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Books by Edward Holden

The Fairest of Them All
Ember
The Whole Half

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This book is dedicated to the children of class three.
The children of Nepal.

... The little girl who one day asked me if I thought she was pretty.
Elvis, the little boy who simply followed me around.
The young girl who never came to school because she had to
work.

Memories... they gave me.
I am so very glad for them.



Prologue

The Acorn Theory

A century ago, the creation of the universe was a concept that astronomers as a rule ignored. The reason for this was the general acceptance of the idea that the universe existed in infinite time - a conglomeration of matter that had no beginning.

Today, however, it is generally considered that the universe started with a big bang (much to the satisfaction of most religions) for should something have existed with zero volume, tantamount to saying it was nothing, and then explode, it only went to prove the theological argument that the world was created... to be true.

Once having established this point we are confronted with the ideology of eternal life, sometimes referred to as the spiritual or dream world, a world that although invisible, is all around, inexorably coming into existence parallel to that of the physical one.

*The Spirit world must arise out of nothing; it must first create itself;
Its first creation is itself.
When it has accomplished this creative act then follows a natural
reproduction of creations.¹*

This is what is known as the Acorn Theory.
From this metaphysical acorn, all trees of life have grown, a spiritual
rain forest spanning both the vastness and depth of time.



Deep within the forest, where the Yggdrasil, the Acacia, and the Bodi tree² grows, stands the Welig tree. Unlike the other trees however, it neither grows up or outwards, but hangs like the willow. Perhaps it is the forefather of all willows. Its branches twist in on themselves, splitting time and light. It is here where the dragons live and the phoenix comes to rest. It is here that all magical creatures great and small can be found. It is here, that fairytales are born and told, for the Welig tree is the tree of life, of all things magical...

It is Springtime.

A young sun shines down upon the trees of the forest. A wind blows, tossing the fallen leaves of the past. The branches of the Welig tree tap together like they are whispering.

1. The reference is taken from, 'German Ideology' by Marx and Engels, who, in their early years worked together to form an alternative to capitalism, which today is known as Communism
2. The Yggdrasil (Norse mythology) the Acacia (Egyptian mythology) the Bodi (Buddhism) are all names for 'the tree of life'.

Something is about to happen, for there at the end of one such branch
three small red-green buds have grown.

It is time, it is their time.

The sunlight gently touches their frail form. Slowly one by one the
buds open...

The First... The Second... and The Third.



Chapter One

Not Witches

It was *definitely* not a meeting - and certainly not a secret one. Okay, so he hadn't actually told anyone, but that still didn't make it a secret. Meeting in secrecy was what witches did; they were renowned for their meetings and meddling.

They were not witches. Witches flew on broomsticks, they drove in carriages. Witches dressed in black, they wore bright and cheerful colors. Witches gathered, they socialized. And as for fortune telling, never - they gave advice, good advice. There was no way anyone could mistake them for witches. So it was utter nonsense to think that *this* was a secret meeting.

But still, it felt like one.



The last few rays of daylight fell upon the house of The Third, when a knock resounded on the front door. It was made by the back end of an umbrella; it belonged to The First. A large brass door knocker in the shape of a horse shoe hung shiny and as untouched as the day that it had been brought.

The Third lived in a lime painted, yellow cottage with faded green shutters and matching door. Over the years the foundation had sunk so much that it now leant against the castle wall, while the nearby apple tree that had once grown beside it now grew in and out of the top floor windows.³ Anyone visiting the castle mistook the house for the gamekeepers lodge; The Third liked it like that. He went out of his way to help people believe this. It gave him the peace and quiet he enjoyed. Plus it allowed him plenty of time to do what he enjoyed most: fishing. Today though, fishing was the last thing on his mind. Nervously, he stared at the laden table. In the middle was a clay teapot, which would soon be hot in action. Beside it, a large silver tray piled high with biscuits and a cake, baked especially for the occasion, beside which, overflowing with sugar, was a hand painted sugar bowl that had once belonged to the royal family. It had been a gift for his services. Now they all seemed to glare back at him as if to say that even they knew this was a charade, and it was in fact a meeting.

Graciously, he opened the door.

“Oh, good evening!” he said, surprised to see The First *and* The Second.

³ The description is taken from the Friedensreich Hundertwasser house in Vienna, built and designed by Friedrich Stowasser, (1928 - 2000) and is part of Austria's cultural heritage.

“Picked her up on my way,” The First replied in answer to his look of surprise. “I figured by the time that *she* got herself ready and then organized a carriage, this little get together of ours would be over.” The Second stared at the back of her head, uncertain whether or not she had just been insulted.

“Oh and don't worry about the carriage, I put it in among the cabbages, no one will see it there. The mice are safe too,” saying which The First tapped her skirt pocket meaningfully.

“Oh. Well yes, fine, if you say so,” The Third said, somewhat overwhelmed and took a hasty look around to make sure no one had seen them arrive. “Come in, please,” and stepped aside to let them pass.

“I see you made a cake,” The First called back as she sat herself down at the table and poured herself a cup of tea. “You don't mind, do you?” she then asked, indicating the teapot.

“No, certainly not, go ahead.” The Third stuttered as with a rather doleful look towards the door, where three new scratches had joined the countless others, closed it behind them. He then hurried over to where The Second stood, waiting impatiently to be offered a chair. “Please sit down.”

The sun slipped below the horizon.



Chapter Two

,Mirror, mirror on the wall‘

The Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu once said that a good traveler has no fixed plans, but in today’s world of time tables and schedules it’s hard to imagine life without one. We are taught and trained to make them. Planning something is the opposite of dreaming about it. Yet neither the plan nor the dream exists alone. Words such as destiny, fate and kismet come to mind. How often have we heard such references when things go wrong, blaming any of the three for the cause? Does this mean that plans only work if they are supposed to, or would things that are meant to be still happen if we didn’t plan them?

The Third had spent the past two weeks carefully planning the evening. He had run through every possible scenario and every possible esoteric intervention. His plan was to outwit Destiny. The trouble was, he also planned to outsmart The First and The Second, and that was proving to be a bit more difficult.



“Mirror, mirror, on the wall, all for one and one for all!” The First proclaimed, standing up and saluting The Second with her teacup, who quickly did the same.

“Oh, well done!” The Second said clapping enthusiastically. “I must say that was pretty damn good. Third, what do you think?”

The Third raised his head; he hadn't been listening. His thoughts were elsewhere. He took a very deep and long breath to calm himself down.

“What did she say?”

They ignored him.

“It's my turn now,” The Second then said as huffing and puffing she stood up to face the mirror.

It had been like this for the last two hours. All the plans he had had for the evening were gone and all because of one small, but erroneous comment; he had asked them about his magic mirror.

“My mirror is playing up something dreadful,” he had said, loosening his collar. “I just can't get it to do what I want.” Followed by a brief bout of silence with The First and The Second staring at him.

Nervously he checked his collar again; it still felt tight.

“Have you checked to see if it's working properly?” The Second suggested, and held up her teacup to indicate she would like a refill. The Third was grateful for the distraction.

“Yes, last week I took it to a hobgoblin to make sure. It's fine,” he added, offering her the sugar. “Not even a shimmer or flicker around

the edging. Good for another thousand years.”

“So what do you think it is, then?” The Second asked slightly more curious. The First busied herself with scouring the room to see if anything was out of place or had changed since her last visit.

“I thought perhaps I’m asking it the wrong kind of questions. I hardly ever use it other than for getting dressed with.”

“I see the little man in the boat is no longer on the mantel piece,” The First then said, pleased at her own observation and pointed to the spot where it had once stood.

“One of the castle cats knocked it down,” The Third answered polite but rash, trying to avoid a distraction. He had spent too long preparing for this moment.

“I hope you taught it a lesson,” The First continued not letting off. She lived at the top of a very tall tower and saw no need for cats whatsoever. For her a cat was nothing more than a furry nuisance; a furry nuisance that killed her stock of mice. A fairy godparent without any mice was stranded. “It’s no wonder witches ride on broomsticks,” she muttered in disgust. “Troublesome balls of fluff, I dread to think what they would be like changed into horses!”

“What I thought was,” The Third said a little louder, turning to face The Second for support, (who had several cats, all of whom could well have done with chasing a mouse or two about.) “As you are so good with the mirror magic, maybe you could give me a few tips?” And that had been that, like children suddenly given permission to play with something they normally were not allowed, The First and Second began to demonstrate how a mirror should be questioned, challenging each other to come up with the better rhyme.

“Oh come now Third, don’t be such a grump!” The First reprimanded.

“Why don’t you have a go?” She hadn’t had so much fun in years.

It was then that The Second said, in a loud and commanding voice:

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall, will he meet her at the ball?”

The room fell silent. The world seemed to hold its breath. For a moment the rain clouds parted and the moon shone through. Far away a wolf howled. Out in the courtyard, behind the stables, an open window clattered noisily on its hinges...



Chapter Three

Tea

“I must say Second, that was excellent,” The First declared with a raucous round of applause, letting the world breathe again. The Second grinned, triumphantly.

“Is there any more tea?” she then asked, suddenly feeling thirsty. The Third, less enthusiastic, picked up the teapot, indicating no, but he would make some.

“Now that is what I call a question,” The First continued with her praise. “Third, did you hear that?” She said, calling out after his disappearing figure. “I know it’s none of my business but perhaps you should try asking the mirror something like that?”

The Third made no reply but noisily filled the kettle.

“I wonder what has gotten into him?” The Second whispered in answer to his silence. “He doesn’t seem very keen at all. You don’t suppose there’s anything wrong, do you?”

The First rubbed her chin and then tapped in triplets on the tabletop - perhaps The Second was right, was there something wrong?

"Third, what is the real reason for this meeting?" she called out, bringing the hammer to the nail, followed by the sound of something crashing in the kitchen. "Ah ha!" The First announced as though the noise confirmed her doubts. The Second nodded in conspiracy. Then, with the kind of voice any headmistress would have been proud of, she called out to the Third, demanding to know what he was up to. The Third nervously shuffled back into the room carrying the broken teapot.

"It just slipped out of my hands," he said. They were not interested. He caved. He had planned to tell them of course, that was the reason for the meeting, but now, when it was actually time to do so he just didn't know how or where to begin. Carefully he put the broken teapot down on the table and placed the lid on its broken form.

"Start at the beginning," The First suggested before he had time to ask, watching his actions with approval.

"Yes, that's usually a good place," The Second added and patted the chair beside her to indicate he should sit down.

The Third sat down.

By the time that he had finished the tea had gone cold. The fire that kept the pot warm glowed red among its own ashes. Outside the night sky reached its turning point.

"Definitely seems strange," The First said after a respectful amount of silence, nodding her head in a knowing fashion. "Difficult too."

"But what I don't understand is how exactly do you mean by more prince-like?" The Second asked, not so astute but didn't mind admitting this.

"Yes," agreed The First, making it sound like a question.

"I don't know. He just appears to be princelier, that's all," The Third said, cringing as he heard the words. "What I mean is, I know he's a prince and everything, that's obvious, and a very good one too, but there's more to it than that. The people actually like him. They whistle and wave as his carriage goes by."

"They whistle and wave?" The First repeated in disbelief. Real princes were not handsome and kind like those in children's stories, real princes were cruel and thoughtless, they ruled - exactly what the word meant; dictators in fancy dress.

"I know. That's how I felt the first time I saw it. They line the streets and wave."

The First and Second stared at each other and then back at The Third.

"It's his aura you see, it has changed, I no longer can read it. No matter what I do. For more than six months now, the magic in and around the castle has been changing, maturing, as if it were about to bloom, the problem is, I don't know as what. My crystal ball fogs, the paranormal plains won't let me in and the mirror keeps giving me the same image, no matter what I ask it."

"Which is?"

This time the room went silent without the drama. Even the clock above the fireplace knew it wasn't the right time to chime, even if the hands said so.

"Okay," The First said while The Second gently patted his hand reassuringly. "Let's see what this is all about."



Chapter Four

The Swan King

The Third stood up and with a double clap of his hands summoned the spirit of the mirror. A gray, shadowy image of a face appeared. It did not smile. In fact, it looked rather annoyed as if it had heard all the other silly rhymes. It was a magical mirror after all, not a toy. Very slowly and rather sullen it said: "Yes, my lord?"

The First and Second leaned forward in anticipation.

"Mirror, show me the young prince," The Third commanded, much to the disappointment of The First and Second, who had expected at least one rhyme after all their demonstrating.

The face faded and in its place an image of the young prince appeared.



Outside, the night sky cleared. Tomorrow was midsummer night, the longest day of the year. A pale but full moon rolled along the horizon. No one noticed midwinter night, it thought, the shortest day of the year. This was the night when it, the moon, should have been worshipped.

Almost as if it didn't want to shine the moon rolled behind a cloud.



"Oh, that is a problem," The First said, leaning back into the couch. "Haven't seen anything like that for a long time, have you Second?" and turned expectantly towards The Second, who nodded in agreement. "No, not for a long time."

"I mean it's nothing new of course, it's just a bit odd to see something like this after such a long time."

"You're not thinking what I'm thinking, are you?" The Second asked conspiratorially, and winked at The First in a caballing way.

Nope," The First answered as flatly as a squashed idea could get. "I think it highly unlikely, if not impossible, no matter how strange something might be, and let me tell you, this is very strange. But that we should share the same thoughts? Never."

"Share what thoughts?" The Third asked, not understanding.

"About your young prince, of course," The First said reveling in The Third's lack of comprehension. "And on that horse too."

"Yes, on *that* horse," The Second repeated, refusing to be squashed.

"So?"

"Well, it could mean a lot of things," The First said, beginning to enjoy herself. "But basically, if you ignore the fact the horse he's sitting on has wings, and of course ignore the shining armor he's wearing..."

"Don't forget the sword," The Second added helpfully.

"Oh yes, ignoring the great big sword he's holding with all those glowing runes, I'd say it means only one thing..."

"Which is?"

The First tilted her head to one side like a jackdaw. She knew what the image meant. What she didn't know though was why here and now?

"He's a real prince," she concluded to The Third's open mouthed expression. "I know what you're thinking; they're all princes or princesses, in one way or another. Take my young lady for example," The First said, patting The Third's hand reassuringly. "She's about as much of a princess as the king is a farmer, and as for the young man The Second is in charge of, well, Second, how would you describe him?"

The Second cleared her throat enthusiastically.

"Useless. Completely useless," she said, grinning happily. "But that doesn't make him any less a prince! It's all down to blood, you see. Royal blood, that's all that matters. Remember The Swan King? Completely mad, drowned himself trying to build an underwater palace. Or that nice young man, prince Mustafa, lived in a golden cage, and spent all his time whistling. And of course there was princess Erzsèbet,⁴ stark raving bonkers. She used to bathe in..."

"Well yes, thank you very much Second, I think that's quite enough," The First interrupted before she went into any of the more gory details. "I think The Third has got the picture. What she is trying to say is your

4. The Swan King (Ludwig II from Bayern, 1845-1886).

Mustafa I Deli (1591 - 1639) reported to be mentally retarded or at least neurotic, was confined to his room in virtual imprisonment, a system called Kafes, (golden cage) for fourteen years.

Erzsèbet Bathory (1561-1614) was one of the most notorious female sadists ever, who supposedly bathed in the blood of virgins to remain young and beautiful.

young fellow now, well he's a bit more than just your regular bloodline prince."

"Was I? Is he?"

"Why certainly. Look at him," The First declared, pointing once more to the image in the mirror. "And didn't you mention earlier that everyone likes him?"

The Third nodded in admittance.

"And I suspect he's extremely polite, gracious, and kind. Even has a funny wave, no doubt."

"Now you mention it, yes he does," The Third said, surprised by this last comment. "I just thought there was something wrong with his wrists."

"Then it's obvious, he's a prince charming; you know, glass slippers, meet her at the ball, kind of stuff."

"Oh I bet he's dashing!" The Second said beaming with pleasure, as her mind flooded with all the fairytales she had ever been a part of. "With periwinkle blue eyes, you know, the kind of eyes that just sweep a girl off her feet."

"What?" The First and Third chorused, completely at a loss by this unexpected outburst.

"Prince Charming of course," The Second replied giving them both a very strange look.

"But you've seen him... and often." The Third added completely confused. "Handsome is not quite the word I would use for him."

"Ah but that was before he was a prince charming. Every prince charming is dashingly handsome; common knowledge. He has to be, to fulfill the tale."

"The tale?" The Third echoed.

"Yes, the tale, he's got to have a tale. There is always a story, some damsel in distress somewhere who he has to save, perhaps from a

dragon or even a giant troll. Or maybe it's a wicked queen or worse still, the stepmother!"

The words crushed all other sound. An uncomfortable silence filled the room as their imaginations mixed with their memories.

"But that's old magic?" The Third said as the truth sank in. "Surely it was all destroyed along with the last..." He did not even want to say the word. The moonlight shone through the open curtains. The First got up and closed them. This was not the time for melodramatics. It was time for a good cup of tea, a really *strong* cup of tea.

"Second, go into the kitchen and put a pot of water on the stove, if there's any Granny Black Tooth use that. I think three spoonfuls will do the job."

"Three?" The Second said, her turn to be shocked. She usually used only half a teaspoonful when she was feeling really sick.

"Yes, three."

It was that serious.



Chapter Five

Spots

The Third sat and stared at the dark stain the tea had left in his cup and then again at the image in the mirror: it was hard to believe, a real prince charming. It had been hundreds of years since anyone had been born with such a destiny. Too many things had changed since then. Kings and queens had changed. They no longer ruled in the true sense of the word. They were more figureheads, images reflecting the general wellbeing of the kingdom. The ancient kings who had ravished the land and folk were well and truly safe in the past, along with their mad queens and their poisonous apples. Even the boastful farmer whose daughter apparently could spin just about anything into gold kept this to himself and grew happily rich instead. They had to be mistaken.

In the back ground he could hear The First and Second arguing in the kitchen over who would do the drying. He didn't have a lot of plates to start with.

He feared he'd soon have even less.

"Just leave the dishes," he called out, while thinking it was high time he brought some new plates. The First and Second returned, each with a dishcloth thrown over a shoulder and shirt sleeves rolled up.

"Are you sure?" The First asked, sitting down.

"Certainly, and I must admit an excellent joke; you really had me fooled for a moment."

"What are you talking about?" The Second said and leaned over to look into his cup. "Have you drunk all the tea?"

"Yes, thank you." The Third said with a lopsided smile and a twitch. Granny Black Tooth had several different side effects. "And it would have worked too, if it wasn't for the fact that the young prince is covered in spots."

"Spots?"

"Yes, spots; he's at that age, you know."

The First slapped a hand over her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

"How many spots?" The Second stuttered, trying to come to grips with the idea.

"Well, spots are not something you count," The Third said seeing the look of horror on her face. "Besides, it's a joke, right?"

The Second sat down with a thump. She had made the study of ancient magic and its royalty her life's work. Once there had been young princes roaming all over the country saving young farmer's daughters from their cruel fathers. The role of the prince charming was her métier. The whole gypsy thing had only come to an end due to one unusually bright young prince discovering the whole escapade had been planned by the young lady's mother. After that the tower building industry went bankrupt and farmers' daughters had to try their luck somewhere else.

"Now, now," The First said in what she considered a consoling voice, while gently patting the shaking hand of The Second. "It doesn't matter right now does it, I mean, so long as he doesn't have a tale."

"Yes that's right; as long as he doesn't have a tale!" The Second exclaimed, rallying. "He doesn't have a tale yet does he?" She then asked with panic in her voice. The Third could honestly shake his head in denial. It was the first he had heard of his young ward being a prince charming, let alone having some dangerous journey he was to go on.

"Prince charmings' always have a tale, some even have a song! This could take years to evolve!" The Second burst forth, her thoughts roller coasting along. "Until then, we'll just have to make sure he washes regularly. Eats lots of good wholesome food and gets out into the fresh air. And most important keeps away from girls."

"Keeps away from girls?"

"Yes, we can't have him falling in love with just anyone, now can we!" The Second declared as if the spots had already cleared up and he was a dashing young prince.

"Yes, well, sure," The Third said, thinking this last part would be quite easy. The princesses stayed away on their own accord. He had had spots since he was eleven. Five long years of creams and spells... they were not going to go away over night.

"Third, go and get your crystal ball, let's take a closer look." The Second said, paying no attention to his indifference. Obediently The Third stood up and walked over to the shelf where the crystal ball rested, covered by a dark blue satin handkerchief.

The Second began to light the candles.

"Don't just stand there doing nothing, First. Start sealing the room," she said, seeing The First's look of disapproval. "We don't want anyone or anything looking in."

"Don't you be telling me what to do," The First snapped and crossed her arms in protest. "Besides, you know as well as I do that we never share magic."

"Who said anything about sharing magic? Are you planning to do magic?"

"Certainly not!"

"Me neither. So, where's the problem? If The Third wishes to do magic he may, it is after all his home, and should he ask us to look, and we care too, there is also nothing wrong with that either," The Second continued, turning back to The First. "Now get your wand out and help."

Outside the night gave way to the day and the moon gave way to the sun. The First gave way to The Second as all together they prepared the room for The Third to do magic. Which was correct, after all it was his house. And, after they had all looked into the crystal ball, together they wondered what it all meant.

They decided to meet again...



Chapter Six

Double Trouble

*A*n idea is a specific thought or concept that occurs as a result of mental thinking; the word *Idea* originates from the Greek language, the birthplace of philosophy.⁵

An idea that just appears, however, without any previous contemplation, is known as inspiration. The evangelical church claims inspiration comes from God; for without it the uniqueness and authority of the Bible is reduced to a mere collection of religious myths. Sigmund Freud, on the other hand, argues that inspiration comes from

5. Philosophy is the study of general and fundamental problems concerning matters such as existence, knowledge, truth, and the mind. It is distinguished by its critical and generally systematic approach and the reliance on reasoned argument. The Greek word; *filosofea*, means 'love of wisdom'.

within, created by a subconscious thought process caused by unresolved psychological conflict. Either way, great or small, ideas have the potential to change the world.

Any idea that is followed creates a decision.

Any decision that is made forms an act.

Any act that takes place causes change. Consequently, to deliberately give someone an idea is the same as to intentionally interfere with that person's destiny.

The Three never interfered.

Sharing information, on the other hand, well, that's different; that's education.



Princess Suilen awoke with the sunlight peeking in through the sides and top of her bedroom curtains. From where she lay she could hear the sound of rumbling cartwheels and horses' hooves clattering on the cobble-stone courtyard below. Throwing open the window, she leaned out and looked about. Ramming both index fingers into her mouth, she then whistled. Ambler, the stable boy, was leading one of the royal horses out to graze.

He looked up and waved.

"Hi Ambi," Suilen called out to him, beaming with pleasure. "Can you go and tell Warren to get my hawk ready?"

Ambler nodded and smiled back at the disappearing figure of Suilen. Suilen loved falconry; she had her very own Jack Merlin, and Warren the gamekeeper was helping her to train it. She hoped one day to own a Peregrine hawk, the fastest of all birds, but was sure her mother would never consent; such a bird was considered unfit for a lady.

