull of this fairy's magic before, she would again. For her daughter's sake, for her sake, for the sake of all the Kingdoms.

She saw the fairy's feet standing in front of her. Her husband and friends were sprawled on the ground trying to breathe air that was as much water as air.

Rumpelstiltskin reached for the baby. Alexandra forced herself to her feet, still bending over to give her daughter a space to breathe.

"You can't win," Rumpelstiltskin said. "You can't stand against my magic."

"And yet," Alexandra said, "I have. No enchantment has touched me. I have needed no kiss from a prince or help from a fairy. I am the Unenchanted Princess. I have no straw that

needs spinning. I don't need your help and have not asked it. You may not touch me or my daughter."

"SHE'S MINE," the fairy said and reached for the baby.

The baby gurgled with laughter.

"Even a child doesn't fear you," Alexandra said. "Fairies will only be stories for her. You have no power over me or mine."

Rumplestiltskin tried to snatch the infant, but he couldn't touch her. The storm began to fail, and the people started to pick themselves up. The swans returned and the crows threw themselves into the air. Herbert and the others stood up as the sun shone brightly through the fading clouds. Alexandra's daughter waved at the sky where a rainbow arched over them. Her gurgling laughter was infectious. Alexandra started laughing, then all the people. The swans trumpeted and the crows cawed. Rumplestiltskin shrank to a grey haired little man.

"I will be back. You *will* fear me," he shrieked, but they just laughed harder.

"It's over," said Harold Smith as he appeared beside Rumplestiltskin. He put a hand on the fairy's shoulder, "Let's go home. You don't need our blessings or gifts," he said to Alexandra as he faded away, "but accept our thanks." Alexandra nodded and he was gone. The water from the storm vanished and clothes that had been soaked and ruined were dry and fresh again. Alexandra could feel something different in the air.

"My friends," she called and Herbert raised his hands for silence. "My friends, I believe that the final enchantment has been lifted. Sopo awakes."

"Now that we have dealt with that," Herbert said into the sudden stillness, "it is time to introduce our daughter. Please greet Princess Crystobel." The cheers shook the ground. Prince Rumplestiltskin the crow led his people in loops and rolls above the princess. The swans bowed. Then the great black cloud of crows flew off to the north, while the swans flew west.

Herbert bent over and picked up two feathers, one black as coal, one white as snow. He tucked them into a pocket as a reminder.

The celebration lasted all night and well into the next day. People told each other the story of what they had seen and

laughed again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Far away on her lake Avi felt the magic barrier that trapped her shatter. She flew south, followed by all the swans on the lake. They met with the flock from the naming celebration, and following their Queen they crossed into the Kingdom of Sopo. Even as the swans flew, the people were stretching and rubbing their eyes. Avi flew to the castle and in through the open door. She found her prince just sitting up.

“Avi,” he said in wonder, as her swan form melted away. He hugged her. “I am so glad you came to rescue me from this terrible party.” She laughed with joy and led him out of the castle. The servants stood and watched with wonder as the swans circled. Michael found his horse and put his love in front of him, and together they rode out into their new world.