Everything she liked seemed to be unladylike to her mother... even her attire.

Quickly she slipped into what she considered her 'waving from the balcony' dress; at least she would look like a princess... and ran down the stairs, two steps at a time.

Half an hour later, with her maid and Warren in the carriage beside her, they left.

The sky was cloudless and the autumn sun rolled lazily along the horizon; full of the promise of being a burning hot spot later. By late afternoon with the sky packed with dark and heavy rain clouds, Suilen knew the sun had lied.

Warren was busy loading the carriage.

"Bring him down," he said without even turning round to look at her.

Skillfully she began to swing the lure around in wide circles, making small whistling noises that the bird had become accustomed to. She could hear the sound of its foot bell in the distance but couldn't yet see it. Then, bursting out over the treetops he appeared, racing low in the typical twisting tail-chase motion of a Merlin. She smiled. It really was a beautiful bird in action. When, suddenly, unbelievably, one, or both of its jesses snagged on to a branch, trapping the bird. Wildly it flapped and screamed as it tried to free itself without success. Suilen knew that if something wasn't done immediately, it would either fall prey to a crow or red-tail, that, or hurt itself.

Ambler however had already gone back to the stables and Warren was far too old to be climbing trees; it had to be her...



The Queen sat composed yet irate at one end of the long banquet table in the great hall, at the other end sat the king. They hadn't spoken throughout dinner.

"It's impossible," she finally said exasperated, and threw down her napkin in a demonstrative manner. "She simply refuses to behave like a princess."

"Who does my dear?" The King asked politely, knowing the answer. "Your daughter, Suilen of course!" the queen scoffed snapping at the waiter to remove the unwanted napkin.

'Ah,' the king thought and sighed in recognition. 'She is *my* daughter again.'

"Did you know she came home today soaking wet and her dress all torn?" The queen asked, but needed no reply. "I must have told her at least a thousand times she's too old to be climbing trees, and I swear you encourage her."

"I encourage her?"

"Why of course you do, it was you who gave her that dreadful beast? I mean, a princess with a hawk! Who'll want such a daughter-in-law? You know something is going to have to be done."

The king swirled the wine in his glass, patiently waiting for the next line. It was coming, he knew it; this was not the first evening to be spent in such pleasantries.

"You're the king, do something!"

And there it was: the answer that meant everything and nothing. It was bad enough having to listen to the petty feuds of the landowners and farmers all day long without having to spend his evenings listening to his own family problems. Surely he had advisors and councilors for this?

"I'll have a word with her tomorrow," he said and took a slow and thoughtful sip of wine. It was a good wine, his headwaiter had told

him. It came from some foreign and distant land where apparently the sun shone all year round. It was supposed to be rich in flavor and aroma; he couldn't taste or smell any of them.

This worried him.

Absentmindedly he watched the swirling wine flow up and around his glass. It left an almost invisible pathway behind it. In the background he could hear the queen going on about suitors and bribes and other such possibilities to find Suilen a husband - yet, somehow he knew none of them would work. Something told him what he had to do. Something he didn't like. He was king, and was never told what to do; he gave the orders, he was supposed to have all the answers... only this time he didn't. If only there was someone else he could ask, someone other than *her*.



The night faded. The frost came. The sun slowly warmed the world and melted the frost to make the morning dew. Out on the fields the farm hands hung up their scythes; there was no point in cutting the grass now that it was wet. They would wait until tomorrow to cut again.

In the castle the kitchen staff stirred. Fires were lit, eggs and milk collected. The king required his usual two bread rolls and a poached egg for breakfast.

The maid timidly knocked on the door to awaken him.

"Yes, who's there?" the king called out, startled by the sound.

"It's me, your majesty," the maid said, bobbing her way across the room.

"What do you want?" The king said, very surprised to see her, he had not slept all night

"I've brought you your breakfast."

"Is it that time already?" he then said, staring at the note he held in his left hand. This was the reason for his insomnia. He had spent all night writing it; it had taken an awful lot of willpower and ink. A large pile of discarded attempts lay scattered and crumbled upon the floor as proof. The maid remained motionless as the king walked twice around the table where the breakfast things now lay, rubbing his unshaven chin with one hand and apparently reading the note.

"I know I am going to regret this," he suddenly said out loud. "Can't be helped though," then, noticing that the maid was still there added: "Is that all?" while looking down at the breakfast things again. "Run along then," he said, seeing the maid curtsy. "Oh and on your way down to wherever it is you go, please tell my councilor I wish to see him, immediately."

Ten minutes later there was another knock on his door.

"Come in," the king called out, more cross than startled.

"You called?" His councilor asked dutifully, knowing only too well that he had. He had been drinking a steaming hot cup of tea when the maid had come bursting in, telling him the king wanted to see him right away.

With a deep, chest-clearing cough, the king handed him the note.

"Tell her I want to meet her in my private chambers this evening, and for heaven's sake, no carriage and horses!"

And with that, the councilor left.



Chapter Seven

The Visitor

The king paced the royal chamber, double-checking that everything was in place. He had been there for over an hour. The note had said, 'be here at seven,' and although he knew that would be the precise moment she'd arrive, it hadn't stopped him from going to the room early, just in case. Besides, it gave him plenty of time to check that everything was neat and tidy. He remembered as a child how she had controlled his bedroom, deliberately lifting things and wiping edges in the hope to find something broken or dusty. Oh, and the pleasure she had when she did! He was pretty sure that although he was now king and could do whatever he liked, it still wasn't a good idea to have an untidy room.

He looked out of the window at the chapel clock. It read ten minutes to seven. It had read ten minutes to seven the last time he'd looked,

he was pretty sure of it - perhaps it had stopped.

Ten minutes later the chapel bell rang out seven leaden notes. And just as the seventh note faded, a gentle but firm knock came on the door.

The king turned towards the door, but then remembered who he was.

"Come in," he called out, with a slight tremor in his voice. She had arrived exactly as he had written, no magic, no carriage, and unannounced, but still the knock had startled him.

She knocked again.

"Come in," he repeated a little louder. The door opened and The First stepped into the room, greeting him with a stiff curtsy.

"I see you are as punctual as ever," the king said and pointed to the chair he had carefully placed in front of his desk for her to sit down.

"I'll remain standing if you don't mind," The First said with a smile that looked more like a grin. "It's my back, you see, playing up again," she said in explanation and looked around the room.

The king sat down instead.

"I see you got my message," he continued, rolling a quill between his fingers and then realizing he was making a mess. He could feel her eyes on him. He was sure that at any moment she would start running her fingers along the mantelpiece to check for dust. It was spotless.

"I am glad," he continued, to the silence, while his inner voice was challenging her to check. She smiled again, only this time he was sure it was a grin. He wiped his hands clean on a piece of paper. "Fine, shall we get down to business?" Yes, it definitely was a grin. He was sure of it. She was grinning at him. The very same grin she had worn when she caught him climbing over the college wall after hours, as a young man. The very same grin that had peered out of the bushes late one summer night, when he had slipped away with his childhood sweet heart and stolen his first kiss. Tonight the grin said, I know

why you have summoned me, but I am not going to make it easy...
It never was.

After months of listening to his wife during dinner and consultation with his councilor, he had finally given into the queen's wishes and 'done something about it'. She, The First, was the result. She was princess Suilen's fairy godparent. She had been his too, and had terrorized his childhood. It was only when he married had he been finally free of her. He could clearly remember the day his parents told him they had found a bride for him: he had literally jumped for joy. Being married meant he would be free of her and he could live happily ever after, which, at the time, had seemed like a very long time! Grinning madly, he had watched The First climb into her carriage and drive away.

But then princess Suilen had been born and tradition required a godparent. The First had been the royal fairy godparent since anyone could remember, and longer. It was tradition. She was tradition. So she had been summoned... again.

She arrived just like she had left. Nothing had changed. Instead of appearing smaller as most childhood monsters do, she seemed even larger, even more real. She had walked down the aisle to where the crib stood, her eyes fixed on him the whole way, as if she were saying 'I know you, I changed your nappy as a child, just because you're sitting on that throne there, doesn't frighten me.'

He had openly trembled as she had placed one hand, laden with the very same silver bracelets and rings from his childhood, on the side of the crib and tilted it towards her.

"A strong child," she announced after what felt like ages. "She will need to be... later, when the time is ready." And with those apoplectic words she had left, without even as much as a 'by your leave.'

He had never called or spoken to her again. Princess Suilen didn't even know she had a fairy godmother. When princess Varina was born, three years later, The First had not been invited.

Seventeen quiet and magic free years passed and Princess Suilen grew from a happy child to a young woman...

Only... the queen was right; Suilen was running wild and needed a firm, but guiding hand. She needed someone she would listen to; someone she would obey. But still, summoning The First felt like an act of betrayal. The queen naturally couldn't understand this; she had never actually *lived* with The First. For her, like everyone else, The First was a polite and charming senior member of the royal court. When he tried to explain otherwise she only told him not to be silly; it had all been a long time ago. Things were different now; for one thing, he was the king.



"I assume you have read the note?" he began, offering her his hand in welcome.

"Yes, your highness."

Grin.

"And you accept the task?"

"Yes, your highness."

Grin.

"The queen and I are naturally very grateful and indebted to you."

Grin.

"Should there be anything we could do for you, you know you only need to ask."

Grin.

The First bowed politely in response letting him know that she had registered the offer. He was sure too she would remind him of it... one day.

“Thank your honor, but now I think I will go and attend to my duty.” And with that she turned and left the room, leaving the king to fall back into his chair, feeling very relieved.



Chapter Eight

Aunts

The first thing The First did as Suilen's newly appointed teacher was to introduce her to the royal guardians, the keepers of the book of peerage. Nothing happened or went on without their permission. They knew everything there was to know about everyone and every thing within the royal court. No one got married without their approval.

They were Suilen's old and ancient aunts.

"She'll be okay with us," her aunt Arcelia said as Suilen entered the drawing room. "Thank you," and stood in the way of The First. "There's no need to wait," she added, opening the door.

The First did not move.

"You of all people know the rules... ladies only."

The First frowned.

"...ladies of royal blood." She added and closed the door right in The First's face.

Outside, in the corridor, the walls were decorated with oil paintings of the departed royal members, and beneath each was a chair. The First sat down to wait.

“So, she has brought you to us then, has she? At least the old dragon knows something,” her aunt Arcelia began, turning her back on the closed door and walking into the center of the room. “You’re quite fortunate. Your poor father never had this chance, being a boy; he had to suffer her full attention right until the day he got married. Varina, bring your sister a chair please, and stop gaping girl, princesses never gape. Now where shall we begin? First, we need to get rid of those awful clothes; you might not behave like a princess but from now on you will dress like one. Emily, bring me the tape measure please.”

A young and skinny looking girl with big blue eyes and blond ringlets ran over with the tape measure and a pencil.

“Good girl, now take notes.”

“Yes ma-am.”

“I can see you are going to make Prince Harry very happy one day.” Emily blushed.

“Lift your arms please,” Aunt Arcelia said, turning to Suilen. Her eyes were of different sizes, giving her the expression of permanently squinting. And each eye worked separately. She could stare at you with one while the other raced around the room making sure everyone else was doing precisely what she wished. She never missed a thing. “I want you to come here every day. We have a lot to catch up on if you are going to behave like a lady. We’ll help you of course, won’t we girls?” she then said, addressing this remark to the circling crowd of young ladies, who nodded enthusiastically. “And when you have learnt how to behave like a lady, we’ll teach you how not to.” This

comment was followed by a ripple of sniggers and giggles. "Today though, as we are not dressed for anything else, we'll start with embroidery. Rosemary, be so kind as to show Suilen where we keep the needles and silk."

So each day, precisely at three, The First led Suilen down to the drawing room, where for two hours she was taught how to dress, talk, walk and even smile... and everyday between three and five The First sat outside in the corridor, knitting.

There was so much to learn and so much to understand. Suilen found herself looking at the kingdom not as a burden but a private world filled only with her friends. She'd never really had friends before, having always thought what the other princesses did to be so silly, especially the giggling parts. She even surprised herself with just how good she was at embroidery. Aunt Arcelia told her this was only natural what with her being of such thick, royal blood, but her biggest surprise came on the evening when she was invited to join them in the drawing room, after dinner. The men had gone out onto the terrace to smoke their cigars and boast about their recent kills, while she in the company of her aunt Arcelia sat down around a large circular table, carefully laid out with tea, biscuits and cake.

"Can you play cards, my dear?" Aunt Arcelia asked, picking up the pack of cards and beginning to shuffle them. "Oh, that," she said, seeing Suilen's stare. "Just a little trick I picked up over the years, I call it the dovetail shuffle.⁶ Maybe I'll show you one day. Girls, shall we?"

6. The dovetail shuffle, or more commonly known as the riffle shuffle, is a shuffle where half the deck is held in each hand with the thumbs inward. The cards are released by the thumbs so that they fall to the table interleaved. It is often used in casinos because it minimizes the risk of exposing cards during the shuffle.

The game was called Teatime and it was a simple game; the person that managed to get three teapots and a sugar bowl won. Suilen was fascinated, and it didn't take long for her to realize that they were actually gambling, but in code.

"That'll be two thirty then, will it?" Aunt Arcelia said, taking the bet. "Lady Kendra can you make it?" She was the bank, or in their case, the time keeper.

"Yes," Lady Kendra said, picking up another card. She was a large and stately woman. She was married to the duke of Mongean, a very old and very bald-headed gentleman. It was said they had once owned half the kingdom.

Lady Kendra was not very good at cards.

"Can you make two thirty, Emily?"

There was a moment's silence.

"Yes, but I think I'd prefer if we met at three." Her comment was followed by an outburst of whispering.

"Three o'clock, that's pretty late in the afternoon, are you sure you want to meet so late?"

Emily nodded her head while Lady Kendra stared at her with all her willpower, hoping to see if she was bluffing or not.

"Well it's tea at three, then," Arcelia finally said, taking the bet. "Lady Kendra?"

Lady Kendra put her cards down in defeat. Three o'clock was far too late. Begrudgingly she passed her sugar bowl over to Emily who took a sugar lump. Seven sugar lumps made a biscuit, three biscuits made a slice of cake and, anything more than a slice of cake was a fortune.

That evening Suilen went to bed counting teapots and sugar bowls; she couldn't sleep. Emily had promised to teach her how to play the following day.



Chapter Nine

Mumbo-Jumbo

Suilen sat in the classroom and stared at the blackboard. Scribbled, almost illegible across it, were ten questions on etiquette, questions she normally knew the answer to.

Outside the day was beginning, and from where she sat she could hear voices down below. She was sure one of them was Ambler's. He was shouting, but not like her father shouted at people, but in a light, happy manner, as if he were playing a game of tag. Annoyed, she looked over to the corner where The First sat half asleep, and then back at the blank piece of paper that lay upon her desk, smudged but unwritten.

She couldn't concentrate; her mind was filled with a thousand other things... thoughts and ideas that hadn't been there yesterday.

When Suilen's father had first told her that her godparent, a *real* fairy godmother was going to replace Madame Lantana, the now retired school teacher, she was thrilled. Madame Lantana had droned

dictation, spawned homework and had given out detention like sweets. Anyone had to be better. She had even imagined all the wishes she would make and have come true.

Now her only wish was that Madame Lantana had not retired. The First made her droning sound like music. And as for homework or detention, she would have been happy with either, instead The First followed her about everywhere, from the moment she got up, to the moment she went to bed. It was awful, there seemed no escape. She hadn't felt so trapped ever; even when she hadn't been allowed out for a whole week she had known the week would eventually end. ... until yesterday morning it had felt like it was going to last forever.

It had been raining, heavily, but that hadn't stopped The First, who believed the weather was simply a reflection on life: sometimes it was wet, and sometimes it wasn't, but always changing. Just because it rained it did not mean it was a bad day. Besides, there was nothing more refreshing than a good brisk walk in the rain... with an umbrella. So off they had marched, down to the stables, to groom and clean out Suilen's pony. Riding her pony was now the only time she was truly alone. When The First had asked her why she didn't let the stable boy clean and groom it for her she had simply said it was her responsibility. The First had agreed.

"I guess your parents will be picking you a husband soon," The First said, handing her the hoof pick. "Can't think of any other reason for me being here."

"What do you mean?" Suilen replied, startled by her comment. "No one's mentioned anything to me!"

"Oh, come now, you must have thought about it? Just climbing trees or getting caught in the rain is no reason for *me* to be summoned. I'm

called to solve problems, not because I own an umbrella," and to emphasize her point waved the aforementioned object.

"They wouldn't dare!" Suilen retorted, knowing even before the words had crossed her lips that they would.

"You know best I suppose. But it's not as if you have a say in the matter, now is it? Arranged marriages have been a part of royal tradition for centuries. I should know, I've helped organize enough of them."

Suilen took the hoof pick and attacked the dirt from heel to toe as if it were the most important thing in the world, flicking it across the stable floor, even though she knew she would have to sweep it up later.

"Well my dad hates tradition, he says it's just a lot of old mumbo-jumbo and silly costumes, designed to keep the peasants happy."

"Yes, I have heard him say that too, but here I am, all mumbo-jumbo and fancy dress, keeping the peasants happy," The First said with a smile that flashed like a warning sign announcing trespassers will be prosecuted.

Suilen chose refuge in the horse's hoof. The royal farrier had shod her pony two days earlier, increasing the shoe space to allow the frog of the hoof to make better contact, now that she was jumping. He was a nice old man, chatting with her like she was just a normal kid and not a princess. Sometimes, when no one else was around, he even called her Su, which no one ever dared!

Suilen liked him. He made her laugh. Perhaps that's why she listened to whatever the farrier said. If the questions were about ponies, she would have gotten them all right.

"And what do you believe?" The First continued, acknowledging the silence. Suilen pretended not to have heard. She knew the danger signs; she could hear the deep, nasal breathing, and the un-rhythmic snapping of her fingers - but then the foot began to tap.

"Well, if you ask me," Suilen said, looking from the foot to the face.

"I think, perhaps not all of it is mumbo-jumbo. Some of it might be, I mean my father's the king after all, so he can't be completely wrong."

Tap, tap, tap.

"I mean those parts that are really dumb sounding."

Tap, tap, tap.

"Take the costumes, for example..."

Tap, tap, tap.

"Surely some of the costumes aren't necessary?"

Tap, tap, tap.

"Well, I don't know, now do I?" Suilen finally said, getting cross. "I'm a princess, not a fairy godparent. You tell me."

The First smiled. Suilen had spirit, a good, fighting spirit, if she had been a boy she'd have already conquered the neighboring kingdoms. Without drawing any attention to herself The First stared at a spot about two centimeters above Suilen's nose before closing her eyes. It was time to take a deeper, more intense look at her - not at the skinny, freckle-faced tomboy that everyone knew, but at her aura. For the trained eye, it shone like a halo. Suilen's basic aura color was manjesta,⁷ like her father's had been at her age, only now her aura was muddled and foggy caused by anger and frustration. The First suddenly felt sorry for her. She knew she was a good child, at heart, just a little high spirited. The queen called it stubbornness and bad manners, but the truth was Suilen had a mind of her own and questioned everything.

Opening her eyes, as if she had only blinked she smiled again at Suilen. "The cook told me," she answered, meeting her look. "He heard it from the maid," she concluded, as if this was all the

7. Manjesta is one of the five colors that make up the aura of Buddha; it is similar to scarlet.

evidence necessary. "She'd apparently been listening outside the royal bed chamber the other night and heard them discussing it. The queen seemed quite keen, too."

"Keen?" Suilen replied, torn between curiosity and anger at the maid for having eavesdropped on her parents.

"Yes, keen. Eager. You know, excited about the idea. I reckon you'll be married within a year, probably to one of the local princes, too."

"One of the local princes?" Suilen echoed.

"Not a lot of choice, is there? I mean, there's young what's-his-name, who's always making those funny noises, and then of course there's young Harry, certainly not the brightest match in the box."

"He's already spoken for," Suilen said, interrupting her.

"Oh, by who?"

"Emily."

"The silly little girl with the ringlets?"

"She's actually quite nice," Suilen said, defending her new found friend.

"What about Prince Albert then, surely he's not taken?"

"No."

"Somewhat given in years, I must admit, but still a prince." The First sighed. "They just don't make princes like they used to. I blame it on all this modern thinking."

Suilen put down the hoof she had been cleaning and moved on to the next, without saying a word. She knew The First hadn't finished what she was going to say; The First would never make a reference to modern thinking and then stop. She was anything but a modern thinker.

Outside a late winter wind slammed the stable door closed. Spring was in the air, in the soil, and in the trees. Sap pumped through the branches bringing life. They bent with ease in the blustering wind; safe for another year.

Spring was also The First's favorite time of year. It was a time for planting new seeds, a time when old ideas looked new. Behind the tower where she lived was a small allotment, here she spent most of her free time, pulling up the weeds and cutting back the flowers. There was something very relaxing about digging in the dirt. Thoughtful she looked once more at Suilen, was it time? Why not? If they were all helping The Third get his young man to fulfill his destiny, it was her responsibility to make sure that Suilen also fulfilled hers...

"Spring," she said out loud. "People often refer to the younger years of live as a kind of Springtime. Did you know that?"

Suilen nodded her head, all old people went on about the Springtime of their life, it was rather boring.

"You could actually say you were in the Springtime of your life. Do you know what I like doing most in Spring?"

This time Suilen shook her head; tormenting young princesses probably, she thought.

"I like to plant seeds. Of course not all of them grow, but those that do, well you can imagine how much pleasure these bring."

Suilen gently patted her pony, as if *it* were old and senile, and rambling.

"If you'd been a boy of course, it'd be so much easier," The First continued as she handed Suilen one of the many brooms that hung on the stable wall. "You could have ridden away to find your own bride. In the past that's what princes did, all the time in fact. It was considered the correct thing to do. Quite a nuisance when it came to organizing parties," and pointed to an area of dirt that Suilen had missed. "Girls never get to do anything. They're not allowed. Don't have a mind of their own, you see."



Chapter Ten

The List

The candles in the long hallway flickered as princess Suilen hurried by, followed by the sound of her bare feet echoing down the empty corridors. Everyone else in the castle was asleep. She hadn't been able to. Her mind, like her feet; ran down a labyrinthine of passage ways towards a goal. A thought had become an idea. The idea had become a decision. And the decision was to tell her parents of her plan.

The royal bedchamber, (it moved in accordance with the seasons) was on the second floor of the southern wing. She hoped they would still be awake.

Suilen turned the last corner.

"Hello," The First said, startling her. "You're late. Shall we?"

"But how did you know?"

"Oh I've known many young princesses. I know when they are up to something. Come on then, let's get this behind us shall we?" and with that Suilen and The First knocked on the royal bedchamber door.



“Good evening Father,” Suilen said to the sleepy figure of the king as he opened the door. “I know it's late but during the day you are always so busy,” she said in explanation, before he had time to say a word. “Besides, it will only take a minute,” saying which, Suilen, followed by The First, stepped into the room. The king calcified. The First nodded politely in recognition and sat down in a nearby chair.

“Good evening,” the king submitted on automation, rearranging his attire.

“I've come to tell you of my idea, to solve everyone's problems,” Suilen continued busy rummaging through her pocket for something.

The king blinked on instinct, as the autopilot blood, took the wheel. He liked Suilen; she reminded him of himself when he had been young, he too had always been getting into trouble.

“Ok,” he said letting the two syllables resonate restoratively through his mind. “And what is this idea?”

The First shuffled noisily in her chair, objecting to the comfort. She would never own a chair like that, such comfort only made people lazy and such a chair made a person lazy and want to sit down all day.

“Well you know how you and mother want me to behave more like a lady, and attend the balls and royal galas, and how I keep getting things wrong and messing things up, and you know how tradition requires that the eldest child should marry first,” at which point The First, who had finally stopped scraping the floor with the chair legs, nodded in affirmation. “Well I've come up with an idea to do just that...”

The King stared first at Suilen and then at The First. He was missing the link; when had teaching his daughter to behave like a princess become a quest to find a husband? He couldn't remember telling her this?

Royal blood, breed with experience, raced to the rescue.

"And how, may I ask, do you intend to do this is?" he asked with a fixed gaze on The First, whose face remained as unchanged as the isograph of history.

"I plan to ride out and find him. I have written a list of all the things I will need," Suilen continued pulling out of her pocket the crumpled list she had been searching for. "I need you to sign it," she added and handed it to him with what she hoped was a winning smile.

Behind the heavy velvet curtains of the four poster bed the queen stirred. "Who is it?" she asked, with that slow, fighting back a yawn, speech.

"It's Suilen."

"Suilen? What does she want at this unearthly hour?"

The king pondered on the words, unearthly hour, for a moment, before answering.

"She wants to ride off and find herself a husband," he then said, puzzled by his own words.

"But he'll be asleep at this time of night?"

The king politely ignored this last remark and looked at the list and then at The First. It was indeed a very long list.

"She's written a list," He proffered in answer to her question.

"A list?"

"Yes my dear."

"Can't it wait until the morning?"

"Obviously not."

The queen's boney hand clasped the monocle that lay on the bedside

table.

"The First is also here," the king then added, whose presence was making him feel more and more uncomfortable.

The curtains parted and the queen, wrapped in her royal dressing gown, shuffled over to where they stood.

"Did you put her up to this?" the king hissed beneath his breath at The First, accepting the quill Suilen offered him.

The First bowed respectfully towards the queen.

"Ah, this must be the list?" The queen said taking the list out of his hands. "Have you read it my dear?" she then asked, turning it around and around like it was an object of curiosity.

Irate, the king looked at The First and then back towards Suilen, who tried another smile.

"No my dear, but I mean to, immediately. With your permission of course?" saying which he reprocessed the list and his authority. "Well Suilen, as you seem to have gone to such measures, I'll tell you what I will do," he said and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'll read the list first thing in the morning, and, if everything's fine... you may go," and with a flick of his fingers in the direction of the door, indicated that they should now also leave. "As I don't know about you, but I really am tired."

"Thank you father," Suilen said, and gave him a big hug and a kiss. "Goodnight mother," she added and kissed and hugged her too. Bewildered the queen turned towards the king who was already climbing back into bed.

"And?" she asked as he removed his night cap.

"And?" the king repeated. "Nothing my dear," he said pulling the covers up over his shoulders. "She's off to find a husband, what else is there to say?" and with that turned over and fell a sleep.



The following morning, dressed in a pastel-colored gown of yellow and pink, designed to compliment her pale skin, and with her usually unkempt hair skillfully pinned up, Suilen climbed into the waiting carriage; it was time to leave. Her parents, the king and queen, looking very surprised by her feminine appearance, waved goodbye with uncertainty.

To accompany her Suilen had chosen four servants, a chambermaid, a cook, and a very large and shaggy cat of no real lineage, which now sat curled up on her lap, purring loudly.

“Riding out to find our prince are we?” The First said, poking her head in through the carriage window. “Father agreed then did he?” Suilen ignored this remark but stroked the large furry ball on her lap which hissed at The First.

“I could make you a real fairy coach if you like?” The First then added pulling a face at the cat.

“No thanks, it's a three day drive; I don't fancy being stranded at midnight in the middle of nowhere, with just a pumpkin and some mice for company, although I imagine Thomas wouldn't mind.” referring to her feline companion with this last remark.

“You could take a couple of extra pumpkins with you,” The First suggested not allowing herself to be provoked. “I can put a magic timer on them, that way you'll be fine.”

“No thanks,” Suilen replied with a genuine laugh. “Although I must admit it's a nice idea.”

“Well at least take these then,” The First said catching the moment and handed Suilen a pair of glass slippers. “Take them as a gift, you'll

be thankful to me later. A touch of romance, always works." And with that, she literally disappeared.

'A touch of romance!' Suilen thought, staring at the shoes. This was not a touch but a good hard slap. There was no way she was going to use these. Still, so as not to break them, she carefully stashed them beneath her chair, out of harms way.

The coach rolled off, the crowd cheered, she could see Ambler and Warren waving furiously. She waved back at them, wondering for the first time if she was actually doing the right thing.



Chapter Eleven

The Young Prince

In all, there are seventeen different types of sayings, ranging from the common cliché, to those of practical truths and wisdom. Time may have literally changed them, like a tree with the seasons, but still, the tree remains a tree, irrefutable of its immediate appearance.



An apple fell. It landed on the roof of The Third's house with a thud, then, in a stuttering motion, half bounced, half rolled its way down the rooftop and over the gutter, landing but a few feet away from the base of the tree.

History had repeated itself.

Inside, sitting at a small wooden table, covered with scratches and slashes, (for it doubled as a cutting board,) was The Third, deaf to everything but his own thoughts. Slowly and with great precision, he placed the quill back in the inkpot; then, as if someone else was there, read aloud what he had written, the ink-stained piece of

parchment held at arms' length. It was a message, a very important message, one that he had waited almost five years to write. Five years of uncertainty. Five years of planning and scheming, five years for the young prince to grow tall and strong, as destiny intended, even one or two spots had faded. (His eyes remained brown, the news of which he was certain was going to disappoint The Second.) But most of all, it had been five years spent watching...



Standing on the balcony with his hands behind his back the young prince stared out across the fields of ripened corn. It was harvest time, the busiest time of the year. Small, brown-clad figures bobbed in and out of view. The late autumn sun, still with the heat of summer, beat down upon them.

It all looked very picturesque from where he stood.

“Good evening your highness,” The Third said, stepping out onto the balcony.

“Ah, it's you,” the young prince said, turning to greet him. “And for what do I owe this pleasure?”

The Third bowed in recognition.

The young prince offered him his hand. After receiving the obligatory kiss, he turned the hand around in slow in admiration. He had long, slender fingers and beautifully manicured fingernails. The palm, was as soft as his adolescent cheeks.

It was the hand of someone who had never done a hard day's work in his life. It was a royal hand.

'Surely she can't be a field hand,' the young prince thought, distracted,

his mind mixing the immediate with the past. *'I could never love a girl with hands like leather.'*

"The King informs me that you have not been attending your lessons recently," The Third said, standing up. "Is there something wrong?"

"Ah, well, yes, I have indeed, but I can assure you there is absolutely nothing wrong; in fact quite the opposite. I haven't felt so good in a long time. Besides, my marks have improved, surely?"

"Yes your highness, quite dramatically in fact; all straight A's. Naturally the king is very pleased, but at the same time, a little concerned."

'Maybe she's a seamstress. Seamstresses have very pretty little hands. She could do embroidery while I read...'

"Concerned?"

"Yes, your highness, this sudden improvement in your marks and your unforeseen restlessness, I am of course referring to your daily trips outside the castle."

The young prince graciously strolled back into his room and sat down.

"Oh, that," he then said, shrugging the idea off with a wave of his hand. "Care for some tea?"

The Third politely declined.

'Perhaps she works in the kitchen,' he thought, waving to the maid in indication that she should pour the tea. *'She might be a maid somewhere?'*

"The king has asked me to look into the matter," The Third continued tactfully, the moment the maid had finished.

'If only I could see her for real...'

"Look into the matter?" the young prince echoed, still watching the maid. He did not recognize her. Was this the same maid as yesterday? She had the same dress on, and her hair was tied up in a bun just like the one before, but was it the same maid? Damn! How was he

supposed to find her if they all looked alike?

"Yes my lord, as he worries so."

"Are you sure you would not like a cup of tea?" the young prince repeated, dragging his thoughts back to the matter at hand and pointing towards the chair opposite him. "I thought fairy godparents drank tea all the time?"

"No, not *all* the time, your majesty."

"Ah, Third, I stand corrected, seated actually, but please, do tell father that I am perfectly happy and well..."

'Perhaps I am asking the mirror the wrong kind of question? There must be a way to find her, otherwise why would the mirror show me?'

The Third nodded regally as they both watched in silence as the maid with a pair of silver thongs carefully added two small, crystal brown sugar cubes to his tea.

"Is there anything else I can do for you my lord?" she then asked when she had finished.

His answer came in the form of a royal wave.

With a curtsy she left the room, taking with her the mood.

"May I be so bold as to ask but one question?" The Third said with the closing of the door. Things were suddenly far more serious.

"Why, certainly," the young prince said, not having tuned into the change.

"There is nothing you wish to tell me, in private of course, just between you and me?"

The young prince shook his head.

"Or perhaps there is something unusual that you might like to share?"

Again the prince shook his head.

"Not even about your daily visits to the north wing?"

"Oh," the young prince said with full attention. The Third had told the prince all about the secret room and the secret door, even about

the key hidden behind the druid's mask, and had emphatically told him not to go there. He had even gone as far as to tell him which way not to go. He had to make sure, that when the young prince did disobey him, he didn't get lost.

"You're not going to tell Father, are you?" he said, putting down his teacup.

"Tell him, tell him what?"

The young prince hesitated before finally saying; "About her."

"Her?" The Third repeated, trying to sound nonchalant while his heart pounded.

Finally being able to tell someone, the prince poured his heart out to The Third, telling him all about his love for the mysterious girl in the mirror and how he had found her, concluding with the question; 'What am I to do?'

The Third knew of course he must not answer this question. This would be a direct intervention. He could only guide. He indicated that the prince should follow him out onto the balcony.

"Did you really think it would be that easy?" he began, with a sweeping gesture to cover the horizon.

"What do you mean?"

"...To find her. Surely you do not think that your true love would be here, among these very fields?"

"Then where?" The young prince implored, grasping The Third's indicative hand.

"Oh this, this I cannot tell you. You must listen to your heart, follow your intuition, let Fate guide you."

"Oh but how, please, please you must help me!" the young prince begged, falling to his knees.

The Third looked down at the beseeching young prince and closed his eyes. He could feel the magic tingling all around him. He could

hear the whispering of ancient kings warning him not to meddle. He could also hear the laughter of The First and Second, how they had joked in front of his mirror.

He had waited long enough for this moment.

“You must ride out and rescue her,” he said, taking out his wand.

“Yes, tonight, you must leave tonight!” And without waiting for a reply, amid a theatrical blue cloud of smoke and a loud bang, he left the young prince alone and kneeling on the balcony.



Chapter Twelve

Washer-women

The First parked her carriage and horses in the nearby forest before donning the appearance of an old washerwoman. They had agreed to meet at the castle of the 'Born Moon,' home of The Second. It was to be a secret meeting. No one was to know.

"I've come to collect the dirty washing," she said to the castle-gate guard, when asked what she wanted and where she thought she was going at such a late hour. His name was Kennard. He'd been a castle-gate guard all his life, like his father before him, and his father's father before him. He knew everyone who came and went within the castle. "Mrs. Tucker's youngest daughter Taci usually collects the washing," he replied, barring her way with his lance.

"Well, she's not feeling very well," The First said realizing that the idea of a washerwoman was not waterproof.

"Really now, I wonder what could be the matter with her?" Kennard continued waving to his colleague, indicating he should join him.

"Hey, Ben, did you see Taci today?" he asked, wearing a grin. Taci

and Ben were as good as married. Ben nodded his head.

"This old washerwoman here says she's ill, know anything about it?" and laughed at his own astuteness. Ben instead went from a rosy red to a pale white and then a sickly yellow color, nodding his head frantically.

"Are you ok?" Kennard asked, somewhat surprised by the sudden change of his friend's appearance. He looked again at the old washerwoman who hadn't moved.

He, too, suddenly felt quite ill.

"Anything wrong?" The First asked with an innocent smile, as she covered up the top end of her wand. It had been poking out of her back pocket.

Almost doubled over with a bout of coughing, Kennard spluttered a 'no', while waving her through.

"Nasty cough you got there," The First said as she passed. "Try chewing on a bit of the old slippery elm... that should do the trick." Kennard made no reply but continued to cough and wave her on while Ben pounded him on the back. Two minutes later The Third arrived, disguised as an old washerwoman.

"I've come to collect the dirty washing," he said, panting and out of breath. Strapped to his back was a large enamel washtub inside of which was a pumpkin and four mice. "And I'm a bit late."



It wasn't midnight. It might have been, it certainly was late, but he wasn't sure. From his room the young prince could see the town hall clock at night - when the sky was clear and the moon was full. Tonight was none of these things. He could just about make out the church

steeple in the dark. But it *might* have been midnight.

Hurrying down the stairs of the castle's secret passageway that led out into the forest the young prince did a mental check of all the things he would need. He had been surprised that the stable boy hadn't said anything when he had told him to tie up his trusty horse out in the forest, and how his father had simply asked him if he thought it was enough, when he had mentioned the three bags of gold.

Without a sound he opened the rusting and ancient iron-wrought gate that barred the secret passage from the outside world, and stepped out into the night. Then, with one final glance up at the dark silhouette of the castle untied his horse and carefully led it away... his tale had begun.



"Ah, Third!" The Second said courteously, as he entered the room.

"It's not like you to be late."

"No cats around are there?" He asked, unstrapping the large enamel tub.

"Really Third, you should know me better than that. Put it down over there," The Second then said and pointed to the corner of the room where The First's large, fake sack of washing lay.

"Oh, I see you've also come as a washerwoman," he said shaking The First's hand cheerily. "Fancy that."

"Yes, fancy." The First said who was beginning to think the whole idea of a secret meeting to be extremely childish.

"So tell us, what has happened since your message, Third?" The Second asked before The First's sarcasm could register.

“Well quite a lot actually,” The Third said very happy with himself, to think that his plan had actually worked. “In fact he leaves tonight,” he added and sat himself down. “He does not suspect a thing. I even oiled the hidden passageway gates!” The Third concluded, as if this were a stroke of genius. “Nothing can go wrong...”



Chapter Thirteen

Time

It was ten minutes to midnight and the clepsydra⁸ dripped. It was the only noise in the room. The Second had carefully filled the upper section of the 'Water Thief' with two hours of time. Srying was an art not a pastime. Staring deep into the crystal ball, The Three watched in silence as the young prince crept down the secret passageway and out through the well-oiled gate.

The air tingled with excitement.

8. A *clepsydra*, or water clock, is a device in which time is measured by the regulated flow of liquid into or out of, a vessel where the amount is then measured. In both Greek and Roman times a clepsydra was used in court for allocating periods of time to speakers. In important cases, when a person's life was at stake for example, it was filled. But, for more minor cases, it was only partially filled. If proceedings were interrupted for any reason, such as to examine documents, the hole in the clepsydra was stopped with wax until the speaker was able to resume his pleading. It was also known as a water thief.

One hour later and far less excited, The Second put the crystal ball back on the shelf, blew out the twelve standing candles, and plugged the clepsydra with a lump of hot wax, taken from one of the candles.

“Well, he's off, then,” she said, somewhat vexed that nothing else had happened, other than that the young prince had sneezed twice. “Yes,” The Third said, far more content with what he had seen. “That's my part done,” he concluded, as if the young prince had already found his true love.

“So it seems,” The First said, less convinced. Getting the prince to sneak off in search of his bride didn't make him a prince charming. From what she could see, what he'd packed for the journey made him more like Prince Idiot.

The Second stared at the empty tabletop - to think the whole meeting had been for a couple of sneezes! She had deliberately informed the king and queen not to disturb her that evening because of the meeting; they had naturally agreed, on the promise of a full report.

What would she tell them?

“An excellent idea though,” The First continued, ignoring The Second's mumbling. “I mean, letting him find the magic mirror like that, perfect.”

“Thank you,” The Third said mindful, knowing that The First had not finished.

The Second sighed. Why couldn't her ward have been destined to be a prince charming? It just seemed so unfair; after all, she was the most famous. Everything about her was presentation and image, unlike The First, whom she thought could certainly do with an image brush up. She tended to dress in faded colors making her blend when she went out, while she, she dressed and behaved exactly as people expected, even so far as to carry a large carpetbag around with her

filled with all the things she might need in an emergency... even a spare pumpkin. So why had she been made ward to such a useless prince?

His name was Prince Taren and he was twenty three years of age, He was the firstborn and had no sisters. He also had no spine, according to The Second. He never went hunting, never got drunk and had not even kissed any of the barons' daughters, let alone ravished one. There was a growing unrest in the kingdom. And, if that wasn't enough, he was also a vegetarian. Reindeer were not cute, sad-eyed animals, but delicious. In the eyes and taste buds of The Second, there was nothing better than a plate full of steaming-hot, boiled potatoes and a huge slice of venison. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a huge slice of venison.

Ignorant of her thoughts, The First, still not convinced that The Third *hadn't* taken any unnecessary risks to achieve his goal, probed deeper. Besides, he'd come to the meeting also dressed as a washerwoman...

"What I don't understand is how did you know, I mean really *know*, he'd ask the mirror, precisely this question?"

"How did I know?" The Third repeated slowly, as if he needed time to think, when the truth was he had expected this question, planned his answer; he knew The First too long and too well to be caught out so easily. "Why, what with him being a prince charming he was *bound* to ask; bound by fairytale lore and tradition. He really had no choice."

"What do you think?" The First asked, giving The Second a nudge, interrupting her mumbling. It had been a good answer, a very good answer. It had also been very clever of The Third to have used the mirror; it was the kind of thing she would have done.

The Second looked at The First for a moment as if focusing and then asked, "What would have happened if he hadn't?"

The Third struggled to contain a smile. They had been spying on him. It was too good a charade. Fortunately he had done the same; there were always signs.

"You mean if his destiny had been something else?" he asked innocently.

"Yes."

"Like an evil king you mean?"

"Yes."

"I was worried about that too, in the beginning, but cheating at school doesn't make a wicked king. And yes I was very relieved the first day he rode out of the castle grounds in search of *her*. If his destiny had been otherwise he most likely would have sneaked out at night looking for three old hags."

"Well done then," The Second said, getting up from the table. "You have been very thorough, haven't you? And now I suppose you are wondering what we have been up to?"

The Third nodded his head politely in answer.

"First?"

The First took the cue.

"I think it's better if you show him," she said with drama. Obediently, The Second went over to a nearby chest of draws and after tapping the bottom draw three times with her wand, opened it. A bright glow filled the room.

"I finished them only last night," she said in a chit-chat fashion as she handed what it was she had finished over to The First for inspection. "I needed the light of a waning moon."

The Third sat with his mouth open, staring at what The First had been given; three glass slippers. He'd never seen a real glass slipper before. They were made of magic in its purest form, and although a size seven, would fit a size ten, if that was the owner's shoe size.

Enjoying the moment, The First turned each slipper slowly around

in the moonlight; they sparkled with a shower of stars.

“Fine craftsmanship, Second,” she said as she handed them back to her. “I see you haven't lost your talent. But please, put them away now.”

The Second tapped the bottom draw three times once more with her wand.

“Do you really think they're necessary though?” she asked as she put the glass slippers carefully back in the draw. The Second knew all about glass slippers; she had made the very first pair. She knew the real story of Cinderella so she also knew the trouble they caused.⁹

“Yes I do,” The First answered with conviction, she too knew the truth of the castle of the 'Born Moon'; they all did. In silence The Second closed the draw. The room darkened. It was natural, but still it felt imposed. Unlike people and history, magic did not repeat itself; it learned from its mistakes.

9. The real story of the glass slipper can be read at the back of the book.



Chapter Fourteen

Destiny, Fate And Kismet

Being a prince charming is not like being a knight or a crusader. A prince charming doesn't really do much other than deliver the one, true kiss. Maybe he has to chop down a few rose bushes or climb up a rope of hair, he might even have to take a few singing lessons, but there is really not a lot of danger involved and certainly not much heroism. Fortunately, for all prince charmings, fate, destiny or kismet are always somewhere nearby to lend a helping hand; without them, your average prince charming would not survive.

It had been raining all night and half of the morning. The young prince was soaking wet, and beginning to think perhaps riding away like he had was not such a good idea after all. He had taken everything he had thought necessary; large bag of gold, huge sword, even an extra pair of socks, but he'd never imagined he might need an umbrella. He looked around for shelter. The moor stretched out

further than the eye could see. He hadn't passed a living soul or seen an outhouse or shed since leaving the forest. Feeling annoyed, he ordered the rain to stop.

Ten minutes later the sun came out.

"What a stroke of luck," he said cheerfully, and patted the neck of his horse. "The gods must surely be with us. I bet just beyond the horizon there's a small and cute tavern, the kind you read about, with a raging fire and a warm bed. Perhaps even a stable full of hay for you." With this, he spurred his horse on.



The sun shone through the windows of the west wing. The many crystal objects that hung or stood cast miniature rainbows upon the porcelain ballerinas and ladies carrying parasols. A large, slice of chocolate cake and a lukewarm cup of tea lay untouched on the table. In the middle of it all, sunk in a mountain of cushions, sat The Second. She was feeling on edge. Something was wrong despite what the rest of the world was trying to say. Everywhere she looked she could see the number three. The dredges in her tea spelt it, the ashes from the fire fell into three distinct piles and the morning dew hung in triplets. Even the fork she had wanted to use to eat the cake with, which she had deliberately made only with two layers, had three prongs.

Something was about to happen...

Six hours later, as the castle gates were closing it came, an ocean wave of magic, knocking her off her feet. Dropping her hot water bottle, she ran over to the nearest window to watch the magic pour over the palace. The crumbling, woodworm infested watch-posts were now

huge towering columns. The moss infested and ivy covered walls shone a luscious green, and right in the middle of the square, a fountain appeared, with four stone horses, who looked like they were trying not to be pulled under by their sunken carriage.¹⁰

Suilen's carriage came to a stop right beside it. She had the glass slippers with her; The Second could feel them. They were calling out to every brick and stone in the palace, trying to make them remember. They were searching for the fairytale...



The Second cursed, something she never did, on principal, although there was often enough reason. What did The First think she was doing letting the slippers come to the castle? Without wasting another minute, for this was not the time for pumpkin and mice, she grabbed her carpetbag and disappeared amid a cloud of smoke. A second later she was standing in front of the tower of The First. Her magic could not take her any further, being uninvited. She took a deep breath before opening the tower staircase door. It was going to be a long climb.

"Over here!" The First said, taking her by surprise. She had been working in her garden. The sun set behind her. "You should have said you were coming, I could have put the kettle on," The First continued, wiping the dirt off her hands. "Horseradish," she then said, following The Second's stare. "And a fine example too. Ever wondered why they're called horseradish? Certainly don't taste like horse." She put the root into the basket with the other vegetables.

10. Bassin d'Apollon - the Apollo Fountain, can be found in the gardens of Versailles in the northern region of France.

"You should have told me what you were going to use the slippers for!" The Second snapped, ignoring her question. She used horse-radish to clean her teeth.

"I thought I did." The First answered innocently. "Shall we?" and with that, and a quick flick of her wand, they rose up the side of the tower and landed safely on the rooftop outside her apartment door.

"You never said Suilen was going to bring them to the 'Born Moon'!"

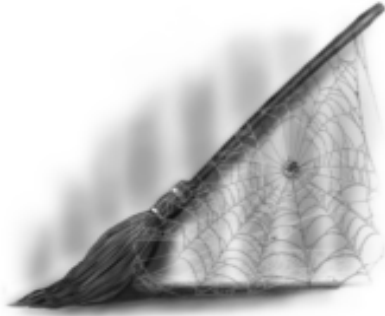
"Didn't I? Would that have made a difference?"

"Would it have made a difference? Of course it would; I'd never have made them to start with. You are deliberately trying to make history repeat itself."

"Tut tut tut, what a thing to say! You know as well as I do history never repeats itself; next you'll be saying an apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Go and sit down, I'll be with you in a minute. "

The Second sighed as The First opened the door and waved her in.

"The Third should be arriving soon. I sent him a note. We have a lot to talk about..."



Chapter Fifteen

On The Count Of Six

The Third arrived without even a trace of smoke. It was most unlike him. He was worried. It showed in his expression.

"I came as soon as I could," he said, out of breath. He'd been outside collecting wood. The nights were getting colder. "So what's up?"

The First was in the kitchen making sandwiches.

"I'll tell you what's up," The Second said, still rather annoyed. "The First sent Suilen to the castle of the 'Born Moon' with the slippers."

"And?"

"And! And what do you think is happening? The place is beginning to look like something from a picture book."

"But surely you must have known what she wanted the slippers for?"

The Third said, finding it hard to believe that she hadn't.

"The glass slippers are not the problem; I've made several pairs in my life time, they work a treat when it comes to romance, but it's not that that's the problem, but how she's using them. She's trying to create a Cinderella."

The First returned with a tray filled with sandwiches.

"Anyone hungry?" she said with a smile.

They ate the sandwiches in silence. They were egg. The Second was sure she could taste horseradish. When they had finished and the plates had been cleaned The First carefully placed her crystal ball in the middle of the table. It wasn't a particularly impressive model; she had brought it from an old fisherman who had used it to weight his nets. It was pocketed with chips and bumps. But that didn't matter to an experienced Scryer.

"Shall we?" she said, indicating the other two chairs. Without waiting for a reply she sat down and began to move her hands over its cold, jagged surface, in a double handed motion.

They sat down.

Whispering incantations in a circular-breathing manner, The First tried to invoke the spirit of the crystal... nothing happened.

"When you're ready," The Third politely said after a respectable pause. The First bit her bottom lip and cagily tapped the top with her index finger.

"Odd. It's never done this before. Although I must admit I haven't used it in ages. Perhaps it just needs a bit of time to warm up."

"I've got a broom like that," The Third added supportively. "I have to give it a good hard wallop before it'll start cleaning."

"Why don't you just buy a new one?" The Second asked, still annoyed; what had this to do with the glass slippers coming to her castle?

"Oh, I couldn't do that, I've had it for years. Besides, it takes forever to train a new broom. You know, show it where to clean and where to be careful," The Third replied, surprised by her remark. "One good thump is usually all that's needed. I tend to just bash it on the floor a couple of times, shakes the dust out too, and off it goes, whipping round the house like it should."

The First crossed her fingers behind her back and stared deep into

the glass ball. A distorted image of the tabletop stared back at her. "Perhaps we should do things the old way..." she said, finally admitting defeat and covered the crystal ball with a cloth.

"The old way?" The Third said.

"Yes, the old way. It was how we used to watch things, in the beginning, when there wasn't so many of us and people didn't mistake us for witches."

"But do you think that's wise?"

"Do you want the place crawling with dragons and giants again?"

The Third shook his head. He knew all about dragons and giants. He tended to be summoned to be the fairy godparent of little boys, who in time grew up to be young men, who in time rode away, completely inexperienced, to fight a dragon.

Most of them had never returned.

He shook his head.

"Well then, the old way it is." The First said, standing up. "Come on," she said, noticing their hesitation. "What are you waiting for?"

The Second and Third stood up.

"On the count of six," she said raising her wand. "Gently now, we only need a spark..."



Back in the valley of the 'Born Moon' magic rolled over the sleeping figures of the king and queen, the prince and all the staff. It then proceeded to spread out into the fields and nearby villages. A nightingale flew out of the forest and landed outside princess Suilen's window. It peeped a couple of notes as if to clean its voice and then sat down to wait for the sun to rise.



The ends touched. A single spark appeared. It grew into a flame. The flame wavered for a moment before erupting into a huge spinning tower of light. The ceiling disappeared, revealing a star filled sky. "Show me the Moira!" The First roared into the night. Her words were swallowed by the silence of the spinning light. The light spun from a pale blue to a deep purple as slowly, like a curtain rolling back the night sky parted to reveal the home of the gods, and there, sitting round life's chessboard sat Fate, Destiny and Kismet. They were moving figures around. One of them was of a young man on a horse with wings. In his hands he held a great big sword... he was approaching an inn, an inn that moments ago had not been there.



Chapter Sixteen

The Sheep's Head

Even from the outside the inn looked a pleasant house to familiar eyes. It had a front on the road, and two wings running back on land partly cut out of the lower slopes of the hill, so that at the rear the second-floor windows were level with the ground. There was a wide arch leading to a courtyard between the two wings, and on the left under the arch there was a large doorway. ... Above the arch there was a lamp, and beneath it swung a large signboard...¹¹

Painted, rather badly, on the signpost was a picture of a sheep in bed - it said everything anyone needed to know - room to let with lamb on the menu; the beds being the straw in the loft. Inside there were five round tables each with three wooden stools. A large open fire occupied the space in the middle. At the furthest end a long wooden counter stretched from one wall to the other, in front of which sat the

11. The description is taken from the fellowship of the ring, by J.R.R.Tolkien

inn's one and only customer. It was the young prince and he'd been there for quite sometime.

"You do look familiar, you know," The young prince said for the umpteenth time taking another sip from his glass. The drink was called Nin¹² and the barman had told him it was the secret brew of the gods, and they'd be angry if he didn't at least try it.

He'd tried it. This was his third glass.

"I think I'd remember such a fine fellow like yourself," the barman answered, wiping the bar-top clean.

"Well, I still say you remind me of someone," the young prince continued and emptied his glass. "Someone I know. Yes, someone I know."

"We're all related around these parts sir, if you don't mind me saying. Perhaps you've met my brother or one of my cousins, we all look very much a like."

The prince, although not having actually seen anyone since leaving the castle, nodded his head accordingly. It made sense.

"So what brings a fine young gent like yourself to these parts, and so late in the year?"

The young prince, feeling relaxed by both the heat of the fire and the drink, and glad to be able to tell anyone of his true love, told the barman the whole story of his adventure.

"Well, I never," said the barman, developing that chitchat manner barmen all around the world have, seeming interested while weighing up the chances of selling another drink. He took the risk. The young prince nodded his head. "You say the rain stopped after ten minutes?" and handed him another glass. "That must be Fate that, why it usually

12. Ninkasi is the ancient Sumerian goddess of beer. Around 1800 BC the Hymn to Ninkasi, was discovered. Written by a Sumerian poet and found on a clay tablet. It actually includes one of the most ancient recipes for brewing beer.

never stops raining here for days, when it starts." With this the barman slumped into the 'I could stand here all night long' position. He figured it wouldn't be long before the young man fell off his stool.

"So which way are you heading?"

The young prince pointed in the direction of the woodland and hills. There was even less cover from the weather there. Only a fool tried to cross the pass in the winter.

"Ah, and so late in the year, too," the barman continued. He was beginning to feel sorry for the young man. "Do you think it's wise, young sir?"

"The gods will guide me."

"That they will," the barman said, nodding sagely and pouring himself a drink. "I'd keep to the roads though if I was you. They may twist and turn a lot but they're safe. There's bandits in them there forests. They dress in green, that's how you can recognize them. Not that you would want to, mind you. So just you keep away."

The young prince thanked him for his advice and promised he would. He then emptied his glass and wished him goodnight. If he wanted an early start he would have to go to bed early, too.

Forty minutes later there came a knock on the back door. Checking to see that the young prince was fast asleep, the barman opened it and let three very rough looking gentlemen in; they were not dressed in green but from their profession they should have been.

"You got my message, then?" the barman whispered, stating the obvious.

"Yep, you want us to do it now?"

"No, later. Not here, somewhere in the woods. But make sure you tell me afterwards, where exactly."

"Right you are. I know just the place."

“Good. But I don’t want you hurting him, is that understood?”

“Well, we’ll have to a little sir, if we’re to knock him out, it’s not as if we can do magic.”

“Yes of course, but I thought with all the experience you have...I mean you must know where to hit someone where it matters.”

“Oh that, yes we do that a lot sir, don’t we lads?” The speaker’s other two friends chuckled their agreement.

“Good, then that’s that sorted then. And remember precision is what’s called for.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that sir, we’ll be very precise.”



Chapter Seventeen

Nightingale

Time is often referred to as water flowing under a bridge, but where is that bridge, and just how big is it? For Suilen, life in the castle of the 'Born Moon' was a mountain stream racing down towards the valley... and if that wasn't enough, it had been raining all night.



Suilen stared at the ceiling – a huge mural of roses - it was very impressive. At the same time, she noted the sound of a bird singing. She looked over to the window where a small, plain brown bird, with a reddish tail, sat. It was a nightingale. Because of her skills in falconry, she had a good education in ornithology, so she knew this was very

unusual. The bird, though, didn't seem to think so and happily chirped away.

Yawning, she checked the rest of the room - dressing table, velvet curtains, open fireplace – it was all very grand and romantic. Nothing seemed to be out of place or unintentional – carved, inlaid, or cast, with a rose motif.

She was impressed.

She pulled twice on the servant bell rope that hung beside the bed, the cotton sashes made to look like thorns.

A few minutes later a maid arrived, carrying a silver tray laden with tea and toast, and a tiny pot of black elderberry jam; the maid's uniform was an exclamation mark of Laura Ashley.

The nightingale flew off.

"Where's Amelia my maid?" she asked as the maid put the tray down beside the bed.

"She's down in the basement ma'am, sorting out your clothes," and curtsied. "Shall I get her?" she then asked, hesitantly turning towards the door.

Suilen sat up in bed.

"Oh no, it won't be necessary," and waved one hand to indicate that she should stay.

Suilen looked up at the ceiling again. There was something odd about the painting, it looked right, proportioned, depth, even the color scheme ... yet something was wrong.

"So what's your name?" Suilen finally asked, aware that she was being watched.

"Rhodopis, miss, although everyone calls me Dorothy."

"Well Rhodopis, it's very nice to meet you," Suilen replied, to the fixed, smiling face of the maid. It almost looked glued on. "I see someone's being busy doing repair work..."

The maid looked puzzled.
“The ceiling, it’s freshly painted?”



The Second appeared back in her room just as the sun rose. She could feel the magic of the slippers like a sticky bun, a bun that was going to get even stickier in the heat of the coming day.

They had talked all night.

There had been a lot to organize.

The First had definitely thought it through. The plan was simple; they were going to make three happy endings, one for each of their wards. To do this, however, required a little bit more than gentle persuasion. They were going to have to deliberately change the magic of the young prince. For this they needed not only the glass slippers but six months’ extra time... and the only way they were going to get that would be by performing the spell of the sleeping beauty.

“Of course if you can’t do it,” The First had said, seeing The Second hesitate when she asked her, “I could always ask a few of the lesser godparents to help. The Fifth perhaps, she seems quite keen.”

Their eyes met and locked. This was not a question about help, or not being able to do it. This was not even about getting involved. This was an open challenge to the gods; an offer to play life chess wearing a blindfold.

“Keen? You insult me,” The Second said, rolling back her shirt sleeves but not breaking the stare. “This is not about keen, have you any idea what might happen if the spell is not done properly? We’re not talking *Bib-biddy Bob-biddy Boo* here’s your carriage; what you’re

asking me to do is time outside of time¹³ magic.”

The First did not waver. The stare intensified.

“Is that a no then?” she flustered.

The Second cracked her knuckles.

“The gods will notice, and it won’t be dice that’s getting rolled.”

“Ah, so you can do it then?”

“It’s not a question of if I can do it; it’s a question of if I should?”

“Ah, so you think its okay that the gods just move everyone around as they see fit? Is that what you’re saying? You think we should just sit back to see what happens?”

“Well, they are the gods. That’s what gods do.”

The First turned her attention to The Third who was devoting his time to counting the cracks in the floor.

“Third, what do you think?”

The Third looked up with a worried expression. Somehow he knew he was going to again be the buffer in their argument. He never asked to be. He certainly didn’t want to be. He very rarely knew he was until it was too late.

This was one of those too late situations.

“Well, actually I quite like the idea,” he said, twiddling his wand nervously. “Everyone finds true love, gets married, happy ending. This is what we do.”

The room buzzed with magic.

The Second broke off her gaze. She hadn’t lost, she was accepting the challenge. It was more than a challenge; it had taken three fairy godparents to cast the last spell of the sleeping castle. They had also

13. Saint Augustine of Hippo (November 354 - August 430), wrote that time exists only within the created universe. God exists outside of time; for God there is no past or future, only the eternal present. This also applies to numbers and the relationships among them. They exist outside of time, and so are in the sense eternal.

had sixteen years to prepare. She had less than a month.

"I hope you know what you're doing," she finally said, banking on a positive answer. "It had better work."

A smile crept slowly over the face of The First. Yes, she had thought it out, and yes, it had better work, because if it didn't, it wasn't going to be the king in check mate.

"We all agree, then?" The Third asked, nodding his own agreement.

"Personally I think it's going to be lots of fun. I've always wanted to be a bar man. Even if it is only for one night..."



Chapter Eighteen

Romance

TPrince Taren was the only son of a growing line of only sons. There was no room for more than one heir, the kingdom was far too small to be divided. He was twenty three years of age and first and last in line to the throne. He had no sisters, which meant it was important he got married. When Suilen's letter of introduction arrived, two days before she did, his parents were both delighted but cautious. Scouts were sent out to gather information about the valley of Avenant. When they returned with reports of grandeur and money, the king actually kissed the scout; he could not believe his luck...

So it was that Suilen's arrival was greeted with great expectations. She also came with the glass slippers, stashed carefully underneath her chair.

Their magic quickly covered everything.

Cinderella had returned.



No one questioned Prince Taren's immediate adoration for Princess Suilen. For him the hours passed like minutes, and the days blurred into weeks. It was the fairytale romance. Everywhere they went they were met with what Suilen now thought of as the Dorothy smile. But at night, when everyone else had gone to bed, and no one was around, the magic faded and the cracks returned. The polished floors became once more dirty and squeaky, the rooms, musty and in need of airing. Suilen felt as stripped of life as the castle was of its façade. The silence and emptiness that covered everything was like a premonition of her future. She was building her own golden cage. Of course she told herself she was happy, as everything was working out exactly as she'd planned; right down to Prince Taren's undying love for her, only it all had been too easy. The idea of finding Prince-Made-To-Measure had, on paper drawn up pretty well, but in reality was not at all 3-D. There were just too many small things, things that in the beginning had perhaps been inconvenient, even irritating, were now downright annoying. Sitting there listening to him talk about their future, it screamed of high towers and long hair. Heroes and wandering princes didn't exist anymore; Suilen was the living proof of this. What was missing was precisely the thing she did not believe in – love.

She found herself wanting to fall in love; to feel heartache, to chat with other princesses, while wringing her hands in desperation and fear of being requited. She even wanted to sit pathetically at her bedroom window waiting for him, whoever 'he' was. Silly perhaps, but it was a 'silly' she didn't have. What she had was Prince Taren, and no matter which way she looked at it, or how often she told herself that he was

perfect, he just wasn't *him*. Of course she had no idea who *he* was, or what *he* actually looked like, maybe *he* didn't even exist, but there was one thing she was certain of, and that was *he* was not Prince Taren.



The living room was full. Where there was a space there was a fairy godparent. The news of The Three's secret meetings had spread like a cold in a classroom of kids. It had been more than a hundred years since the last Cinderella, and who knew when the next one would be? Rumor, a very powerful sort of magic, claimed she was going to be the last. This made it far too important not to be a part of. They had thus all invited themselves.

The meeting was naturally in the castle of the 'Born Moon', where it was all happening. For any magic-sensitive person simply being there was like taking a hot bath after a very long day. They *oohed* and *aahed* at everything they saw. Even The Second, who had made the shoes, swaggered as she was complimented time and time again on their effect. In the godparent circle it was a well known fact that the strength of the magic was in direct relationship to the craft used to create its source.

"Please, will everyone calm down," The Third said as the fairy godparents' chitchat grew to impatience. He had been unofficially nominated spokesman for the evening. "The mirror will be activated shortly."

At this point, The Second ceremoniously stood up and walked over to the mirror.

The Third cleared his throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I present The Second."

The crowd went quiet.

"First of all it's nice to see everyone here, even if none of you were invited," The Second said and smiled at them sardonically. "I probably would have done the same, if I'd been in your shoes..." and deliberately looked at their feet. This comment confused a few of the lesser godparents as everyone had left their shoes in the hallway. One even raised her hand to comment on this.

"I feel there is no need to remind anyone of the fact that being a guardian to someone, no matter how important, or special, they may seem at the time... is an exclusive right. Decisions are made alone. Any kind of help, interference, or even a suggestion, is not only unwelcome but could be harmful, if not dangerous, for their future. Therefore, before we start, I must insist that you all kindly refrain from even thinking how you might be of a service."

The comment was followed by a short outburst of disappointment and indignation, but eventually everyone agreed. They had all come a long way to be there that night to see the new Cinderella, first hand. The Second turned to face the mirror. With a few whispered words, barely audible, she called upon its spirit. The air rang like a tuning fork.

'This was magic,' she thought as a grey, nodular face appeared. 'This was what being a fairy godmother was all about!'

"Show me the princess Suilen!"



Down in the stables the coach was loaded and the horses harnessed; all that was needed was for Suilen to get in. She had had enough.

She felt like she was living in a picture book. Everywhere she went, everyone she met, felt like a narration, a story she was not a part of. She was the bookmark separating the pages. She hadn't come to the castle to find true love's kiss, but to meet Prince Made-To-Measure. Perhaps it was this that made her immune to the magic. Perhaps it was because she knew what a real functioning bastion looked like; it certainly didn't have roses painted on the ceiling. Ivy covered the walls to keep the rising damp down, not because it looked good. The cobbled courtyard was sunken in places from the weight of the carts, and moss grew everywhere no one stood. Most of all, the farm hand wore rags because they couldn't afford anything else, not because someone had drawn them like that in a book once.

The place made her dizzy.

She sighed with relief as she climbed into the carriage. It was late, it was dark - no one would notice her leaving.



"Is she supposed to do that?" one of the many fairy godparents said as the coach rolled out through the city gates. "I don't remember Cinderella sneaking off!"

"Sssh. Otherwise we'll miss what she's saying," another fairy godparent said, munching away on some popcorn.

The room went silent again as all eyes turned back to the mirror and the image of Suilen, who now leaned out of the carriage window talking to someone. It was none other than Prince Taren.



"Where are you going my dear?" he asked, out of breath and wrapping his night gown around him. It was very cold. "The maid told me you have packed your things?"

"I'm going home. My poor mother misses me dreadfully," Suilen replied and looked about in surprise as if she had heard twenty people gasp.

Prince Taren obviously had heard nothing.

"But how long will you be gone?"

"I don't know, but if I don't leave now the pass will be closed and then I won't get home till after winter."

"All winter? You mean you'll be gone all winter?" Prince Taren gasped, forgetting how cold it was. "May I at least come and visit you then, in the Spring?"

"Visit?" Suilen repeated, taken by surprise; she hadn't thought of this.

"Yes, I could get to meet your father. Ask him for permission?"

"Ask! Oh no, no, no you can't do that. No, no, no, you shouldn't talk to my father. They keep me locked up. Yes, that's it. You'd have to rescue me from the tower."

What a whopping great lie!

Ssh! She'll hear you.

Her mother doesn't miss her!

Second, can you tell her to be quiet...?

Again Suilen looked around, expecting to see a crowd of arguing women.

"Rescue you?"

"Yes, rescue me!" Suilen said, forcing tears. "It's dreadful, I spend most of my days locked up in a lonely tower with a mean old hag, who pretends to be my teacher," she said in hurried explanation.

It's no wonder they called you in, First, the young lady is such a liar. I'm not saying that Royalty doesn't sometimes throw a bad egg, but she's a

baker's dozen.

Sssh, will you! I can't hear what she's saying.

Its all lies anyway.

Who's the old hag she's talking about?

"Please Taren, promise me you will rescue me!" She cried, well almost screamed actually, as she tried to drown out the sound of the voices. Prince Taren, thinking she was shouting because she was distraught, knelt down in the mud beside the carriage, pounded his chest with one hand and swore by his life to do just that.

Look he's proposing!

She aint no Cinderella... she's not even listening!

"Oh Taren, you are so brave," Suilen continued, looking at the small sand clock she had taken with her, wondering how long this was all going to take; it was getting very late.

"Oh my dearest, for you the word danger does not exist. But please leave me a trifle to cherish during the winter months, your glove perhaps?"

It was then that Suilen remembered the words of The First - 'you'll be thankful to me later,' and grinned. Fortunately it was dark and Taren was not paying any attention.

"Take this, bring it back to me and I will marry you," Suilen said with her best pout and handed one of the glass slippers over to him. She could have sworn she heard a round of applause.

Did you see that! She's given him the slipper. What a fox!

You mean a minx, I think.

I know what I mean, and, believe me, fox is perfect...

Is anyone going to tell me who the old hag is?

Suilen, having handed the slipper to Taren, took a lace handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her eyes even drier, while at the same time waving the driver on. She sat back comfortably in her seat, safe

in the knowledge that Prince Taren would never come looking for her; he just wasn't that kind of prince.

Half an hour later, Prince Taren still stood holding the glass slipper, staring down the empty road...the coach had gone.



Chapter Nineteen

Chocolate

The following evening, still holding the glass slipper, Prince Taren made his way to the west wing. He was a slow thinker, just like his father. It was a good quality in a king. Rash decisions caused wars. He knew what he had to do. Princess Suilen was gone, and, like a true fairytale princess, she had left him with a glass slipper. There was only one person in the castle who would know what he should do next... the royal fairy godparent. Nervously, he knocked on her door.

“Come in,” The Second called. She had been expecting him. “Is there something the matter?” she added, seeing his nervous expression. He was pretty useless as a prince, she knew, but he was a good boy, so it made her sad to see him this way.

Prince Taren walked over to a nearby chair.

"Sit down. Make yourself comfortable. I'll be with you in a minute. I just have to put Michael back; he's been having his lessons." The Second added as she went over to what must have been the largest mouse cage Prince Taren had ever seen. It was a huge twisting glass pipe system that stretched all the way up to the ceiling. Removing a small circular cap at about waist height, she put Michael, a small black and white mouse, back inside.

"The blessed thing just keeps on growing," the Second continued without turning around. "It was no bigger than a shoe box when I started... a bit like a real city I suppose."

Prince Taren didn't say a word but stared fascinated at a small speckled mouse that looked like it was scrubbing one of the pipes clean. There was a painted picture at one end of the tube indicating that the floor was wet. It even wore a small apron.

"Oh, that?" The Second said, following his gaze. "They take it in turns. There is no class distinction in my tunnel system. No king mouse here. If there was there would have to be a fairy godparent, wouldn't there?" The Second laughed at her own humor. "That's Susie, hard working little thing. But they all are, actually. Look how clean the whole system is. She'll be having babies next month," The Second continued and indicated that they sit back down.

"Do they all have names?" Prince Taren asked, obediently following her.

"Certainly, doesn't everything?"

"It's just that there are so many."

"Yes, they do seem to breed rather fast. But that's not what you've come about, is it?" she replied and sat down beside him. Prince Taren suddenly wished he was back staring at the mouse cage.

"She's left, hasn't she?" The Second said matter of fact. Prince Taren

nodded his head anxiously. "But before she left she gave you something?"

Again Prince Taren nodded his head.

"And you thought I would know what to do with it?"

"Yes!" he finally said, sounding very relieved, as if she had already solved his problem.

"Oh, don't give it to me!" The Second said and laughed, as Prince Taren offered her the glass slipper. "It won't fit my foot!"

"I didn't mean that," he replied, embarrassed and reddened.

"Neither did I," The Second said and laughed again. "Everyone knows princes marry princesses or at least beautiful servant girls. Not old fairies like me!" This time both of them laughed. Taren carefully put the slipper on the table.

"So what do you suggest I do, then?" he said when the laughter had stopped.

"Do?" The Second repeated, as if she didn't understand the question.

"Nothing of course, unless, that is, you plan to ride off and find her?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Prince Taren answered, as he knew where she lived.

"Throw it away, then."

"Throw it away?"

"Yes, throw it away, somewhere safe though as we don't want anyone cutting themselves on it, now do we? Glass can give you a very nasty cut," The Second said. "Throw it down the well, that's a good place, good and deep. Such things have a nasty habit of turning up whenever they wish, and we don't want that either."

"But we're engaged," he stuttered.

"What? You mean you asked that scrawny looking thing with the short brown hair to marry you?" The Second said and breathed in deeply, allowing her already ample bosom to swell even more.

"No, not quite, she kind of told me actually."

"Told you? And what did you say?"

"I asked her for her glove."

"And she gave you the slipper?"

"Yes."

"Well count your blessings she's gone then. You ask for one thing and she gives you another, that's not a good sign. I know these things. She probably even lied about where she lives. She'll have you running around the countryside looking for her next, mark my words. And as for that awful moggie of hers, it tried to eat one of my mice!"

"Her name is Princess Suilen, and that is what cats do," Prince Taren heard himself say and was shocked at his own resolve. "Besides, I love her."

The room black-starred the noise, leaving the sound of Prince Taren swallowing to fill the emptiness. Behind her blank expression The Second smiled; her young ward had turn into a man, right in front of her eyes. She no longer doubted he would behave like a true prince, when the time came. She snapped her fingers and a very large plate piled high with all different shapes and shades of chocolate appeared out of nowhere.

"Care for some chocolate?" she asked, offering the tray to him. "It's good for the nerves you know. Sit down, stay a while, we have a lot to discuss."



Chapter Twenty

Another Three

“Okay, remember what the wizard said?” The elder of the three thieves whispered as they watched the young prince make his way down towards the stream.

“I feel silly in these tights,” Mickey, the henchman of the band mumbled, twisting his already twisted face into greater heights of grotesqueness. His main job was to look and be mean. “If anyone saw me in them, I’d be the laughingstock round our way.”

They were dressed in brown and green and huddled behind a very large and very broad white pine.

“It’s what the wizard man wanted. And you don’t want to be upsetting a wizard now do ya?” The elder answered, also feeling silly in the tights. “He repeatedly said we *have* to wear them; otherwise the magic won’t work.”

“What about the shoes?”

“Same with the shoes.”

"I feel like a clown in them. I couldn't kick anyone in the family planners with these on."

"You're not supposed to. He's not up for the 'give you something to remember us by' business. He's to forget *everything*."

"Well I still feel... stupid."

The leader of the three didn't say anything for a moment, unsure how to answer. He guessed Mickey had just made a good guess.

"Listen now; this is what I want you to do..."

They shuffled closer together.



The road made its way up the mountain side in a gradual, winding fashion. It was in no hurry to go anywhere. Quite the opposite, it seemed determined to show its travelers as much of its range as possible, and it really was a splendid view. By midday it rolled out onto one of the few mountain plateaus. A small wooden hut that had been built there a long time ago now stood to ruin. Three inconspicuous dirt tracks met beside it, and then parted without the least sign of confusion as to where each of them was going. The young prince stopped his horse and looked down each pathway, not confused, simply curious.

Down below the valley was a patchwork of fields.

Up above the sun shone bright in the cloudless sky.

Birds sang. Well, actually, one bird sang, a small and rather persistent blue colored bird¹⁴ that had followed the young prince ever since leaving the 'Sheep's Head'.

14. This is a reference to the blue bird in the Walt Disney film, Song Of The South.

Feeling rather hungry, tired and stiff, but confident that he would reach the pass before night fall the young prince decided he would make a break. Not too far away, close to the plateau's edge, a cluster of evergreens grew, sheltering the section from the worst of the wind and rain. It looked greener than the rest. A small wooden bridge spanned the stream at this point. It looked the perfect place to stop and rest.

Dismounting, he led the horse down towards the bridge. It felt good to feel the weight on his legs again. Taking off his boots and socks the young prince sat down and let his feet hang ever so lightly in the water. At first it stung and bit his swollen feet but soon they were numb and painless. Closing his eyes, he leaned back to enjoy the late October sun. It felt good. His mind drifted to his family and friends and what he imagined they must be thinking right now. Even the strange blue bird had finally stopped singing. He smiled. He'd never expected an adventure could be so much fun, and laughed at himself for not having done something like this earlier.



"The moment he sits down, okay?"

They nodded their heads in agreement.

"You grab his arms and turn him towards me. But remember he's got to look at this," the leader of the three said and held up a silver box between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.¹⁵

15. The description is taken from James Braid's (June 1795 – March 1860) Original Eye-Fixation Hypnotic Induction Method.

...Take any bright object (I generally use my lancet case) between the thumb and fore and middle fingers of the left hand; hold it from about eight to fifteen inches from the eyes, at such position above the forehead ...

Inside were three small knives.

"What is it?" the twist¹⁶ of the group said, wrapping a thick leather belt around his hand.

"No idea. The wizard guy gave it to me. Told me, he's got to look at it first. It's very important."

"It looks pretty expensive, can we keep it after?"

"Just make sure you turn his head towards me okay?"

"Then I hit him?"

"Yeah, but not too hard. Just like I showed you. We don't want to smash his head in. He's no good to us dead. The wizard wants him unconscious."



Half an hour later, up by the old shed where the three roads met, the world was a completely different place. Clouds had rolled in and a bitter wind drove the dust in small eddies in and around the shed. In the small clearing beside the bridge the young prince lay stripped of all his valuables and clothes in a bleeding heap beside the stream. Not too far away but gaining, the three thieves ran as fast as they could, downhill. They were not paying any attention to the countryside.

"Do you think I hit him too hard?" Mickey the henchman said, leaping over a fallen tree. "I mean, he fell like a stuffed doll."

16. The idea for the name 'The Twist' is taken from the character Oliver Twist who was taken along with Bill Gates to the house of Chertsey.

...The aperture was so small, that the inmates had probably not thought it worth while to defend it more securely; but it was large enough to admit a boy of Oliver's size...

“Well, he was a prince. Everyone knows princes are made out of porcelain,” the Twist said, tight in the rear, letting Mickey clear the way.

“Was? You mean is, don’t you?” the leader said, who was definitely leading the way.

“Yeah right, is. So why are we running?”

The oldest of the three thieves pulled out of his pocket the shiny lancet given to him by the wizard.

“Oh,” the Twist said as comprehension dawned.

“Yeah, it might have been a bit difficult for him to have seen it, what with it being in my pocket the whole time.”

Back up the mountain it started to snow.



Chapter Twenty One

Pyrzqxgl

With both hands holding tightly to the side grips of the Phaeton, The Second raced along the same mountain lane the young prince had set out on that morning. The Phaeton, made from an 'Autumn Gold' pumpkin and two pet mice, bounced and slid around another bend.

"I'm warning you!" she shouted in a threatening manner at the two white mice (who were really having a lot of fun being horses). "I'll turn you back into mice again if you don't slow down this instant!"

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, in the warmth and security of the castle. It had been such a wonderful meeting, too. Every fairy godparent had been there, marveling at her craftsmanship and the beauty of the glass slippers. Oh, and the look on their faces when

The First had told them that she, The Second, was going to perform the 'time outside time' spell! Of course she had agreed when The First had then revealed where and when it was going to be performed. What else could she have done, sitting there, in the middle of all those watching eyes? This was not a time to be indecisive.

Now though, with the back end of the Phaeton more over the cliff edge than on, she was having second thoughts and this was not a good time to be having second thoughts.

The Phaeton once more righted itself.

"Are you listening to me?"

The mice flared their nostrils and raced on. Time, on the other hand, did that awful trick of slowing down to make sure none of the forthcoming details would be lost. For there, around the next bend, traveling in the opposite direction, was the carriage of princess Suilen. Its horses were real. The carriage, similar to a berline, was also very real. From where the speeding Second sat she could see the driver, chatting to the footman as the two white Percheron horses plodded safe and solid down the middle of the road.



Suilen stared out of the carriage window, she was not happy with what she had done. She knew that telling lies and being deceitful was wrong, but there had been no other solution. She hadn't broken prince Taren's heart, no one fell in love that quick; she was sure of it, she told herself this repeatedly. She tried not to think about it, anyway there were more important things to think about, like what would she tell her parents? They certainly must have heard about her

'intentions' by now.

The air outside was a dry cold, and the sky hung heavy with clouds. It was then that she noticed the Erica Carnea, growing along side of the road. She recognized it immediately as The First grew it in her garden at the back of the tower. She had shown it to her, given her a whole lecture about its hardiness and cultivation. It was known as the love plant. Suddenly she had a real problem - what was she going to tell The First!



The Phaeton splattered.

The carriage of Princess Suilen drew to a stop, covered in pumpkin. Suilen stepped down, followed closely by her maid.

"Are you alright, your Highness?" Amelia asked, brushing dust off her dress.

"Yes, thank you," Suilen said, indicating that she was more than clean.

"Will someone please explain to me what is going on?"

The Second, picking herself up, flicked a large chunk of pumpkin off her shoulder.

They stared at each other in recognition.

"Oh, it's you," Suilen said, like someone caught up an apple tree stealing apples. She had seen her at the castle of the Born Moon, everyday at dinner. She had never spoken to anyone and no one had ever spoken to her. She simply sat there at the far end of the dining table eating and, to her surprise, feeding mice, which apparently she kept in her pocket. No one else seemed to have noticed.

"Yes I'm fine, thank you for asking," The Second replied as sticky as the piece of pumpkin she removed from her hair.

"Oh, sorry, yes but look, this must be yours," Suilen added with a sigh of relief, on spying the long silver rod with a big silver star on the end. She quickly handed it to her. "Perhaps you could fix it with this?"

"Fix it? What do you think I am, some kind of magician?" upon which The Second, with a few flustered words and a quick wave of the wand was as clean and tidy as when she had left. She even had a new bonnet. "I can't fix something that's broken. Now close your mouth child, we have things to do." And with that she walked over to a small wooden bench that had a moment ago not been there. "Come along dear. It's already late."

Sitting down beside her, Suilen held out her hand for her to examine. She knew all about palm reading; her friend Emily had shown her. There was the life line, the heart line and even lines which told you how many babies you would have. It was all nonsense of course, but good fun. She waited expectantly.

"You've got strong hands I see," The Second said after five minutes of silent staring. "Hard skin too, so you're not work-shy, that's good."

"I have a horse," Suilen said in explanation.

"Milking a cow will be no problem then."

Suilen stared at The Second and then at her hands. She'd never been near a cow.

"Oh don't let that worry you," The Second said, as if she'd just read her thoughts. "And I suppose now you want me to tell you your future?"

Suilen looked at her hopefully. The Second laughed.

"Where would the fun in life be if you knew? Nonsense child, the only thing you need to know right now is that I am very angry with you," The Second then said, and gently patted Suilen's hand reassuringly. She wasn't very good at 'angry'. Oh, she got angry and

sometimes very angry, too, but that was with herself for being foolish, not at anyone else. People were naturally foolish; it was what made them human.

"You can travel with us if you like?" Suilen quickly replied thinking it was because of the pumpkin. "It wouldn't be a problem, there's plenty of room inside."

"I'm not angry with you about the Phaeton," The Second continued, still patting her hand. "Accidents happen. I'm not even angry with you about the fact that you came to the castle with wrong intentions, although I should be. I think I'm more disappointed with that. And as for you running off like you did leaving poor Prince Taren, broken-hearted, disgraceful. It's like this mess here, look at your carriage, unscathed like your heart, while mine is in pieces. I have a magic wand to fix things, Prince Taren doesn't. Even for this I am not angry, as fortunately, he *will* get over it. No, the reason why I am angry with you is for daring to use a glass slipper for your fraudulence. A glass slipper is the symbol for love and romance, not a tool for commercial gain. Do you know how many children grow up dreaming of glass slippers? Of course you don't; how could you? You think all those stories you've read about magical carriages that move without horses and talking boxes that let people communicate are just someone's fantasy. Well they're not, and I am not going to let you destroy the belief of those children, with your heartlessness. It's time you were taught a lesson."

"A lesson?" Suilen repeated, finding it hard to keep up.

"Yes, young lady, a lesson; a lesson in love. It is obviously something you know nothing about. *And*, I think it is also time for you to see just what a real fairy godparent can do, and I am not talking about palmistry or making fancy carriages out of pumpkins."

Without waiting for Suilen to reply, The Second stood up and drew a

circle in the air with her wand. It hung for a moment like a golden smoke ring, before slowly spreading outwards.

"A little bit of magic here," she heard The Second say, but it sounded distant, like at the end of a tunnel. "A touch more romance there..." Suilen yawned.

"Oh yes, silly me, I nearly forgot. Now what was the magic word; Bib-biddy Bob-biddy... No that's not it. Oh yes Pyrzqxl!"¹⁷
And that was the last thing Suilen remembered.

17. Pyrzqxl is the magic word used by Bini Aru in the 'Magic Of OZ' the thirteenth book of Oz by L. Frank Baum.

... it was the simplest thing in the world to transform anyone into beast, bird or fish, or anything else, and back again, once you know how to pronounce the mystical word...



Chapter Twenty Two

Time

The First and The Third had been waiting, watching, prepared. It wasn't like turning up on time for the bus or train; this was being 'with' time. They appeared exactly as the spell was cast. Standing at the side of the road they looked in admiration as the world around them froze.

The Second busied herself with adding the final touches.

"I must say Second, well done!" The Third congratulated as he walked around the coach and horses in admiration. The footman and coach driver leant against the side of the carriage sharing a cup of tea. The hot liquid still poured between the cup and flask, while Amelia the maid was in the act of shaking a blanket out of the window.

"And as for riding time like that, marvelous! That is what I call fast thinking."

“Well it wasn’t as if I had much of a choice,” The Second answered giving The First a nasty look, convinced she had known this would happen.

“There’s no need for that,” The First said, sitting down beside Suilen who sat motionless on the bench, wide eyed and staring at nothing.

“How could I know your mice would behave as they did? Personally, I always use wild mice when traveling abroad.”

The Second scowled, maybe it had been a mistake to use the house mice; most of them had never been any farther than her pocket.

“You do train them, don’t you?”

The Second simply ignored this last remark; she had the cleanest and best trained mice around. The other fairy godparents came to her when they needed a driver or a footman with style and looks. There were no mites or barbering¹⁸ with her mice.

She stared out over the edge. A bird hung in the air, frozen in its flight.

How long will things stay like this?” The Third asked, his mind running over with the words ‘a hundred years’. Everything did look very odd.

The First straightened Suilen’s dress.

“Oh I don’t know, give or take a few bumps and flutters in space, I’d say about ten seconds.”

“Ten seconds?” The Third repeated, looking towards the footman and the coach driver expecting them to suddenly wake up.

“Yes. I didn’t really have a lot of time to prepare for it. If I had, I am sure I could have managed to make it less, perhaps even as little as four.”

18. A female mouse may develop a fur-chewing vice and chew the hair off a cage mate or her litter.

“But surely, we need more time than that?” The Third asked, confused, like all the other fairy godparents The Third had thought that the world would stop, or at least part of it anyway, hidden from the rest of the world until it was time for the destined young prince to find it. He had even wondered whether roses would be involved.

“Oh no, nothing like that,” The Second said and laughed. “We’ve got five, maybe six months. We’re outside of time. Think of it like a soap bubble. One in which we are in. When the magic stops it will burst and everything will return to normal, just as it was before.”

“Oh really?” The Third said, thinking this was even cooler than the frozen world.

“Well almost, apart from ten seconds that is. It’s very difficult to be exact, when you have so little ‘given’ time. It will be like a déjà vu. Only everyone will have it. When the magic ends the world starts again just before the crash...”

“Before the crash?”

“Yes of course. You don’t think I plan on crashing a second time?”

The First stood up and walked over to The Third. Everyone had their strong points in magic. No one was great in all. That’s what kept everything so nicely balanced. Of course, sometimes someone was born who did, who could, and even tried to, but they always ended up mad, wicked, or both. History was full of such people.

“Third, it’s really very simple,” she said putting her arm around his shoulders in what she thought was a comforting way. “This is where the fairytale begins...”



Chapter Twenty Three

The No-Name River

The evening darkened the clouds parted to reveal a dark but star-filled sky. The frozen snow sparkled beneath their light. The early evening whispered of the wrath of Boréas¹⁹ who would claim the mountains later that night. The only sound was the occasional scurry of a small mammal or bird, and an old and rickety wooden cart...

...Raizel sat beside her grandfather, wrapped in a patchwork blanket made from animal skins and a pair of self-made mittens. She stamped her feet on the wooden footboard to stop the cold; being tired didn't help. It had been a long day - the last market day of the year. Once a month she and her grandfather made their way down into the valley to sell, swap, and exchange the cheese, butter, wool, and sometimes

19. Boreas (Greek: Boréas) was the Greek god of the cold north wind and the bringer of winter.

even a pig, they had taken with them. Raizel loved market days. It was always crowded and loud. There was also always something interesting to see or do, not to mention the gossip. Time to talk in the mountains was rare, and having someone to talk to, even rarer.

It had been so much fun, in fact, that they had forgotten the time and the sun was already setting when they set out for home. The snow fell lightly but without settling in the valley. Raizel knew, however, that higher up, by the pass and the ancient cross roads, the snow shower would be a squall, silencing the world beneath its thick, cold blanket.

“We’ll take the long way home,” her grandfather said, watching the snow as it tumbled and rolled its way down in a swirling cloud of white, making it look as if it were falling upwards. “It’s safer. Get yourself some rest. It’ll be a long ride. And don’t worry about me and Jenny,” he added, jeering Jenny the donkey onwards as confirmation.

Raizel put her head on her grandfather’s shoulder.

“I’m not tired, Grandfather,” she said, lightly touching his hand. “Let me take Jenny for awhile. Besides, she knows the way, and look, see, the moon has come out to guide us,” she added with a beaming smile and pointed to the gibbous moon, huge at this elevation, which now peered out over the snow covered treetops, painting the landscape with its silver light casting thick black pencil marks. “Besides, it is the last time we’ll be coming this way until Spring. Let me enjoy it just a little longer,” and with that she took the reins from her grandfather and tapped Jenny lightly on the flack as if to say, ‘okay girl, it’s just you and me now.’

An owl hooted somewhere in the distance in contradiction.



Snug beneath the patchwork blanket, Raizel let Jenny lead the way. She had often seen the snow and knew of its beauty and its danger, but it never ceased to fascinate her. The tall, dark evergreens painted white on one side by the driving wind intermingled with the aging and gnarled deciduous trees with their outstretched branches forming enchanted and secret passageways. Around the bushes, which now looked like huge sleeping snowmen, ran a criss-cross pattern of tiny footprints made by birds or a fox.

With the fresh air biting her nose and pinching her cheeks and the ground sparkling like a diamond blanket, Raizel yawned. It really had been a long day. Her mind drifted in and out of sleep like the gentle ebb of a turning tide.

The sound of Jenny's hooves clattering over the small wooden bridge that crossed the 'No-Name' stream and led to the ancient crossroads, the halfway mark to home, dragged Raizel out of her daydream. She gazed over the edge at the freezing waters. Twisting its way down the mountain the stream was the messenger of the weather. In Spring, over-filled and muddy brown, it burst its banks and washed anything and everything away, while in the summer it became but a thin trickle of itself. Now, decked with snow, its banks hanging heavy with icicles from the eddying water that refused to freeze, it was captivating... and Raizel was its prisoner.

'How awful it must be for trolls at this time of year,' she thought. 'Good job we have a donkey and not a goat.' She then reflected and

probably would have happily fallen back to sleep to dream of huge slumbering monsters and Billy goats, had she not seen the naked figure of a man lying in the snow.

“Oh!” she gasped and put her hand over her eyes. Then, with parted fingers, she looked again. “Oh,” she gasped once more, only this time not so loud or shocked. With ease she pulled the slow moving Jenny to a stop. “Grandfather, wake up, quick. There’s a naked man down there in the snow!”

After a bout of coughs and exclamations about where he was, or if they had already arrived, her grandfather looked to where Raizel pointed. He then very quickly told Raizel to stop looking, and climbed down from the cart.

“Is he dead?” Raizel asked as her grandfather bent over the man to check for any signs of life.

“Unroll the tarpaulin in the back. We’ll use it to cover him,” he replied. “Oh, he’s still alive then?” Raizel said, climbing into the back of the cart as her grandfather heaved the naked figure of the young prince, (for it was the young prince) onto the unrolled canvas.

“Don’t you turn around until I say!” Her grandfather ordered as he quickly wrapped the young prince up tight. “Come, we must be on our way. There maybe thieves nearby,” he said, having noticed the huge gash at the back of the prince’s head, and climbed up beside her.

“Will he survive?” Raizel asked, gently brushing the wet hair out of the prince’s eyes.

“We’ll just have to wait and see. He’s had a severe blow to the head - that much is clear.” With this, he cajoled Jenny forward.

There was still a long way left to go.



Chapter Twenty Four

Raizel

The young prince sat up in bed. His head ached. “Where am I?” he asked once he had looked around the room. The floor was clean but bare and the walls white washed and empty. A heavy looking dark wood wardrobe stood in the corner. This was a room that fulfilled its purpose. It was a room to sleep in.

“You were robbed. We found you naked in the snow,” Raizel explained and blushed. “You’ve had a very nasty blow to the head,” she continued as the young prince lifted his hand and touched the bandage. Raizel put down the tray she had been carrying on the bedside table which was made of the same dark wood as the wardrobe. On it was a pot of tea, a loaf of bread, some goat’s cheese and a folding knife.

"But eat now," She said with a smile. "We've got plenty of time to talk later. The winter has set in so no one will be coming or going for quite sometime." This remark made Raizel laugh. The young prince found he liked that. Winter was long and heavy in the mountains. It was no wonder most animals hibernated.

Taking a bite out of the bread, the young prince watched while Raizel drew back the curtains and aired the room.

"How long have I been here?" he asked with his mouth full.

"Just over two weeks; we thought you were not going to make it at one stage."

"Who is the 'we' you keep referring to?" he asked, a little more than curious.

"My grandfather and me."

The young prince felt relieved on hearing this, yet confused. What did he care if the 'we' had been her husband?

"By the way, my name's Raizel, what's yours?"

The Mirror blurred...

"Well done," The First said and slapped The Third playfully on the back. It had worked; the young prince had woken up with amnesia. They had spent the last two weeks in vigilance, watching over him, waiting for this moment. It was important. They did not want to miss it.

They had been ready in case it hadn't.

"Congratulations," The First repeated a little louder and somewhat surprised by the lack of enthusiasm on the behalf of The Third. The Third forced a smile. He had been more than anxious about this moment. He still couldn't believe it. Somehow, without any help from him the young prince *had* lost his memory – he stared into his

empty teacup trying to gather his thoughts. When he had first been told of the idea of amnesia he had argued that it was too old fashioned and that such things as long term amnesia didn't actually exist, except in very rare cases. It was common knowledge. People didn't believe that kind of thing anymore. People had become smart, they wanted facts, they *needed* facts. Without them it would just be another dumb story for kids. So he had come up with the idea of knocking the young prince out while he was hypnotized. He was, of course, banking on the fact that when the prince awoke he'd still be hypnotized, thus preventing any chance of him remembering anything. It would have worked too... he was sure of it.

He got up to make some more tea.

"What I still don't understand is, what was all that with the silver box?" The First called out after him. The Third cringed.

"It wasn't a silver box, it was a lancet case," he called back, a stickler for details. He began to fill the kettle. "And I needed it for the spell." The First straightened herself in the mirror.

"Yes, you said that the last time, only I still don't quite understand how. It didn't actually do anything, now did it?"

"No, but it wasn't supposed to." The Third lied. He carefully put the already used Oolong tea back into the teapot; it was a Yixing purple clay teapot. It belonged to The First. She had a collection of teapots, one for each brand of tea she drank. She had kindly lent him it until he found a suitable replacement for the one he'd dropped. The Third stared at the teapot unhappily. He wished she hadn't lent it to him. The fear of dropping it made his hands shake even now. He also wished she'd stop asking about the case. Sooner or later she would discover the fact that his plan hadn't worked.

"It was more like decoration, to enhance the atmosphere." He called out as the kettle began to whistle.

“Well it certainly seemed to have worked then,” The First said cheerfully and fell silent. The Third sighed with relief. For the first time that evening he genuinely smiled.

“Tea?” He asked out of formality rather than requirement, returning with the purple teapot held in both hands, even though it was very hot.

They each nodded their head.

“Let’s see what the others are up to, shall we?” he then said as he poured the tea. Again they both nodded their heads in agreement. Sitting back down on the large sofa, he waved the mirror back into action.



Chapter Twenty Five

Riding Forth

In the valley of The Born Moon day was breaking. The sun rolled over the horizon. The air was cold and wet from the melted frost. Outside and all along the castle walls people had gathered. The king had declared it a national holiday in honor of his son, Prince Taren. He was riding forth, an action that symbolized the new era. The idea that a second Cinderella was possible had shaken the established practice of conceptual magic. A whole new theory on its usage in modern society had developed. Suddenly, anything was possible. Wicked Queens were no longer the nub. Apparently anyone could create a fairytale. So it was that everyone who could perform magic, from scrying to fortune telling, was suddenly in demand, inundated with paid invitations to parties to explain, in great length and with even lengthier words the 'Hermetic Qabalah' - the dawn of the third state, or, as most people were calling it - the golden age. It was a time of great expectations.



Prince Taren stood in the castle courtyard, not at all happy with his prospects. Dressed in full plated armor with a five ellen broad sword, he stared at the closed castle drawbridge. Beyond it was the great unknown. Well, not exactly unknown, as most of it had been cartographically recorded, but it was certainly great.

He straightened his helmet nervously.

The king stood on the balcony, waiting... With a loud and dramatic thunderclap The Second appeared. The on-looking crowd cheered. The people outside cheered a few seconds later, since obviously something was happening.

"Your royal highness," she called up to the balcony and curtsied. "I have come to bestow my blessing on this auspicious day."

The king nodded his head approvingly.

"*Have you got the glass slipper?*" she whispered as the cheers from the crowd died.

"*Yes, it's safely packed.*"

"*Good. Do you remember what I told you?*"

"Yes," Prince Taren said and nodded. He wasn't really sure as they had talked about a lot of things.

"*Now don't forget to ask around; there can't be many princesses with a name like Suilen. Your great-great-grandfather managed to find Cinderella and she was a peasant. And there's certainly a lot more peasants than princesses.*"

"*But I know where she lives, she told me.*"

"*Especially old ladies collecting firewood,*" The Second said, ignoring his remark.

Their whispering was interrupted by a fanfare.

"His royal highness's steed," someone announced as a dapple gray, bow backed and aging horse was led into the courtyard. As a foal it had seen the other horses prancing, running, and jumping. And, it had watched as one by one they had been enlisted into the army. None of them had ever returned. It, on the other hand, had spent its whole life in the lush royal green meadows.

"Oh, that will never do," The Second said and raised her wand. The crowd oohed with expectation. It was Showtime. With a sharp flick of her wand a dust devil sprang up and wound its way across the courtyard towards her. The crowd oohed with delight. Clapping her hands twice the swirling cloud swallowed up the old horse and in its place stood a huge and handsome horse,²⁰ burnt chestnut in color. It was draped in the royal colors. It even had a plume attached to its head. Prince Taren stared at the beast in horror.

"Relax, we're just borrowing it for a while," The Second whispered as she gave the horse a carrot. "He's one of the Al Khamsa. One of five. You'll ride like the wind."

"Oh, good," Prince Taren said weakly as his fears were confirmed. The royal court musicians began to tune up. The crowd went silent. "There's nothing else you might have forgotten to mention, is there?" Prince Taren asked as he mounted Asil, the wind horse. The Second faked a laugh.

20. This is taken from the tale of Ishmael, the son of Abraham. In this story, the Angel Gabriel descended from Heaven and awakened Ishmael with a "wind spout" that whirled toward him. The Angel then commanded the thundercloud to stop scattering dust and rain, and so it gathered itself into a prancing, handsome creature - a horse. The Bedouins have bestowed the title "Drinker of the Wind" to the first Arabian horse.

“Of course not, would I let you go if there was? Besides, you’ve got company,” she said as four strapping great soldiers marched over to join them, their armor flashing in the sunlight. “They’re going with you.”

Up on the royal balcony the king signaled to the gate house; it was time. The captain of the guards saluted and ordered his men to lower the drawbridge. Trumpets trumpeted. The crowd cheered. The king waved. The Queen wept.

“Off you go, then,” The Second said, and slapped the rear end of his horse into motion. “It’ll be fun!”

Half an hour later, the courtyard was empty. Everyone had gone back to work. There was a lot to do. The palace was a mess. Weeds flourished and dirt and rubbish lay everywhere. With the glass slipper gone the magic had faded. The golden age was turning out to be polished brass.

In the nearby forest Prince Taren looked down at his horse. It too had changed. It was no longer Asil the wind horse but his aging and faithful horse. The four guards (looking far more overweight and out of shape) waited for his orders. They were sure he would tell them to turn around.

But things had changed. Stripping away the magic did not take away the fact that he was riding forth. He had gone in search of his true love. He’d never done anything brave or courageous before. It suddenly didn’t seem so bad after all. He patted his horse reassuringly and then his side pocket where he had carefully stashed away a big bag of chocolate... just in case.

“What are you waiting for?” he said facing the guards. “Let’s go. Like the royal fairy godparent said, it’ll be fun.”



Chapter Twenty Six

Jack

Spring arrived. The snow melted to a burst of flower: snowdrops, daffodils and crocus. The pale azure sky deepened to a sapphire blue. High up in the mountains Jenny was rigged to the cart once more in preparation to take Raizel and her grandfather to market, only this time the young prince was going with them.

His name was Jack²¹. Being unable to remember anything, Raizel had given him the name. Her argument was that he needed a name and as he was tall and thin like a beanstalk, it fit perfect.

“Hopefully, though, you’re not as lazy,”²² she had said and laughed. Jack - the once upon a time young prince - knew nothing about his lazy namesake but laughed anyway. He liked the sound of Raizel’s laughter.

21. Jack is a very common name in fairytales it is also the male name for a donkey.

22. A reference to “Jack and the Beanstalk”

He liked everything about her, even when she was in a bad mood. During his convalescence his affection for her had grown. Today this is known as the Nightingale syndrome²³ and is looked down upon by most doctors, but fortunately for Raizel and Jack, neither of them had heard of this, so they simply fell in love...



As the sun turned night to day and the village serrated the horizon, the sound of stalls being erected and people shouting drifted out to meet them. Raizel had talked the whole way; she was more than her usual excited self.

"Someone's bound to recognize you, Jack," she said as the cart clattered noisily under the gatehouse. "Everyone from miles around will be here. I wouldn't be at all surprised if the mystery of who you are is solved today!"

They had often discussed the idea of who Jack might be, but never very seriously, as there was always some other and imminent matter that had to be done on the farm. No one seemed to mind that Jack was not really Jack: least of all, Jack.

"There. Look," grandfather said as they rolled past a group of men wearing leather aprons and wide brimmed hats. "A carpenter would be useful."

23. Florence Nightingale (May 1820 - August 1910) was an English nurse who came to distinction during the Crimean War for her pioneering work in nursing. She was dubbed "The Lady with the Lamp" after her habit of making rounds at night to tend injured soldiers. The Nightingale Pledge taken by new nurses is named in her honor, and the annual International Nurses Day is held on her birthday. While not technically a medical syndrome, the Nightingale Syndrome is often used to describe the situation in which a patient falls in love with his/her medical caretaker due to a vague bond created when healed by a complete stranger.

The hiring fair coincided with the first market day of spring, making the place even more crowded than usual.

"Oh, I hope not!" Jack said and laughed as he held up his two bruised thumbs. He had been mending the fences only the other day.

"Maybe a thatcher, then," Raizel suggested as they passed the next group, all of whom wore a fragment of woven straw²⁴.

"Oh, no, please!" Jack answered pretending to be shocked. "I'd probably fall off the roof and break my leg!"

"A physician then?" grandfather said and laughed as he caught onto the thought. "A physician would come in very handy," upon which they all laughed at the reference to Jack's sore thumbs. Not long after, they arrived at the spot where they always parked. It was on the outskirts of the marketplace, less frequented but less expensive. The few things they had to sell didn't require more.

"I'll get the shopping done," Grandfather said, climbing down from the cart. "Raizel, you and Jack can set up the stall. I won't be long." And with that he left; even he knew that sometimes, two was company and three a crowd.



So the day passed, and what with one thing and another, meeting old friends and making new ones, it had been such a long time since Grandfather had actually been alone at the market, that apart from having a really good time, he forgot it, too. It was only when the village clock struck five did he remember and hurried back.

"Time to go," he called, slightly out of breath. Raizel and Jack were sitting on the back of the empty cart sharing a sausage in a bun.

24. The description is taken from 'Far From The Madding Crowd' by Thomas Hardy

"Before it starts to rain," he added, pointing to the sky in explanation. They obviously hadn't noticed. The early morning spring sun was now covered by a blanket of late afternoon spring clouds. It was going to be a wet ride home.

"Are they for me?" Raizel said, ignoring all of this as she spied the young boy running up behind him. He was carrying a conical basket of woven straw filled with pots and pans and other cooking utensils. "Yes my dear, they're for you, but we're a little late so we need to hurry."

Raizel's face lit up and began to help the young boy load them onto the cart. Jack helped grandfather with the rest of the goods.

"Any news, Jack?" grandfather asked as they loaded the last sack of corn. He shook his head. Raizel sighed. "Ah," he answered, obviously not. "Well, we could always take the long way home if you like?"

Jack, who didn't know anything about 'the long way home' or even if there was a short way, looked towards Raizel for the answer.

"But you just said..." she began only to be silenced by grandfather who very gently touched her lips with his index finger.

"It'll take us past the 'No-Name' stream."

And no more was said.



Chapter Twenty Seven

Buttercup

By the time they arrived at the 'No-Name' stream the rain beat a steady tattoo on the grey tarpaulin under which they were huddled. Jenny splashed her way up the waterlogged trail that led to the wooden bridge. With no thoughts about trolls or Billy goats, grandfather stopped the cart right in the middle of the bridge. Raizel carefully pointed to the spot where they had found him. She held her breath in anticipation.

"Well, Jack?" she finally said, after what seemed like ages. Jack shook his head and turned away. It had been a long and disappointing day. No one at the fair had recognized him or knew of anyone missing - and now this. Raizel gently touched his hand. She sighed in affiliation. Without making any comment, Grandfather cajoled Jenny forward. They still had a long way to go and the rain did not look like stopping.

The following evening as the dinner plates were being cleared away, Grandfather decided it was time to resolve the issue about Jack's identity and his future.

"It was a nice day yesterday, didn't you think?" he began as Raizel put the kettle on to make some hot water. "It's been a long time since I've roamed around the market alone. You can't imagine how good it felt, and that's all thanks to you, Jack," he said and reached for his pipe and tobacco. "I guess not knowing who you are has its good sides, too."

"Oh, you are wicked!" Raizel rejoined teasingly. "I'm sure Jack would have preferred to find out who he was, wouldn't you, Jack?"

Jack didn't say anything but got up to help with the washing.

"I don't think there's anything wicked about looking forward to another splendid day at market. Besides, Jack can now stay with us with no worries; you know you are more than welcome Jack... Isn't he, Raizel?"

Raizel blushed and quickly handed Jack the dishcloth. Jack in return quickly thanked Grandfather for his kind offer and told him he was more than happy to stay.

"You see Raizel, and I'm quite sure Jack will get the hang of farm work before too long. He just needs to start on something easier perhaps. You're trying too hard, that's all, Jack."

"Yes. Perhaps you are right," Raizel added, supportive. "Remember Jack, you had a very nasty blow."

"Precisely, and that is why I want him to spend the day with you tomorrow."

"Oh but... but Grandfather, I still haven't sorted out the cupboards for all the new pots and pans and there is all the housework..." Raizel blustered, turning towards Grandfather with her hands dripping soapy water.

Grandfather only smiled. "Oh, one day won't hurt my dear," he said

filling his pipe. "Besides, if you show Jack a few of the jobs you do each morning, well, you'll save time - time enough for you to catch up on your housework. Why don't you start by showing Jack how to milk Buttercup? Did I ever tell you, Jack, that no one can milk a cow better than Raizel?" But without waiting for a reply he stood up and went outside to smoke his pipe.



The next morning Jack walked impatiently back and forth outside the cowshed. Inside Buttercup moored. His nervousness was obviously contagious. He had slept sporadically. The thought of having to spend another day alone with Raizel had robbed him of his sleep. It wasn't that he didn't like the idea, quite the opposite. There was no place he would rather be than near her. Nervously, he rubbed his hands together. He felt hot and sweaty, although his breath appeared like fog. He had practiced every kind of casual greeting he could think of but somehow none of them sounded right. Was a simple 'Hi, how you doing?' too much or too little?

Before he could decide, Raizel appeared carrying two metal pails.

"We'll need these!" she called out and lifted them up to indicate what she meant. "No good milking a cow without a pail."

"Blast!" Jack cursed beneath his breath. He had forgotten to fetch them from behind the kitchen door.

"You do know where the stool is though, don't you?" she asked. Jack quickly sped off to the back of the stall where the stool hung.

He could hear her laughing in the distance.



The day was over. The sunset splashed the horizon a weak pink. It was nothing spectacular, but still, Raizel and Jack stopped to watch it. They had spent all day together and were both very tired. There had been a lot to do and a lot to learn. Fifteen minutes later the world gave up its color to the darkness that quickly covered everything. But still, neither of them moved. In silence they stood staring out at the distant and fading horizon. The night wrapped itself around them. Raizel moved a little closer. And, although it was not cold, Jack put his coat over her shoulders.

"Look, a shooting star!" Raizel whispered and turned towards him.



Far away an argument was developing...

"A shooting star!" The First gasped, more with envy than anger. "I thought we had agreed not to interfere?"

They were once again all sitting around the table staring into the Third's magic mirror, watching. It had become an addiction. It had become *important*.

"I'm not interfering," said The Second protectively. "I don't call that interfering!"

"Not interfering?" The First snapped, happy to have a reason. "What may I ask do you think a shooting star is then?"

"Background."

"Background? Third, did you hear that? She's just adding background."

"And?"

"And?" The First said, about to explode.

"Yes, and, what did they wish for?"



Chapter Twenty Eight

A Hero

A messenger galloped up to the gatehouse; he had ridden all night. Prince Taren from the valley of the 'Born Moon' was coming to ask the king for the Princess Suilen's hand in marriage and he would be arriving that very morning! This was the young man she had gone to visit. The king was wakened and told the news. He was delighted. Breakfast was made. A squadron of guards was sent out to meet and escort them back to the castle. The military band feverishly polished their boots and instruments. The castle was a flourish of activity. Everything had to be perfect for the royal guest. In the streets, carts rolled into place. News of the returning princess and her future husband had reached the vendors - commerce began. Stands selling everything from royal mugs to straw effigies in wedding dress appeared; there was even one stall selling locket with royal hair: red, blond, brown, or black. Daybreak was met by a thousand faces. Everywhere people were waving flags, and spontaneously cheering.

The castle was taking the day off, for it was now a national holiday.



The king looked up from the breakfast table at the sound of trumpets. It was the royal salute; they had arrived.

“Are you ready, my dear?” he asked, standing up and offering the queen his hand. His daughter was finally coming home. He had missed her, as she had been away for nearly five months. Yes, she had been annoying at times, what with always getting herself into trouble or asking the wrong kind of questions, but so had he as a child. He hadn’t realized just how much he had taken for granted: that cheeky laugh, her unusual but often true insight and most of all, the way she called him ‘Daddy’.

“Don’t worry, everything will be just fine,” the queen said as she brushed away whatever it was she apparently saw on his shoulders. The king sighed in submission. It was an irritating habit, but not worth arguing about, not today. “She’s still your daughter, you know,” the queen concluded and took his hand. Together they stepped out onto the royal balcony. The crowd cheered - the sound rose like a wave - but it was the wave of a losing team - by the time it reached the castle walls it had beached itself on awkward silence. The king waved to the crowd. They cheered again, but it was sullen and sporadic, with everyone looking towards the castle gates.

“Your majesty!” the royal councilor panted, bursting out onto the balcony. He had run all the way from the gatehouse. “There is something I think you ought to know.”

In the distance the king could hear the drawbridge being lowered. “And that is?” he asked without turning around. They had obviously

arrived yet there were no cheers or whistles, not even an anarchistic 'boo'. Something was obviously very wrong.

"Your majesty, Prince Taren is alone."

"Alone?"

"Yes, your highness. There is no accompanying carriage or sign of the princess."

"She didn't come with him?"

"No sire, perhaps it might be wise if you received him in private?"

But it was too late, for right then, smiling triumphantly, Prince Taren rode into the courtyard. He still had half a dozen chocolates in his pocket.

"Your majesty," he called out and raised his sword in salutation. "I have come to ask for permission to marry your daughter, the princess Suilen...if she will have me."

"Fine, but where is she?" the king asked, his gaze jumping between the prince and the councilor for the answer.

"I have brought the glass slipper," he continued, but not in the triumphant manner he'd imagined. Somewhat hesitant, he held the slipper up for the king to see.

The magic of the fairytale focused. Like invisible honey it seeped over the castle walls, trickled its way across the rooftops, dripped down the alleyways and oozed its way along the cobbled streets, changing everything in its path.

"Fetch the royal fairy godparent. Immediately!" the king ordered as he watched his castle become a living picture, a child's idea of how a castle should look. She would know what to do. Two minutes later she arrived, in a pastel pink billowy tulle gown and sparkling red shoes. There was even a star on the end of her wand. The queen was delighted.

"Oh, look," she said, pointing at The First, forgetful of herself. "You would think she was a *real* fairy godmother wouldn't you, I mean, if

you didn't know her."

The king sighed, she'd never understood, no matter how many times he had tried to explain.

"Yes dear, I suppose you would," he said and then addressed himself to The First. "Do you know anything about this?" he asked and pointed towards the slipper, which Prince Taren, once more seated on Asil, still held.

"May I?" she asked and took the slipper off of him. Magic raced up and through her, exploding out of the tip of the slipper in a huge fountain of bright colored stars. The crowd roared with delight; this was the kind of thing they had come to see.

"It is Cinderella's slipper, or should I say, the essence of it. It is made from old magic, the kind only a great wizard, or *witch*, can wield. It will fit only one foot..."

The crowd oohed in all the right places while the queen applauded. The king was less impressed; he knew The First and wasn't going to be fooled by such a cheap trick. "We know all that," he said testily. "Can't you tell us something we don't know?"

The First let the magic take over. She closed her eyes as it enveloped her. It had been such a long time since she had bathed in such power. She could feel herself rising off the floor as time slipped away from her aging body. She knew at this moment she could be anything she desired. A bird, a dragon, a queen! All she had to do was to wish for it.

As quickly as it came she let the magic go and was once more The First. She smiled at the crowd who stood wide eyed and opened mouthed; even the king had to blink twice to realize the world was once more back to normal. He bowed in recognition of her display. He was sure it had been a display, like fireworks: there was nothing to be worried about; after all, she was the fairy godparent to *his* throne. The First grinned.

“All I can tell you is if she was dead then the slipper would not exist.” The crowd held its breath - this was the nucleus of the story. This was what would be remembered.

“Surely there must be something we can do?” the king asked, like a fish biting on to a barbed worm.

“Only one person can save her now,” The First said, handing the slipper back to Prince Taren.

“And who may that be?” the king asked, feeling the metaphorical fishing rod jerk to the left.

“Prince Charming, of course.”

The crowd was ecstatic. The queen squealed. King Fish was landed. Everyone turned towards Prince Taren. His armor literally gleamed in the morning light. Asil reared on his hind legs, his long mane flowing in the sudden wind. The crowd began to chant, “Taren! Taren! Taren!” Even the king found himself standing to applaud. He raised his hand for silence...

“Do you take the challenge?” he called out above the crowd. The magic struck. Prince Taren raised his sword at the exact same moment as the sun peered out from behind a cloud, turning his sword into a blaze of gold. The First couldn't have planned it better. The roar from the crowd was deafening. The people had their hero.



Chapter Twenty Nine

Firewood

The following morning as the first gray-light of day touched the treetops and easterly slopes, Prince Taren awoke feeling cold and hungry. The magic had faded. His guards looked tired, and so did the horses. In the euphoria they had left without taking any new supplies. The guards now looked at him for an order - he had none. He had no idea where to go. And yet, somehow it didn't seem to matter. Something had changed; he was no longer just a prince, but a prince with a destiny. People suddenly had expectations of him. They had imaginations of him. They believed he would save the princess Suilen, and by Perun's ²⁵ copper beard he would do just that...

25. Perun In Slavic mythology is the highest god of the pantheon and the god of thunder and lightning. He is often described as a rugged man with a copper beard.



By the end of the third week he was tired and lost and Perun's copper beard had faded to a dull brown. He had stopped at every village and wayward cottage he had come across to ask about the princess, certain that someone must have seen or heard something. But it was of no use, it was futile. Turning his horse around in what he thought was the right direction for home, he ordered his men to turn back. He would simply tell the king he had failed. Surely no one expected him to spend the rest of his life looking for her? The very thought of this was horrifying, unjust, and simply unreasonable. He was a prince, not a hero. He was born for a life of soft cushions and feather beds, not leather horse saddles and straw... Desperately he tried to remember what it was about Suilen that had made him run off to find her in the first place - he couldn't. He could only remember the words of his godparent...

'You ask for one thing and she gives you another, that's not a good sign - she'll have you running around the countryside looking for her next, mark my words.'

He wished now he had listened to her. Perhaps if he threw the slipper away like she had suggested everything would return to normal?

'Throw it down the well, that's a good place.'

He could tell the king it had faded; the local fairy godparent had said it was magical and existed only as long as she lived. He'd be a real cad for doing it but he'd be free. Free to return home and marry any one of the neighboring king's daughters. Some of them had been quite pretty, too. It just wasn't fair. Why did he have to spend the rest of his days looking for a girl he hardly knew?

And so it was that just as he decided to throw the slipper down the

next well he passed, out from underneath the trees an old woman appeared, blocking his way. She was carrying a large bundle of firewood on her back.

Prince Taren stared at her in disbelief.

'Oh no,' he thought in despair. "Not now...'

High up among the trees the wind blew. It sounded like whispering.

"Quick hurry up, you'll miss it!"

"Coming," the wind seemed to call.

"He gave up pretty soon if you ask me."

"Oh, I don't know. I thought he did quite well, actually. I expected him to give in after that first rainstorm you sent," the wind echoed, followed by the sound of scraping wood and clattering cutlery.

"It's two sugars, isn't it?"

"Good evening," Prince Taren said as she refused to move. His first thought had been to ride around her, pretend he hadn't seen her, but he was more than sure she'd only appear further down the road. It was the kind of thing little old ladies did in fairytales. "I don't suppose you happened to have seen a princess wandering around these parts by any chance?"

The old lady looked up from her way, (which was quite a feat considering the weight of her bundle) and looked back down again. Prince Taren took this for a yes.

"Is she a skinny girl with short black hair?" the old lady then croaked, leaning on her stick.

"Yes."

She held out her hand expectantly.

The wind drove the leaves across the path in a circle-skip motion.

"You have to admit she's very good at disguises."

"But asking for money was not what we talked about...."

"Ah, but it makes it more realistic. That's what makes a good fairytale, the small things."

"I still think I should have gone. She's not forgiven me you know, for that shooting star. And you heard that snide remark about witches. She's up to something."

"Oh come now, what can she possibly be up too disguised as an old woman?"

"She just seemed too keen...that's not like her one little bit."

Prince Taren carefully dismounted his horse. He had made the mistake not to take a donkey with him to carry all the things he had discovered necessary. It was all now carefully balanced left and right of his horse. Fortunately there were no narrow lanes he had to traverse.

"Oh yes, I am sorry," he said giving the old lady a penny. She held it very close to her face and turned it around slowly. She was obviously very near sighted. Then, with surprising speed, she pocketed it.

"I might have," she finally said and stretched out her hand once more. Prince Taren handed over another penny.

A sudden gush of wind rattled the treetops.

"Look, there you see, she's doing it again, she's taking his money. She's not supposed to do that. She's only supposed to tell him the way."

"It's only a penny. Think of it as a kind of gesture; it helps the magic."

"Helps the magic? More like helping herself, and it's not just a penny either, that's the second one she's taken. She's stealing from him."

"Shhh...Otherwise we'll miss what she says."

The wind died down.

“Well, old lady?” Prince Taren ventured after watching the second penny disappear with the same agility. “And please, try and be a little bit more elaborate.”

The old lady slowly put the dogbane - tied bundle down and looked him straight in the eyes. He wished she hadn't. It was the kind of look traveling gypsies gave in their tents of fortune, right after they had turned over the cards that told your future.

“Certainly, sire,” she said and stretched out her hand yet again... “as elaborate as you are generous.”

The wind wailed through the trees.

By the time Prince Taren had been told what he wanted to know he was half a purse lighter. Meanwhile, high up among the trees it sounded like a storm was brewing.



Chapter Thirty

Signs

They were in the kitchen... investigating. The Third had sent them a message: 'Need to meet. We must talk. Urgent.' So naturally they came right away, long before it was necessary. The Second had been there over an hour.

"Any idea of what he wants to talk about?" she said, closing the last of the kitchen cupboards.

"No, but it must be important, inviting us like he did to his house," The First replied, putting the lid back on a large copper pot. "He seemed a bit worried. Personally I'd have thought he'd have enjoyed it more, being on location, what with all that fresh air."

"Nah, not The Third, he worries too much. Men do, it's in their nature."

"Maybe. It's a very minimalist kind of kitchen, though," The First said opening another drawer. "Do you think that's a man thing, too?"

"Probably. The toilet's nice and clean though. There's even an extra

roll of paper.”

“I’m surprised he can cook anything at all, let alone make all those delicious biscuits and cakes that he does.”

“Everything seems to be in its place.”

“Perhaps he uses magic and doesn’t say, speaking of which, where is he? He’s late? He should have been here five minutes ago.”

“Five minutes? Are you sure?”

“Check the wax,²⁶” The First said and pointed to a large candle that stood by the backdoor. She had placed it there deliberately. “See the way it’s melted? Jelling half way down, instead of running to the bottom?”

The Second nodded.

“Well that means he’s delayed, something’s stopping him.”

“How bad is it?”

“Can’t say, really.”

“Do you think we should take a look?”

“Yeah, why not? We’ve got about ten minutes still,” The First then said after giving the candle a closer examination. The Second cursed.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’ve forgotten my ball...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” The First said and pointed this time towards the mirror.

“But I thought these things only worked for their owners?”

“They do,” The First said with a huge grin and repeated the word ‘owners’, with the accent on the s.

The Second almost choked as she realized what she meant. Still grinning The First waved her wand in front of the mirror.

26. Ceromancy is the art of divination by dropping melted candle wax in a pan of cold water. Some people also claim to be able to tell the future by any drippings or shapes formed on the side of a candle.

“Show me!” she said. The image of the room faded and was replaced

with that of Raizel, silhouetted in the open doorway. She was waving to someone.



An omen is a phenomenon that is believed to foretell the future, often signifying the advent of change. Omens can be good or bad, but are generally considered to be of a foreboding nature. The study of Omenology is called Nimmita in traditional Hindu Astrology. One of the most powerful astrological omens is the blazing comet, and it is thought to predict the death of kings or noble men...

Raizel threw open the bedroom window to let in the fresh morning air. It was still dark outside. A comet blazed across the sky.

"Oh look, a shooting star!" she said, pleased, and quickly made a wish. She then went downstairs to make breakfast. The tabletop stove needed to be lit. Kitty, a stray Bombay cat that had made their home hers, rubbed itself up against her leg. "Jack'll be here in a minute," she said, hearing the sound of clanging pails. Its green eyes sparkled in the firelight as Raizel picked up its saucer. The milk had gone sour.

"Morning," Raizel next said to the sound of the back door opening and Jack kicking off his shoes. "Is grandfather awake?"

"He's outside having a shave," Jack answered and placed a pail of fresh warm milk on the table.

"I don't like the idea of him going alone," Raizel added taking the pail off the table and putting it on the cold side of the stove. "He's never gone anywhere alone before."

Outside an owl hooted. Grandfather came in dripping water.

"Ah, I see breakfast is nearly ready," he said sitting down at the table. The eggs spat in the frying pan. "Just what I need today."

Breakfast tended to be whatever the farm gave them. Raizel could cook an egg in over a hundred different ways.

“Grandfather, are you sure you’ll be alright on your own?” she asked again. It was just so unlike him to go anywhere without her. “You know I could come with you.”

“No, no, my dear, the walk will do me good,” Grandfather said and patted her hand. “Besides, you’ll be okay, Jack’s here.”

“I didn’t mean that...”

“I know. Now have you seen my hat and scarf somewhere?”

Raizel dutifully handed them to him. She had hung them up by the fire to warm.

“But what if something were to happen?”

The mountains were not particularly dangerous, the few bears that lived there kept to the higher, more isolated regions, and the snow had melted so the wolves once more stayed clear of the farms. But still, it was never a good idea to go walking around the mountains alone.

“Now don’t you fret - screwing up your pretty little face like that - you’ll get wrinkles, besides, the way to the ‘hag of the hills’ is all downhill.”

“Take Jenny with you, then,” Raizel continued, still not happy about the whole idea. “As the way back is all *up* hill.”

Grandfather smiled. Raizel wasn’t easily fooled.

“Jenny’s needed here. The top field still needs plowing. Now stop worrying and hand me my coat.”

He had told them of his planned visit only the night before. His back had been hurting him all day. It had been like this off and on for more than a week with no signs of getting better. Sitting outside on the small wooden bench that backed up to the house, he had watched the evening sun slip below the horizon, splashing the scattered clouds

a violet red and the empty sky a pink. Then, he had watched the moon rise, carefully checking to see if there were any rings. Once he was sure there wasn't, he had gone around to the front of the house and looked at the front doorframe. Several spiders were busy spinning; one had spun its web across the doorway.

The following day would be fine. He went back inside and told them.

Raizel helped him put on his coat.

"I've made you these," she said handing him a small parcel of sandwiches. "For your journey, they're your favorite, and a flask of hot tea." Then, with a kiss goodbye and a promise to be careful, Grandfather took his walking stick and set off. It was a long walk to the 'hag of the hills'. She lived some fifteen miles away, south west of the farm.



Outside the frost had turned the green world white. The grass crunched underfoot. The air was cold and nipped both his cheeks and nose. A wooden stile broke the line of fencing that bordered the forest. Grandfather stopped before climbing over it and looked back towards the house. He could see Raizel standing in the doorway. He waved to her. She was worried, he could tell. On the other side of the stile a small and overgrown track disappeared into the darkness. In the winter it had been marked by fox and weasels; now, where the sun fell, fresh grass had grown. In the pale gray light of the morning, nothing stirred. The air was humid and smelt of pine. Less than a mile away was the main road; from there, it would be easy going. Ducking under an outstretched branch, he set off into the undergrowth

but instead of going left, which was the right way to go, he turned right and, for no apparent reason, he began to run. A foraging deer took flight, startled by his sudden appearance. It wasn't until he came to a gnarled old oak tree that he stopped. He sat down and waited, listening.

Once he was certain no one had followed him, he began to brush away the fallen leaves in front of him until he had made a clearing approximately a yard square, inside of which he then drew a circle. At the top he made the sign of the Akhet, the symbol that embodied both sunrise and sunset. At the bottom, nearest himself, he drew Ka, the ever lasting spirit. In the middle the ancient sign Sesen,²⁷ the lotus flower. Once completed he stood up and holding his walking stick perpendicular to himself, one hand outwards and the other in, he stepped into the circle. For a moment nothing happened. Then, the next, he was gone; he had simply vanished.

27. Akhet, Ka and Sesen are ancient Egyptian symbols, used to communicate information about a person shown on a sculpture or relief. They called their writing 'divine word' because they believed that Thoth, god of wisdom, had taught them how to write. Our word hieroglyphs derives from a phrase meaning 'sacred carvings' used by the ancient Greek visitors to Egypt to describe the symbols that they saw on tomb and temple walls.



Chapter Thirty One

Not A Fairytale

The Third appeared with his usual greeting card of grey smoke and a few fallen leaves. He was exactly ten minutes late, just as The First had predicted. Hanging up his coat and walking stick he made his way over to the table, leaving a trail of dirty footprints behind. His hands and shoes were covered in mud.

Sitting down in his usual place, he noticed there was a cup of tea in front of him.

“Oh, have you been here long?” he asked, looking up at the clock.

“What’s in the parcel?” The First said in reply.

“Sandwiches, egg sandwiches.”

“With onion?”

“Onion and crest, she makes the paste herself,” he added.

“Onion gives me wind,” The First stated, taking one all the same. The Third politely ignored this last remark and offered them to The Second.

"I got no problem with onions," The Second added happily as she took a large bite out of her sandwich. "It's broccoli that really blows me."

The Third chose to say nothing but tried to enjoy his sandwich. There was something very odd about the way The First and Second went on about such things, while at the same time being guardians to princesses. It was better not to think about it.

"Will she remember how to do this after?" The Second asked, with her mouth full. "I mean it'd be a shame to lose such culinary skills."

The Third had been thinking the exact same thing. He'd spent a lot of time teaching her how to cook. Food was now burnt with deliberation.

"Oh yes everything," The First said lifting the top off her sandwich and picking through the paste. "She'll be a little confused at first, but nothing to worry about. Most people are confused their whole lifetime," she added with a chuckle.

"It's a pity we can't do this kind of thing to all the young royals. I can think of at least half a dozen that need it," The Second added as she wiped her mouth clean.

"Yes, but we mustn't, we can't, it's exactly the kind of behavior the old queens and wicked witches used to do, meddling in other people's lives. That's how it begins; first one small change here, then a slight adjustment there. Before long we're not just planning a six month bubble, but a whole lifetime."

The Second nodded her head sagely ñ it'd be a challenge, though.

"So, let's take a look shall we, and see what everyone is up to?" The First said, turning to The Third. "If you would be so kind?"

The Second sniggered.

The Third stood up and waved the mirror into action. The reflected room faded once more and the countryside rolled into view. Trees raced by. Fields and rivers were crossed at high speed as the mirror

focused. There, riding along one of the mountain's many twisting paths, was Prince Taren and his four guards.



"I'll give you five to one that it's another farmer wanting to give the prince his daughter; marriage or maid," Avadon, the tallest of the four guards, said as they approached what was going to be the eighth farmhouse that morning.

"Five to one you say? I'll take you on that," the youngest guard said, checking the weight of his purse.

"Careful there, young Lockett," for that was his name, "you don't want to lose your purse so soon; remember the last three farmers tried to give him a daughter," the second and oldest guard said. His name was Fisher. He gently put his hand on the young boy's before he took out his purse.

"Yes, Sergeant Fisher. Right you are, sir. But begging your pardon, sir, I don't want to seem rude, but there was that other house, the one with the dog."

"Ah yes, the dog, well spotted there, young Lockett. But I don't see any signs of a dog here, do you?"

"No sir, but begging your pardon again, sir, but there wasn't any signs of a dog the last time either. Not until it came racing around the corner all frothing and barking, that is."

"Yes, that did take us all by surprise, didn't it," Sergeant Fisher said with a stifled laugh. "Never knew the prince could run so fast."

"Never knew Private Maelgwn had such a way with dogs," Avadon said, looking towards young Lockett, wondering if the bet was still on.

"Ah, yes, that, well you see now, Private Maelgwn, he's a real dog's

man. There've been dogs in his family for generations. If Maelgwn sees a stray dog in the streets he takes it home. That mutt probably realized this. Probably could smell it. Dogs have got extra senses for just this kind of thing."

"Is that why Private Maelgwn's now with the prince and not you, sir?"



The image in the mirror faded.

It was midday and although the sandwiches had been delicious, there was always room for one of The Third's special pastries. The recipe was a closely kept secret.

"You mentioned earlier there was a problem?" The First said, looking over The Third's shoulder as he cut up the vegetables, carefully noting which vegetables and how much.

"Yes, there could be," he said as he took out of a lower cupboard a rolling pin. "If Jack asks Raizel to marry him before Prince Taren does."

"But surely you've taken measures against this?"

"Yes, but I can't be there the whole time, and he's certainly taking his time getting there. I must say your directions were rather obscure."

"You think so?" The First asked innocently.

"Well actually, yes I do. ...*Where the trees end, there's an old barn and a sheep pen.* That's pretty obscure considering the mountains are beset with people living just below the tree line, and they *all* own sheep. Oh yes and that other one...*follow the stream:* another good tip. A city has a river, a castle a moat, but a mountain... why a mountain has streams, springs, brooks, even rivulets. Which one did you mean? You do realize that if Jack asks first then the spell will be broken and they'll stay on the farm as peasants?"

“And?”

“And?!! And I’ll have to stay with them as grandfather for who knows how long!”

The First tried not to laugh. It wasn’t easy.

“Have you any idea how many everyday comforts are not on the farm? Living happily ever after is not going to heat the stove, and it won’t be much consolation to their parents, either.”

The First couldn’t contain herself any longer and burst out laughing.

“Is that what you are worried about?” she said wiping her eyes dry; she hadn’t laughed so much in ages. “This is not a fairytale. There are no evil witches or stepmothers. There’s no lesson to be learned, or hidden moral, there’s not even a good character. The only thing that’s magical are the slippers, and they only work when we are near. Isn’t that right, Second?”

The Second looked up from the couch where she sat feeding one of her mice and nodded.

“This is a plan, our plan. I know the magic wants us to create a tale, I felt that when I held the slipper, but that’s not going to happen. We made the time bubble to do only one thing, and that is all it shall do. But the magic wants more, it’s desperate. It needs something to latch onto, and that something is Prince Taren at the moment. I could have told him anything and he’d find her. You see, he’s the story’s Prince Charming. He has been all along.”

The Second spluttered on her tea. The First made a large and theatrical bow in recognition and The Third, well, he very carefully put in that secret ingredient while The First wasn’t looking.



Chapter Thirty Two

The Truth Is Revealed

They were watching, they were always watching. Fate, Destiny and Kismet were not going to be denied - tampered with. Life was *their game, they* decided. Of course there were rules, even for them, but no one ever checked, no one else ever played...



The day was drawing to an end like a child's picture. The sky hung over the hilltop in a thin blue line. The cherry trees looked like giant sticks of candy floss while the farmhouse chimney issued a perfect spiral of smoke. The smell of fresh baked bread drifted across the farmyard.

Jack stepped outside. He had just finished cleaning the barn.

“Mmmmm,” he said as his nasal senses went rollercoaster. He looked over towards the kitchen window – Raizel was usually there at this time of day. He couldn’t see her. “Never mind,” he told himself in consolation, “later then.” And with that and a tuneless whistle set out in the direction of the meadow.



Prince Taren, accompanied by Private Maelgwn, made his way over to the farmhouse. The garden fence was green from algae. The gate squeaked. The path was overgrown and the raspberry bushes had not been trimmed. The place looked more neglected than the other farms he had visited. A spider’s web spanned the doorway. Without thinking, Maelgwn swept it away.

“There you go Sire, nothing to worry about there, spiders hardly ever bite, although my sister Patience²⁸ screams at the very sight of them.” During the past nine hours, Prince Taren had learned all about Maelgwn and his phobic sisters, and was secretly rather glad he hadn’t been offered any as a maid. Cheerily, he knocked on the door. There was no reply. After a while he knocked again, a little louder.



Raizel was in the cellar getting wood for the fire when she heard the knock. Now that the winter was over and the days were getting

28. Patience Muffet; her stepfather, Dr. Muffet (1553 - 1604) was a famous entomologist who wrote the first scientific catalogue of British Insects. Whilst eating her breakfast of curds and whey little Miss Muffet was frightened by one of his spiders and ran away.

warmer the stove was only lit in the mornings and at night.

"Jack, is that you?" she called, surprised that the knock was on the front door. The front door was only for visitors and no one ever called. "I'll be with you in a minute," she added, closing the oven and putting the rounded dough at the back of the table-stove where it would not get too hot. If the mix got too hot too soon it would spoil, giving the bread an unpleasant yeast taste later. With less attention she dusted herself down. Moments later she opened the door, wide and expectant.

"Oh?" she said, staring into the face of Prince Taren. Prince Taren stared back.

"Suilen, is it really you?" he finally managed to say, taking hold of her hand. He could hardly believe his eyes. He had actually found her. "Maelgwn, quick, bring me the slipper," he ordered, indicating the large wooden case he carried. Raizel stared at the slender white hand that held hers.

"My dearest Suilen, I am returning the slipper as promised," he then said and took out of the box the glass slipper and held it up for her to see. "Now will you marry me?"

The magic focused. It came with a downpour of color. Everything was suddenly bright and freshly painted. Cartoon ruled. A blue bird landed on Prince Taren's shoulder while a rabbit flitted in and out of view by the garden fence.

"Sorry, sir, but you must be mistaken. My name is Raizel," Raizel said, staring at the slipper. Her mind flooded with a thousand images of princesses and maidens. "I can't be who you say I am. Look, my hair is short, my friends are tall and I don't even have a distant cousin let alone two ugly stepsisters."

Prince Taren only smiled and told her to try it on; after all, it would only fit one foot. In the setting sun the shoe glimmered orange. Even

if it had been a normal shoe she would have been tempted. Women and shoes have a magic all of their own.

She took off her clogs and thick woolen socks.

'I knew I should have worn the light blue stockings,' she thought, staring at her feet. She had taken them out of the drawer that morning but at the last minute had put them back - *They* didn't have holes in them.



The Three were also watching. The pastries had been greatly appreciated and eaten, and so had the chocolate cake and the cookies. They should have been comfortably slouching on the couch watching their planned romance unfold like some Oscar winning film, but instead, they sat stiff and upright staring at the image in the mirror. Something was terribly wrong.

"Is that supposed to happen?" The Third said, saying what they were all thinking. "I thought you said the magic only worked when we were present?"

The First made no reply. She was staring at the garden fence behind them. She was sure she had seen a rabbit standing there, not a brown rabbit nervously scurrying through the cabbage patch, but a grey one wearing blue britches and carrying a red bundle tied to a stick, leaning against it.

"Did you also see the rabbit?" The Second asked confirming her doubts. There was suddenly no time to waste.

"Wands!" she ordered, standing up and holding her wand high in indication as to what she meant. The Second and Third took position. The ends touched. A single spark appeared. It grew once more into

a flame. The flame wavered for a second before erupting into a huge spinning tower of light. The ceiling faded, revealing a downpour. But the rain fell outside.

“Take me to the Moira!” The First roared. There was a sudden crushing silence as the light spun from a pale blue to a burning white. The rain clouds were ripped apart as the home of the gods came hurtling towards them. “Just as I suspected!” she yelled above the roaring of magic. “This is not chess!”

Fate, Destiny and Kismet sat around the board game table. They were playing Risk-Patolli.²⁹ The stakes were all three kingdoms.

“We’ll see about that!” The First said, not waiting for an invitation but snatching up the five kidney beans tossed them. They landed four down and one up. Then, with an impious grin, she took hold of a small, shabby looking figure and placed it on the board. The deities watched in horror as it moved from behind the house and out onto the porch.

29. Patolli is one of the oldest games in America. It is played with five specially prepared kidney beans, which have been marked on one side with a white dot. A player tosses the beans to score accordingly.



Chapter Thirty Three

Tears

Jack came around the house precisely as Prince Taren got down on one knee. He was about to propose.

"Hello?" he said, as surprised as everyone else.

"Oh Jack, there you are," Raizel said, happy to see him. "This is Prince... eh?" she trailed off and began to laugh as she realized she didn't even know his name.

"Taren," Prince Taren answered, introducing himself and standing up. The spell was broken; the moment had passed.



Far away there was a sound like thunder. Happy thunder, if such a thing is possible. The Three were doing high fives, low fives, and a

vast number of other such signs of victory. They were in the house of the gods. The Moira sat on the opposite side of the gaming board, decidedly less euphoric.

"Is she allowed to do that?" Kismet asked, watching as the scene below unfolded.

"I don't know. Let's have a look in the rule book, shall we?" Destiny, who liked to do everything by the book, replied.

"The rule book?" Fate asked timidly.

"Yes, the rule book, it will be written down."

"But I thought you wrote it." Fate continued awkwardly. "I didn't."

"We're the Moira; all things that have been and will be are written by us."

"Well, yeah, theoretically."

The eyes of Destiny narrowed as Fate struggled to explain.

"Well, you know how sometimes some things can go without saying? It's a bit like that with the rules."

Destiny swelled to full godly size, which was pretty big. This was getting awkward. Destiny was not someone with whom to be trifled. For Destiny, things happened because they were written. And if it was not written, it just did not take place. There was no code of behavior, no 'old school' for Destiny.

"You mean there are rules but no book?"

"Yeah, something like that. You see, we are the rules," Fate said desperately, turning towards Kismet for support, who was more interested in what was going on down below. "We decide what happens."

"Then let us throw a six and clear the board," Destiny declared, having grown tired of the conversation.

"Ah, well, yes, a very good idea, but you see this particular game is played with only five beans..."



Unaware of what the gods were doing, Prince Taren, with promises to return before the next moon, mounted his horse and left. It had been Raizel's wish, she couldn't just leave, there were things to do, things to organize. Things needed to be packed. Besides, grandfather had not returned from the 'Hag of the Hills', and she wasn't going to leave without him.

"Can you believe it, Jack?" Raizel said as they stood side by side on the porch waving goodbye. "Me, a real princess! And we're all going to live in a real castle with servants and curtains and a bed with a mattress so soft you can feel a pea through it! It's hard to believe."

"I'm very happy for you," Jack replied, not sounding at all like someone very happy.

"We'll have to sell the cow of course, and the chickens," Raizel continued without listening. She was too excited to listen. "Do you think the prince will let me bring the pots and pans? They've hardly been used!"

"I don't suppose you'll need them in the palace," Jack replied, staring out at the empty horizon. "They've probably got a bunch of big, shiny copper ones in the kitchen. And I reckon what with you being a princess you won't need to do anymore cooking."

"But we can't just throw them away! Grandfather brought them the last time we went to market, do you remember?"

Of course Jack remembered. It had been a 'just the two of us' kind of day. Even under the tarpaulin in the pouring rain, it had been just the two of them.

"Yes, but it's all going to be different now, for sure," Jack said and

stared up at the night sky. He remembered the shooting star. Wishes didn't come true.

"Hello, you two!" Grandfather said, appearing as if out of nowhere. They had not seen his approach. "What are you up to?" he asked and smiled tenderly.

"Oh Grandfather, you'll never guess what happened today!" Raizel said, throwing her arms around his neck. "We had a visitor..."



That night they all went to bed very late. Raizel had been too excited to sleep and had insisted on talking the whole time. She had taken out the big picture book of tales, in which were pictures of castles and kings and had wondered which one she was going to call home. In the morning, after lighting the fire and filling the kettle, she went to wait by the back door for Jack. He brought the fresh eggs and milk each morning. Grandfather came down and went out to wash and shave. She was still standing in the doorway when he returned.

"Have you seen Jack?" she asked as he entered and sat down at the kitchen table. "Do you think he's over slept maybe?" she added with a nervous laugh. Although Jack had been named after the famous Jack and the beanstalk he never over slept and was anything but lazy, he just wasn't very good at anything.

"Perhaps you should sit down," grandfather said pulling a chair away from the table for her to sit on. Raizel sat down. "Jack left this morning."

"Left?" Raizel repeated, puzzled by the comment. "Has he gone down to the village?" she then asked remembering how she had mentioned things would need to be sold.

"No my dear, nothing like that," grandfather answered shaking his head sadly. "I don't think he wants to be a servant in the castle, not even head steward, which is a very fine job."

"But why?"

"Isn't it obvious my dear?" he said with a sad smile. They had talked all night about life in the palace. She had not thought they might not want to live there. Why should she? In the palace everything would be different. Life would be different. The truth dawned, grey and frosty; they would be different. She would be a princess and Jack, just Jack. Of course he didn't want to go.

"Did he say where he was going?" Raizel asked, getting up from the table and putting on her coat and hat. He couldn't have gotten far. Grandfather shook his head again. "We must stop him, we must explain."

Grandfather gently touched her arm.

"Raizel, he left very early, he is gone. It is better this way; you are a princess and must marry a prince."

Raizel wanted to cry.

"Oh Grandfather, how can you say such a thing? I don't want to be princess without Jack!" Raizel burst into tears. And as the first tear fell the spell was broken.



Chapter Thirty Four

Three Shoes in a Pear

Suilen rubbed her eyes in disbelief as she found herself once more back in the carriage and traveling along the bumpy and twisting mountain lane, heading home. Overhead, grey clouds were gathering. It was going to snow. She was pretty sure of it; no, looking again, she was positive. She stared out of the carriage window and her fears were confirmed as she spied again the floral flush of magenta pink heather beside the road. She remembered how worried she had been the first time she had seen it, wondering what she would tell The First. Now she laughed at her own foolishness. It had been but a few seconds before the crash. The crash! Quickly she grabbed the door handle and braced herself. Nothing happened.

After five minutes of nothingness other than the coach bumping its way downwards, she let go of the door handle and let out a loud and long sigh.

"Are you alright, m'lady?" Amelia asked, seeing her mistress's pale complexion.

"Yes, fine," Suilen replied, not really sure if she was. She looked down at her lap. There was a glass slipper. "Amelia?" she began after a few more minutes, her voice a little shaky.

"Yes ma'am?" Amelia answered, looking up from her knitting.

"I did give Prince Taren a glass slipper, didn't I?"

"Why certainly ma'am, the left one. I specifically remember you giving him the left one because I said to myself, 'Look, Ami, she's giving him the left shoe because it's closest to the heart.'"

"I think that phrase actually refers to your hand, Amelia, but thank you anyway."

"Oh," said Amelia, then 'ohed' again as Suilen held up the glass slipper; it was a left shoe.

"Coach driver!" Suilen called out, as the truth dawned. The driver stuck his unshaven face through the window.

"Yes ma'am?"

"Is there a small stream nearby named 'No-Name' by any chance?" The coach driver grinned his reply.

"Fancy you knowing that! Indeed there is, Your 'ighness. It is a local joke too, what with it being such a small stream that no one ever thought of giving it a name. No official name as likes. 'Tis less than half an hour from here; would you be wanting to stop there?"

Suilen looked again at the left glass slipper, then at the grinning face of the driver. She knew it was impossible; Jack could not be there. But what if he was? The first few flakes of snow began to fall.

"Yes, and hurry," she finally said and blushed as she remembered exactly how she had found him the first time.



Sure enough, there exactly where she had found him the last time, lay the naked figure of Jack in the freshly fallen snow. Suilen immediately ordered the coach driver and her footman to wrap him up and put him in the carriage beside her. Amelia, however, insisted that he be put beside her, making it clear this was not a point to argue about. Then, once safe inside the carriage, Suilen ordered the driver to take them home as fast as he could. It no longer mattered what her parents would ask, or even what The First would say, she was with Jack and this time there would be no surprises...



There are always surprises. The Moira had set the board for a new game. Destiny had written the rules. Three against three, even the odds were fair. A dice was rolled to see who would begin.



Jack awoke in a large feather bed surrounded by maids and doctors. He awoke after three days and could remember everything, who he was, where he was going, and most of all who he had been looking for. He was puzzled when Suilen called him Jack but recognized her as the girl in the mirror and wasted no time in asking the king for her hand in marriage. The king gladly gave it. When spring arrived so did Prince Taren, saddle sore but triumphant.

He had come with his guards and the glass slipper to declare his love for Suilen - which caused a little confusion but was quickly set to rights when Suilen introduced him to her younger sister. "Believe me, you're made for each other," she said and gave him Varina's hand. "Well, maybe not made for each other," The First added, appearing out of nowhere, "but most definitely planned." She took Prince Taren's hand, and indicated to the two princesses to run along, as she needed to have a quiet word with him alone.

"You got any chocolate left?" she asked as she led him away.

"Eh, yes I think so," he answered somewhat surprised and rummaged in his pocket.

"Oh, it's not for me," The First said with a laugh. "It's for you, oh, and I'll be taking that," she added as she took the glass slipper off of him. "You won't need that anymore, whoever heard of three shoes in a pair?"



So it was that spring became summer and the wedding that had been 'most definitely planned' happened. Even the weather seemed designed, although it wasn't - it was just not too hot or too cold with just the right amount of blue sky and sunshine to make it truly fairytale-like. All that was left to do was for everyone to live happily ever after - everyone, that is, who was a royal. The Three sat and stared at the empty church pulpit. All the other guests had gone.

"So that's it then, finished," The First said as if it didn't matter.

"I guess so. The wedding of Varina and Prince Taren is planned for spring next year," The Second said and sighed. "It's going to be rather quiet around here I guess," she concluded. "I mean, what with there being no need to meet and such."

"Ah yes, things will be back to normal," The Third added unaware of the mood swing. "Who knows how long it will be before they have children, and we all know what that means."

The First counted the cracks in the floor; she'd always been the fairy godparent for the Avenants. What, though, if the king had his way and she was not chosen?

The chapel room went silent as this fact sank in. With all this modern thinking, there was the chance that they *might* not get the job.

"Oh don't you worry, you're bound to get the job," The Second said, seeing her friend's face. She too had never lived without her royals. "What, and look after *their* kids?" The First retorted as if the idea was horrifying. "No thanks. I'm getting too old anyway. I'm thinking about retiring."

"Retiring?"

"Yes, break the wand; hang up the star, that kind of thing."

"But what if something should go wrong? I mean, just because it's a happy ending now, it doesn't mean it's going to stay that way."

"It's not our responsibility anymore."

"Yes, but we did get involved."

"It is the responsibility of the new godparents," The First said, sinking even lower. "Tradition must be upheld."

"Yes, but what if tradition is still in danger?" The Second asked, determined to hear a sound that might lead to a light that would eventually get them out.

"It's not our business."

"But they're only three, what about all the other kings and queens and their sons and daughters? They might also not believe!"

"She does have a point there," said The Third to The First's silence. He had finally worked out what it meant if there were no more meetings. Fishing no longer seemed so attractive.

"It's certainly been a long time since there's been a Sleeping Beauty,"

The Second added.

“Or a Snow White...” The Third added, remembering the day his young ward had brought her home. No one had ever seen dwarves before. It was quite a shock.

“Just to remind people of course...”

“Yes, just to remind them.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said The First. “It all sounds a bit mad queen and meddling.”

The Second and The Third exchanged quick but earnest looks. They didn’t have an answer. If they let the chance pass it would not come again. Maybe it was mad queen and meddling, but it was them doing it. They needed a sign. It came in black and white. Michael, The Second’s favorite mouse, crawled out of her pocket and onto the pew. For a moment it did not move but sat on its hind legs sniffing. Then, after a minute or two it scurried along the top of the narrow wooden ledge; it could smell the other mice. They were poor, they were hungry. There was plenty of room in the big tube back home.

The Third stared at the mouse in shock comprehension. The Second always carried mice to remind people.

“Isn’t that what Tradition is all about?” he said out loud, looking The First straight in the eyes. “Isn’t it all really just about remembering?”

The Bits That Got Cut Out

Author's comment:

I had wanted to give a more in-depth view into the relationship of The First and the king, but chose in the end to leave it out, although I liked some of the imagery that this short passage evokes.

Weatherbeard's book

The day finally arrived for Princess Suilen's christening. Everyone had been invited. The royal fairy godparent had been summoned, just as the king's father had summoned her before him. She was to be her godparent. She had been his godparent. She had been the king's father's godparent. She was very old.

She came to the christening exactly as he remembered her. She hadn't changed in the least - worse still, instead of looking smaller as most childhood monsters do when grown up, she looked even taller, even more real. Dressed in a shiny black gown, which was not at all fairy-like, and chorused by a flood of hushes and whispers, she had marched up the aisle; none of this made sense to the king, as she lived in one of the castle's six towers. She was seen around the palace every day; well, mainly in the kitchen, but still... nobody whispered and pointed then.

But now she had come as 'The Royal Fairy Godparent.' This made the difference. The guests knew it and so did she. Standing over the child like some avenging angel she had announced in a loud and dramatic voice that she had a gift for the child. A gift she would

need in her life. Everyone strained to see, as everyone knew the old stories. Was it the gift of beauty, or the gift of eloquence? Maybe even the gift of love? It was pure theater, and everyone loved it. The crowd held their breath as she pulled out from under her cloak a very large and soiled copy of *'All About Gardening by farmer' Weatherbeard*.¹

Instead of the usual ahs and oohs there was a general *huh?* No one knew what it meant. Then someone sniggered. The King was furious. As the giggling turned to laughter he ordered the guards to remove her from the premises. It was an outrage, how dare she insult him in front of all his guests? Who did she think she was? And what did she mean by giving his child such a gardening book? She would never get her hands dirty, she was a princess, not a commoner!

The following year, when Princess Varina, Suilen's younger sister, was christened, the royal godparent was not invited - nowhere in tradition did it say she had to be. He had fulfilled his part by making her godparent to Suilen, but this certainly did not mean she had to be seen around the place.

So it was for the next fourteen years the royal godparent was not mentioned.

1. The tale is taken from the red fairy book by Andrew Lang, and is a Norwegian fairytale, more commonly known as farmer Weathersky.

Author's comment:

This part was deleted from chapter twenty four as although I often imagine the first and the second arguing it didn't fit in with the character of the chapter, which was sad as I personally liked the reference to the singing frog fairytale...

The Singing Frog

...“I still don't understand why you had to have him hit over the head?” It was The Second, feeling it was her turn to question the success of The Third's 'plan'. She had disapproved of the idea even before she had witnessed the scene with the thieves...

“We talked about this earlier,” The Third said, as he carefully added two teaspoonful of fine silver-white tea for each of them.

“Yes we *more* than explained,” The First added abrasively. She was in the mood for an argument. For her there was nothing better than a slice of cake, a cup of tea and a real good, heated discussion.

“Raizel and Suilen both have to find him unconscious,” The Third continued with the calmest tones he could muster. “It is necessary for the story. Fairytales have certain rules that we must abide by.”

“Nonsense,” The Second retorted. “What do you think this is?” She asked, tapping the table with her finger. The Third had wanted to say a table but knew it would only provoke, so he refrained, smiled, and offered her the sugar.

“This is breaking the rules. Fairy godparents don't meet, and they certainly do not interfere.”

“Ah, so you think this is interfering?” The First said, seeing her chance.

“Of course it is. It's interfering with capital letters.”

“Well I certainly am not interfering. I never interfere. Third, are you interfering?”

The Third shook his head, knowing this was not going to help.

“Oh, really now? You never interfere? Would you like me to refresh your memory?”

The First stared at The Second, weighing up her verbal opponent.

“If you are referring to giving Suilen the slippers, I gave them as a gift. I did not tell her to give them to Prince Taren; that was her own decision.”

“Yes, yes, I know all about that. But I wasn’t thinking of that, I was thinking more of a certain singing frog?²”

The eyes of The First narrowed.

“Ah!” said The Third, making it sound like a confession.

“It’s quite a long time ago I know, but, didn’t we turned it into a *princess*? No sorry, my mistake, didn’t you turn her into a princess?”

2. The reference is taken from ‘Märchen und Sagen aus Wälschtirol’ collected Christian Schneller Innsbruck 1867. It is an Austrian fairytale which personally I find ironic considering Austria is the home of Mozart.

Author's comment:

This is a small conversation between the king and queen late at night in their bed chamber - planning a ball for the young prince. It was removed from the story as it took the story down the wrong path. I have kept it though as I like the imagery once more.

The Ball

"Nothing now can go wrong," the king exclaimed delightedly as he paced the room in his royal pajamas and royal sleeping cap, gesticulating. The Queen sat up in bed, patiently waiting for him to calm down. She pulled the blankets tightly around her. It was a cold night. Most nights were cold in the castle. Long stone corridors and high ceiling rooms did not help to make the place any warmer - added with the fact that they lived on top of a hill. Sometimes, when it was extra cold and snow covered the world outside, the queen would think of the poor peasants all huddled together, in their tiny shacks called houses, and imagined all that lovely body heat.

"He's bound to like one of the young ladies. Over one hundred and fifty have written back saying they shall attend," the king continued, seeing his wife's nonchalance. "My court advisor said it was the best idea I've had in years, and to be honest with you, I am beginning to agree with him. It's a splendid idea. I am quite surprised that I did not think of it earlier."

"He wasn't turning twenty-one earlier, my dear," the queen said, politely tapping the empty side of the bed, indicating he should get in and they could talk about this in the morning.

"Yes, well, maybe you're right. But still it's a splendid idea," the king said with a sigh. "One hundred and fifty girls and there are more to come!"

"Yes, dear," the queen said, turning her languid attention towards her pillow.

"I quite fancy that skinny girl, what's her name? You know, King what's-his-name's daughter, terribly uncouth fellow, always shouting and calling out for more ale."

"Oh, you mean King Edward?" The queen replied with a shudder of recollection.

"Yes, that's the fellow. His daughter now, what's her name?"

"Emily."

"Precisely, skinny little thing, with a neck like a giraffe. But that doesn't matter. I am sure she'll put on a few pounds once she's dropped half a dozen babies or so," the king said, finally sitting back down on the bed. He was still wearing his socks. He looked down at them in surprise.

"But she's already spoken for, my dear," the queen added, aware that she had put on weight without the help of half a dozen kids.

"What?"

"Yes, dear, she's already spoken for. I thought you knew?"

"Knew? How the devil should I know if no one tells me?" The King said, wondering where he should put his now removed socks, finally letting them fall upon the carpet. It was a red carpet with an abstract muster. He'd never really noticed it before. "No one tells me anything around here!"

"She's engaged to Prince Harry."

"Prince Harry?" said the king, dragging his eyes away from the carpet.

"Yes dear, Prince Harry, King Philip's oldest boy."

"What? That snotty nosed, dribbling young wimp of a lad? Never been hunting in his life, for fear he might actually have to shoot something?"

"Yes, I think I recall you referring to him this way...once or twice."

"And Emily said yes?"

“Yes, of course. I think at the time, when I told you, you said they were a perfect match.”

“Well yes, and indeed they are,” the King said, slightly less boisterously, climbing into bed. “I think I must have a word with the maid tomorrow about the warming pan; it’s cold.” He added, not at all happy about the queen’s last remark.

Things were indeed worse than he had imagined.

Author's comment:

This next section is just fun. I simply enjoy playing with such ideas. The old fairy tales are very beautiful and pure magic but not exactly air tight, (smile). It's probably even wrong of me to poke fun at them in this way... that's why it's a 'cut-out' story.

The True Story Of The Glass Slipper

The king and queen were very surprised when their son, Prince Taren, told them that princess Suilen had left... without any word of warning. She had simply been unable to love him, but since when did love have anything to do with marriage?

Times were changing.

Prince Taren was of course broken-hearted. This, though, didn't worry the king and queen, as their son often suffered from 'broken hearts.' Some kids suffer from 'falling down and scratching the knees' and others from 'I forgot my homework book'. Prince Taren was a 'broken hearted' kid. What did worry them, though, was the glass slipper. One didn't just give glass slippers away, certainly not here in the valley of the Born Moon. It was the family curse. It was hereditary. Cinderella had left the first glass slipper and... as the story went, married the king's great, great grandfather.

That was how the story went.

The truth was a little bit different and a lot glassier...

Once upon a time...the then young prince was one of seven brothers, so the moment word got out that some scullery maid who had lost her shoe had married him, glass footwear started turning up everywhere. Peasant girls from miles around came to the castle to leave a glass slipper or a shoe, and some even left a boot. Just about

anything they could afford - some even attached their name and address, to help speed things up. It wasn't until the royal fairy godmother had been summoned did it all come to an end.

And how? With magic of course... That, and the fact that she rewrote the story, adding herself and two ugly stepsisters. Almost over night the kingdom was cleared of its plague and the king's other six sons were left to choose their brides however they saw fitting... but that is another story.

Since then the royal fairy godparent lived in the castle. She had accommodated the whole of the west wing. No one dared ask her how long she planned to stay, let alone when she planned to leave. Ridding the kingdom of the glass footwear plague had proven her power. She was there to stay. She even made it her duty to attend all the royal functions, with a pumpkin in her handbag and a couple of white mice in her pocket, to remind everyone what she was capable of. Many a hopeful young princess had left the palace screaming after the sudden appearance of a small white mouse beneath her bread roll.

Now over a hundred and fifty years later another glass slipper had appeared. Not only that, the owner of the shoe had disappeared. This was what worried the king and queen... It was starting all over again.

